

The Challenge of Humanitarian Response

By Kevin Murray | June 2, 2003

The new world order on display in Iraq places new demands on the U.S. humanitarian community. The Wolfowitz-Perle doctrine of pre-emptive action against perceived external threats preserves a role for humanitarian intervention. In fact, it may make humanitarian response a growth industry. The role of relief organizations in Iraq raises many questions, however, and these questions deserve the continuing attention of the movement that sought to avoid this war in the first place.

Humanitarian relief often describes itself as a politically neutral enterprise designed to save lives and limit human suffering in emergency situations. What could be political about high-tech bubbles full of clean water? The enterprise unites governments, the private sector, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the UN system in professional and technically advanced network. U.S.-based corporations and not-for-profit organizations with a heavy reliance on U.S. government funding are major actors in this network.

The neutrality principle has always been difficult to sustain. Political forces in a society always influence choices about how and to whom aid is provided. The provision of aid, in turn, has an impact on the balance of political power, at least at the local level. This is not a new debate. My own organization, Grassroots International, came into existence pointing out the close relationship between war and famine (and, hence, aid) in the Horn of Africa in 1984. Others have made the same argument quite effectively in Afghanistan in 2003.

No one questions that almost twelve years of sanctions in Iraq visited tremendous suffering on the Iraqi people. Coming in the wake of those sanctions, the recent attacks took place at a moment of unprecedented vulnerability for millions of Iraqis. While the massive humanitarian disaster predicted by many does not seem to have occurred, the conflict has multiplied human suffering across Iraq. The occupation regime has shown itself to be remarkably incapable of producing any sort of humanitarian answer for what it has wrought.

Hundreds of professional aid workers—most of them foreigners—are slowly moving into action. They face many obstacles, including security conditions that offer them little freedom to operate and a basic social infrastructure in deplorable condition. These workers are doing their jobs at considerable personal risk, and some will probably give their lives to this mission. Their compassion is to be celebrated, as is that of the many thousands of people in the U.S. who are clicking on websites and writing checks to support this work.

The Context of Compassion

Even compassion has a context, however, and this one is extremely complex. Relief and reconstruction in Iraq are taking place against the backdrop of a military occupation. A collection of individuals trained, for the most part, in U.S. military and security structures hold effective political power in Iraq and show little sign of being ready to surrender that power to a new Iraqi leadership. Humanitarian neutrality will be even more elusive than usual in the context of total logistical and security dependence on such authority. European organizations and U.S. ones not receiving government funds will certainly operate with more independence than those reliant on U.S. government contracts, but they will still face serious limitations. Financial independence from the U.S. government will not, in this case, automatically lead to operational independence from the military.

Many of the large U.S. humanitarian organizations lobbied hard for the State Department to take control of the Iraq relief operation from the Pentagon. Such a change would have given the United States Agency for International Development a key role and provided some degree of political cover for participating NGOs. Before the U.S. forces took Baghdad, however, the Bush administration made it clear that the Pentagon would retain complete control over relief and reconstruction in Iraq. This remains true even after the removal of General Jay Garner and the recent United Nations resolution ending sanctions against Iraq.

With the lifting of United Nations sanctions, the UN will gradually assume a more active humanitarian/reconstruction role in Iraq. The aforementioned resolution assures UN control over some percentage of frozen Iraqi assets for use in relief and reconstruction activities. It also provides for a six-month continuation of the UN “oil for food” program, which uses oil revenues for humanitarian purposes under UN auspices. These changes will confer some legitimacy on the U.S.-led occupation and will likely



help the reconstruction effort accelerate beyond its current snail's pace. A UN presence will not, however, create a significant buffer between U.S. political/military aims and the humanitarian response.

These circumstances have created difficult dilemmas for the NGO community, especially U.S. NGOs. Some organizations have taken the difficult decision of not participating in the relief operation at all. Others, including several faith-based NGOs that expressed strong opposition to the war, have said that they would attempt to respond to the crisis, but would not apply for U.S. government funds to do so. The largest U.S. organizations, with huge economic stakes in Iraq relief and in good relations with USAID, are going ahead despite their reservations about Pentagon control.

The best aid organizations will find ways to carry out some credible operations in this context, but, in other cases, humanitarian interventions will take place firmly within the logic of military plans to pacify the Iraqi population and win the Iraqis' hearts and minds for a long-term project of restructuring the country. Such programs will approximate the "civic-military action programs" widely criticized by the humanitarian community in Central America and elsewhere in the 1980s.

To be successful, humanitarian organizations providing aid to Iraq must struggle to establish a humanitarian/reconstruction agenda with some degree of autonomy from military occupation plans. This will be no easy task, especially for those organizations working with U.S. government funds. Such an agenda must, of course, focus on how to deliver immediate relief to those most directly affected by the war. It must also mobilize the

human and financial resources necessary to initiate the daunting task of reconstructing Iraq's social infrastructure.

But it very much matters *how* this aid is provided. Iraq's reconstruction process ought to take place in a way that respects the long-denied basic human rights of all Iraqis. There is already ample reason to doubt how much importance the occupation regime will place on the protection of those rights. In addition, a progressive humanitarian agenda must recognize the critical importance of encouraging local initiative in the rebuilding of the country, thereby strengthening an emerging Iraqi civil society. Iraqi civil organizations will doubtless promote varied visions of a new Iraq. Even amidst this challenging and contradictory diversity, a true humanitarian agenda will honor local initiative.

Unconditional opposition to unjust war is the first humanitarian response. If the failure to take strong public positions against this war is any indication, many leading U.S. humanitarian organizations apparently judged this a just war. In any event, we would do well to re-examine the relationship between pre-emptive wars and humanitarianism ... before the next war. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to be the last time we will face such dilemmas.

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