



A Crisis of Humanitarianism

A historical glance at African patterns of migration exposes the drawbacks of humanitarian intervention.

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Since the American army and the United Nations left Somalia in 1995, most Westerners and humanitarian organizations have also decamped, overwhelmed by kidnappings and the racketeering of warlords. During 10 years of chaos, Mogadishu has become a field of ruins, a lunar landscape in which combatants and displaced people wander aimlessly. Deserted by the international community, the country has no more embassies, no government, no recognized authority. A single French nongovernmental organization remained in the country until recently.

Permanently guarded by armed militia, this NGO's expatriate employees could barely leave their bunker to carry on their mission. The modus operandi of this group is typical of the way most NGOs op-

erate in a context of war, and that has a significant effect on how a humanitarian crisis is perceived, followed, and evaluated by decision makers.

Numbers Game

Since the fall of the Somalian dictatorship and the pillage of the city in 1991, this NGO regularly sent its fundraisers reports on the number of persons displaced by the conflict, who live in the ruins of the capital on sites reported as so many "camps." Year after year, a rapid tally seems to indicate an almost constant rise in the number of these camps and their occupants. These reports, however, are misleading.

In fact, unable to move around freely without armed escorts, humanitarian personnel have no clear picture of the entire city at any one time. Because of the insecurity and difficulty of living conditions, the

rare foreigner stays in Mogadishu barely more than six months. Of course, the deployment of 30,000 American soldiers under the aegis of UNOSOM, the United Nations Operation in Somalia, did allow a more precise idea of the situation between 1992 and 1994. But our French NGO alone can't keep track of all the camps. So it continues to add, to the number of sites that close, the number of sites that open.

What's more, certain camps may be counted more than once. The Somali language, which borrows many elements from the Arabic, was transcribed into the Roman alphabet in 1972. The word *Ali*, for example, is spelled *Cali*; and *Hashi*, *Xashi*. So the same camp may be found more than once in an alphabetical listing, depending on whether the inventory's author chooses a Somali or English spelling. In addition, because of the high rate of turnover of on-site personnel, camp names change constantly. The name may change depending on the whim of the spokesperson of the day, or whether the name is given in Somali, Arabic, English, or Italian. Thus, displaced persons who are squatters in the industrial zone of Mogadishu have seen their sites inventoried under the English name for *factory* as well its Somali equivalent *warshadaha*.

In other words, no hard data can confirm that the number of displaced persons in Mogadishu has risen since the United Nations left in 1995. Quite the contrary, there is evidence the numbers stabilized.¹ In all war and emergency situations, the problem is the same, whether it's a question of evaluating needs, counting the dead, or estimating refugees. For the most part, to sensitize public opinion and obtain financing from their funders, humanitarian aid groups tend to

exaggerate the extent of a crisis.

Local authorities, for their part, at first try to minimize the drama to mask their responsibility in the matter. Then they solicit international aid for their own gain through embezzlement. In either case, very complex political considerations blur the qualitative and quantitative evaluation of humanitarian crises.

Crisis Inflation

In the Western world, the conflicts of the Third World have given rise to a very specific type of discourse that developed along with the rise of the “without borders” NGOs during the 1980s and later, at the end of the Cold War, with the establishment of partisan groups that claim a humanitarian right to interfere in the internal affairs of Third World countries. According to their logic, there are more civil wars than before, and these conflicts cause more deaths among civilians. On the strategic level, the course of hostilities is supposedly much more devastating and less structured than before. True, the savagery and cruelty of popular insurrections and guerilla movements have regained all their former intensity since the end of East-West tensions and the disappearance of the ideological tinsel that gave these movements a more political and less criminal meaning. This trend allowed journalists to rediscover ancient practices of predation and extortion.

Yet researchers don't claim that there are more wars today than in the past. Indeed, before we attempt even the slightest comparative analysis, we need to agree on the definition of *war*, both in duration and in geographic extent. Analysts face a problem of scale. Consider the case of sub-Saharan Africa, which has suffered numerous, repeated

conflicts, even genocides. For 15 years, Uganda, for example, has encountered various rebellions to the north and the southwest. Should we count that as a certain number of trouble zones, while at the same time counting the Biafran secession from Nigeria, which lasted from 1967 to 1970, as one event? Let's not forget that the Biafran war, according to some estimates, caused a million deaths and cannot be compared to the low-intensity conflicts that continue to plague Uganda today.

I maintain that the perception of contemporary conflicts is largely the result of a theoretical construct erected by certain intellectual coteries with an agenda, on the one hand, and on the other hand by the NGOs who act both as judge and jury. Their distortions of the facts may mislead decision makers faced with financing an emergency aid project or peacekeeping operation. The media, though they fall short of deliberately misinforming the public, obviously play a role as gatekeeper in this process. Since news outlets do not maintain regular correspondents in Africa, the news from their special envoys essentially is filtered through the lens of the NGOs already on site. These NGOs almost seem to enjoy the sizeable role they play in spinning their dire predictions.

Another perspective is therefore necessary. As a privileged operational territory of charitable organizations, sub-Saharan Africa offers significant examples for this. In spite of the dubious accuracy of the oral tradition of these civilizations, historians have shown that Africa has experienced major humanitarian crises over the last several centuries. Tied to human conflicts or natural disasters, these crises have provoked famines and epidemics

every bit as devastating as the plague in Europe in the Middle Ages.

Chronologically, the forced displacements of populations south of the Sahara fall into three major periods: first, the raids and slavery of ancient Africa; next, the administrative partitioning of the territory at the time of colonization; and finally, the development of humanitarian aid. Each of these sequences influenced, even determined, the very nature of migrations in emergency situations, with fundamental differences.

Eras of Raids and Slavery

In the heart of Africa, the southern part of Sudan—today ravaged by a civil war that has gone on nearly 40 years and has unleashed one of the most comprehensive humanitarian operations on the entire continent—is a case in point. Dominated by the Arabs in the north, and the “Negroid” populations in the south, the Sudan has always been crisscrossed with numerous migratory currents.

From west to east, caravans going toward Mecca left many pilgrims along the way who formed agricultural communities called *Fellata*, a term that for nomadic Arabs is often pejorative.² On an axis from the north to the south along the Nile, the Egyptian conquest also left permanent settlements on the land as early as the 7th century. Raiders to the south captured a good number of slaves—notably the Dinka, the Nouba, the Hamaj, the Berta, and the Burun—and took them north. According to the highest estimates, some 400,000 people may have been rounded up and traded to Egypt in the 19th century.³

Still further south, the Egyptian-Turkish occupation of the 1820s likewise sparked temporary move-

ments toward Ethiopia. In return, when insurgents attacked the garrisons of Kassala and Sennar in Sudan in July and August 1885, it was a defeated Egyptian army that flanked the refugees heading across Ethiopia to the port of Massawa. Led by Arab speakers who refused to pledge allegiance to the Turks and their Egyptian vassals, the Mahdist rebellion had terrible consequences. According to some, the fighting, famine, and exoduses disrupted and killed more than four million inhabitants, causing major displacements in the interior of the country, especially for non-Arabic-speaking communities like the Beja around the little port of Suakin on the Red Sea in 1889.⁴

Certainly, these events had much smaller repercussions on the more distant equatorial regions, which nevertheless were not spared domestic rivalries, ethnic conflicts, epidemics, and natural catastrophes: these were just so many dramas to which the native people reacted either by fleeing outright, by seeking temporary refuge using the natural features of the landscape to hide, or by waging war and invading neighboring lands. The warring factions were at times refugees, at other times attackers, like the Chamba of Adamawa in the north of Nigeria and Cameroun.⁵

For refugees like the Anuak farmers, victims of attacks by neighboring Nuer herdsmen, ground cover provided shelter because the tsetse fly prevented pastoral populations from entering the thick bush. The hills of Nouba and the Marra Jebel Mountains also served as refuge for people fleeing slave raids as well as attempts by Arabic-speaking plains nomads to convert them. This strategy, in fact, is still in use today.

On the Ethiopian border, the cre-

ation of a national park in 1967, followed by an endemic famine and deep-seated rivalries, forced the Mursi to leave the banks of the Omo River in 1979 and settle in the foothills of Mount Mago, where they gave up raising livestock and turned to mountain agriculture.⁶

Ethnic Melting Pot

By intermingling populations, these repeated, forced displacements completely modified the ethnic configuration of the region. On the present Ugandan border, the expansion of the Turkana, the Jié, and the Toposa has pushed the Didinga and the Longarim to the west. Fleeing numerous floods, the Nuer clan of the Gaawar settled on the west bank of Bahr el Jabal—the White Nile—in the first quarter of the 19th century, then to the south of Zaraf Island near Duk Padiat in the 1890s. The former inhabitants of that region then had to decamp, and they filled the ranks of the Dinka clan of Twic, which gained power by exacting a tribute in exchange for their protection. In 1917, the so-called flood of the Red Water—*pilual* in Nuer and *amol thit* in Dinka—once again forced the Nuer to move, and this time they ran right up against the Dinka.

The end result of this chain of events was to stir up the populations, remix their collective identities, and bring about a certain degree of assimilation. The flood of 1917, for example, did not increase tensions. The necessity of getting along forced the Nuer and the Dinka to weave social ties, notably through marriages obligating them to solidarity and reciprocity. During the terrible *pawer* flood of 1961, the Dinka and Nuer herdsmen, ruined, had to imitate the Anuak: they began fishing and selling dried fish in Juba or Zaïre.

Ethnic Conflict

In many instances, however, these crisis migrations also brought conflicts, for they encroached on the territory of neighboring communities and repelled or absorbed populations too weak to resist. The famine of 1835 to 1838 thus incited some Nuer clans, the Jikany and Gaajak, to go east toward the Sobat River, in Anuak and Shilluk lands. The Anuak of the region were pushed to the border of present-day Ethiopia, where the Murle, the Amhara, and the Oromo called them *Yembo*. As for the Shilluk, other victims of the Nuer, they themselves had raided their northern neighbors during the *umm lahm* famine of 1684. Settled in the 16th century around Malakal under the authority of their “king,” the *reth* Nyikang, the Shilluk first evicted the Funj cattle herders of Sennar. Though the two communities later formed an alliance to halt the thrust of the Dinka toward the plain of Gezira in the 17th century, the collapse of the Funj sultanate at the end of the 18th century reinforced a Shilluk kingdom henceforth centered around Fashoda. Likewise, the political void created by a successional crisis in the heart of the Shilluk kingdom eased the advance of the Nuer. Nuer mercenaries pillaged the country when the *reth* Awin called on them to crush his opponents in 1827.⁷

In fact, war and famine are related in two ways. As war provokes famine, famine also incites conflict. For the Mursi—some five thousand peasants on the border of Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya—the famine of 1971 to 1973 was due to the absence of rain, not war. But the dearth of food exacerbated tensions: the Mursi tried to steal the livestock of their northern neighbors, the Bori, and occupied the lands of their

traditional enemies to the east, the Ari, whose bee hives they coveted. These disturbances, in turn, precipitated supply problems, since the insecurity disturbed the commercial cycles of harvest, forced the peasants to abandon the best arable lands, and prompted the herdsmen to hide their livestock in forests infested by the tsetse fly, instead of leaving the herds to graze the lush pastures.⁸

It's astonishing how these phenomena could last through the ages. A little further south toward Kenya and Uganda, repeated droughts in 1964, 1968, 1972, and 1979 likewise fueled the theft of livestock. The Karamojong of Uganda attacked the Pokot, some 220,000 people living scattered along the Kenyan border. In the 1980s, the Ugandan Pokot of Upe thus had to find refuge in Kenya on the Mnagei plateau, in the hills of Sekerr and Chemorongit, along the Suam River.⁹ On the other hand, five thousand Pokot had to flee towards Uganda during the Kenyan drought of August 1999. Looking for water and pastures, they clashed with warrior clans like the Matheniko in January 2000.

The Colonial Era

The development of transportation, urbanization, the influx of automatic weapons, and the introduction of modern technologies have radically altered the old patterns of forced displacements in ancient Africa.

First, colonization ended the transatlantic slave trade on the coast. In the hinterland, the European military conquest then provoked many displacements. During World War I, for instance, requisitioning by the British and the Germans in Tanganyika created a famine called *kapatula* after the local name of the "shorts" the colonial

soldiers wore, or *mtunya*, a reference to the "scramble for Africa" by imperialist powers; food shortages caused the death of 30,000 persons, or one-fifth of the population affected by this event.¹⁰

Colonization also laid the basis for a market economy that spurred migrations of workers into cities and manufacturing districts, sometimes in a very coercive way, as in South Africa in the times of apartheid. The arrival of the Europeans also resulted in the establishment of international borders and administrative boundaries. Pushing the state logic of population control to the limit, the colonizers went so far as to regulate traditional flight strategies in cases of natural catastrophes, even though that policy aggravated the impact of humanitarian crises. During a drought that killed more than 20,000 people in the 1940s, the Portuguese of Cape Verde, for example, forbade the inhabitants to emigrate freely; rather, they profited from the situation and deported them to furnish labor for the plantations of São Tomé and Angola.

The colonial practice of partitioning territories took various turns according to the way of life of the local populations. In the Central African Republic, societies that practiced itinerant farming and lived in temporary settlements were regrouped into more easily accessible villages along roads. The pastoral populations of Sahel, on the other hand, were confined to seasonal migration zones and had to have a license to travel. The appearance of international borders especially hobbled the free movement of people even as it created new sanctuaries. To dodge taxes, labor levies, and the military draft, the inhabitants of French Upper Volta, Mali, and Niger left to find refuge in the British Gold Coast and Ni-

geria; those of the Ivory Coast, instead, fled towards Liberia.

Colonial Sudan's Character

In British Sudan, colonization, of course, was a determining factor in formalizing the movements of populations. Administrative boundaries were set in the interior, and international borders were fixed with Italian Eritrea through a convention of July 1895, with French Sudan in 1919 and 1924, and with the Belgian Congo in 1916, following a 1906 agreement that provided for dividing the enclave of Lado and that took effect upon the death of King Leopold II three years later. Even before the exact shape of the colony was defined, Sudan was already greeting the first refugees in the modern sense of the term: the tribes of Chad fleeing the French army, Oromo escaping the Ethiopian troops of the Emperor Menelik II, and some 25,000 Fulani chased by the British from the north of Nigeria toward the Nile valley.

Unlike Kenya or South Africa, Sudan was not a colony where Europeans settled. Thus, the country was spared land takings that forced peasants to live on reservations and at times provoked famines, as in Zimbabwe in the 1930s.¹¹ But drawing on precedents in British India, and Madras in particular, the regulations of 1920 codified and fixed the agricultural and tribal establishments under the pretext of improving soil irrigation and preventing famine. The underlying motivations to such arrangements were of a strategic nature: to keep an armed peace and prevent ethnic conflicts by separating the populations in question.

In that spirit, the British first blocked the eastern advance of the Zande, who were threatening the Dinka and had started penetrating

present-day Sudan in the 18th century at the Mbomou river, on the border between Zaïre and Central Africa. In 1929, the British then tried to distance the Nuer from the Dinka. At Ayod, on the upper Nile, such measures reduced the possibility of contacts between the Nuer clans of Gaawar and Lou, on the one hand, and the Dinka clans of Ghol and Nyareweng on the other. Perceived as warring factions, the Nuer were forcefully regrouped in guarded villages while the Dinka were swept aside.

On the other side of the coin, since moving livestock from their pasture was forbidden, herdsmen couldn't cull animals infected with a bovine disease in 1929. The epidemic lasted until July 1931 and killed half of the herds in some districts.¹² Moreover, the animals suffered from pleurisy and pneumonia during the floods of 1932 to 1934. Called *nyoc thoini*, for the rotten fruit the Nuer had to eat when their harvest was ruined, the rains of 1933 revealed just how ill-adapted the government's strategy was to such natural catastrophes. A case in point: agricultural production rebounded as soon as restrictions on movement were lifted, in 1936, and as the Nuer could once again travel freely.

These failures clearly showed that the colonizers were preoccupied essentially with political ends. Thus the distribution of food aid, still in its embryonic stages at the time, reflected a concern for maintaining public order: quelling hunger riots in Khartoum in 1926, deflecting philanthropic interference by Egyptian nationalists to the Funj in 1930, pacifying the Nuba of the Tullishi jebel, or mountain, in 1932, freeing up labor for building military airports in 1942, and silencing opposition critics in 1949, to name just a few.

Modern Humanitarianism

After Sudan gained independence in 1956, the organization of relief efforts took on another dimension with the internationalization of aid and the influx of Congolese and Eritrean refugees in the 1960s and the Ethiopians, Tchadians, and Ugandans in the following decade. The insurrection in the south of Sudan likewise provoked an intervention by the United Nations: starting in 1989, Operation Lifeline Sudan subjected entire regions to a humanitarian transfusion. In its degree and amplitude, this operation aid still today is one of the most widespread undertakings of its kind, with the obvious exception of European interventions in the Balkans, which enjoy a much larger budget.

The south of Sudan is extremely poor, and international assistance therefore has played a major role in shaping the local war economy. Humanitarian aid—siphoned off by combatants for military and strategic ends—has taken on an even greater political dimension than in British times. By unwittingly furnishing supplies for the combatants, international assistance has even been blamed for prolonging the conflict.¹³ Its perverse effects are the object of much criticism.

In a book that attracted some attention 15 years ago, for example, an anthropologist studying the region denounced the way aid was imposed on populations supposedly benefitting from it.¹⁴ Others echoed recriminations against the distribution of food that heightened tribal antagonisms, ruined local agriculture, perpetuated famine, reduced indigenous people to the status of international beggars, and created a state of dependence that undermined the people's self respect.¹⁵ One knowledgeable journalist, author of a work on international as-

sistance in that part of Africa, remarked, "While it is certain that war starves people, it's not sure that food aid nourishes peace."¹⁶

From the humanitarian crises of ancient Africa, we have now moved on to a new era of humanitarianism. Undeniably, the techniques of forced migrations have evolved considerably, for better or for worse. Aid has an important role in keeping displaced populations enclosed in camps where they come looking for help. These sanctuaries furnish recruits for the guerillas, serve as logistical platforms for combatants, and constitute an ideal military target in the middle of conflict. Retrospectively, the survival tactics of the past, specifically dispersal in the bushes, seem to have had a certain value. Moreover, these tactics haven't entirely disappeared, as climate and terrain continue to affect how hostilities unfold: just as the Nuer had to wait for the end of the floods of 1917 to attack the Dinka, so the guerrillas of today have to plan their offensives during the rainy season, when less mobile government troops can't get around outside the towns.

A new focus on historical perspective can teach us important lessons. First, humanitarian crises are not new to Africa, and today's crises are every bit as severe as in the past. Above all, what has fundamentally changed in our time is the perception that Westerners have of distant wars. The developed nations are less and less inclined to put up with suffering and are more sensitive to the dramas unfolding for other people. This argument should suffice to justify humanitarian engagement, rather than trying at all cost to pad the numbers of victims, to the point of painting a wretched portrait of the ravages caused by "savage hordes."

We should also consider ancient strategies for survival in emergency situations. We know that confining displaced persons in camps is not a solution. Just like prisons, these camps create social tensions and violence. Unless we reestablish peace and undertake repatriation programs, we can't find a viable alternative, considering the extreme reluctance of potential host countries, in particular in the industrialized world, to welcome those who are suffering.

In short, a historic perspective underscores the drawbacks of humanitarian aid. Though we can't allow ourselves to be seduced by the illusion of a golden age of tradition, the facts should spur decision makers to seriously reconsider the "business" of international charity. ■

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NOTES

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4. Richard Fardon, *Raiders and Refugees: Trends in Chamba Political Development, 1750 to 1950* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998).

5. David Turton, "Spontaneous Resettlement after Drought: An Ethiopian Example," *Disasters* 8(3), 1984.

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