

Thursday, July 20, 2006

## Who's Using Humanitarian Aid as a Political Weapon?

When Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF government was accused of using food aid to punish political supporters of the Western-backed opposition Movement for Democratic Change, a hue and cry was raised in all quarters. Newspaper editorialists, government officials, elected representatives, NGO spokesmen and human-rights imperialists deplored the manipulation of humanitarian assistance.

But when the Washington Post reported that South Korea had suspended food aid to the North to force Pyongyang back to six-party talks (1), the silence was deafening. There were no outraged editorials, no marches, no letter writing campaigns.

The common sense view is that only Washington's "outposts of tyranny" use food as a weapon, but never the US and never its allies.

On the contrary, Western powers and their allies frequently create humanitarian crises to pressure civilian populations or their governments to behave in desired ways.

NATO blocked delivery of heating fuel to regions of Serbia that had voted for Slobodan Milosevic's Socialists, after pounding the country for 90 days in a merciless air war. The message was clear: Anyone who supported Milosevic would pay the price.

US Air Force General Michael Short explained the rationale behind NATO's bombing campaign. "If you wake up in the morning and you have no power to your house and no gas to your stove and the bridge you take to work is down and will be lying in the Danube for the next 20 years, I think you begin to ask, 'Hey, Slobo, what's this all about? How much more of this do we have to withstand?'" (2)

The same principle is at work in the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon. "As in the Palestinian territory, Israel is ratcheting up the pressure on the civilian population in an effort to push the Lebanese to reject Hezbollah tactics. Israel wants to make Hezbollah a liability to the Lebanese people and to the Lebanese government." (3)

The US made plain to Nicaraguans that the re-election of a Sandinista government would continue the miseries of the Contra war. They got the message.

And now Western powers are about to send another message. Any Palestinian who puts up a fight will be denied humanitarian (i.e., food) aid.

The European Union has been working on a plan to distribute funding to the Palestinian Authority. The funding will bypass the elected Hamas government. Some funds will be deposited directly to the accounts of the moderate President Mahmoud Abbas, whose Fatah party lost the last election. Some will be distributed directly to schools and hospitals.

Government employees will receive half-pay – except Hamas cabinet members and members of Parliament, who will receive nothing.

The idea follows a longstanding principle of how a ruling class or oppressor nation should deal with opposition: strengthen the moderates, crush the militants.

A third set of payments, to be distributed to the neediest Palestinians, has been turned down by the EU because the list of recipients “included the families of men killed while fighting Israel.” (4)

There’s a pattern here: Support Milosevic and freeze; support the Sandinistas and be terrorized by the Contras; elect Hamas and suffer the privations of a financial embargo; fight Israel and starve.

On the other hand, vote for the Western-backed party and stay warm; oust the Sandinistas and free yourself from the terror of the Contra war; vote for the Palestinian moderates and get paid; don’t fight Israel and get food aid.

### **An occupation by an international force is still an occupation**

When the United States granted the Philippines independence, what initially looked like a loss to US imperialism, turned out to be a net gain. As part of the independence agreement, the US retained its military bases in the Philippines and the property rights of US individuals and businesses were guaranteed (not only on paper, but by the continued presence of the US military.) Through this arrangement, the US was able to continue to enjoy the advantages of colonialism, without the costs and headaches of administering a colony.

There's a plan being bruited about to inject an international force into southern Lebanon to create a buffer zone, once Israel's operations to degrade Hezbollah's military capabilities have been completed. (5) If followed through, the plan will deliver to Israel the benefits of occupation, while sparing it the costs and headaches.

Israel occupied southern Lebanon for nearly two decades to create a buffer zone between Israeli targets and Palestinian militants operating from Lebanon. While the occupation limited attacks, the price was considered too heavy, and Israel withdrew.

With the prospect of an international force re-creating the buffer zone, Israelis should be pleased. They'll reap the benefits of occupation without having to foot the bill.

### **Turning flagrancy into ambiguity**

Louise Arbour, the former Canadian Supreme Court Justice who, as chief prosecutor for the Hague Tribunal, indicted Slobodan Milosevic for war crimes, won't be indicting anyone connected with the Israeli bombardments of civilians and civilian infrastructure in Gaza and southern Lebanon.

Not that she could. She's no longer the tribunal's chief prosecutor, but is now the UN's high commissioner for human rights.

Arbour is of the view that the actions of the Israeli Defense Forces could constitute war crimes. (6) Exactly what the Israeli army would have to do before Arbour concluded war crimes had been committed is unclear, but it would seem the bar is set pretty high, and may, indeed, be insuperable.

My advice to Israeli army commanders worried about a war crimes indictment. Don't.

### **When gatekeepers fail**

The "insurgent" sociologist Albert Szymanski once remarked that the function of mainstream political parties is to act as a gatekeeper for selecting people with acceptable politics to stand for elected office.

Occasionally, the gatekeepers fail.

Recently, operatives of Ontario's governing Liberal Party were in a fevered panic over the comments of one its elected members. "Israel," said Ottawa MPP Phil McNeely, "is"....steady yourself..."a rogue state." (7)

To make matters worse, he urged the Canadian government to apologize for supporting Israel's collective punishment of the residents of Gaza and Lebanon.

Aghast, the party's leader, and premier of the province, Dalton McGuinty, called the Canadian Jewish Congress to apologize.

The chances of McNeely being allowed to run in the next election are about as good as the chances Israeli army commanders will be indicted for war crimes.

### **War is the terrorism of the state**

It's plain to all but Zionists and other simpletons that Israel's terror bombing of Gaza and Lebanon has nothing to do with a few kidnapped Israeli soldiers, and everything to do with crushing any kind of resistance to Israel, whether by Hezbollah or those who support its presence in Lebanon, or Hamas and those who elect it.

The goals of this campaign are to directly create terror to pressure civilian populations to oppose militancy and, additionally, to degrade the militants' infrastructure, even if it means killing hundreds of civilians and destroying bridges, airports, power stations, roads and houses.

This is terrorism on an entirely different scale than that practiced by guerillas, insurgents and resistance fighters.

Asked by a French reporter whether it was cowardly to use women's baskets and handbags to carry explosives to kill innocent people, Larbi Ben M'hidi, leader of the resistance to the French colonial occupation of Algeria, turned the question around. "And doesn't it seem more cowardly to drop napalm bombs on defenseless villages so that there are a thousand times more innocent victims? Of course, if we had your airplanes it would be a lot easier for us. Give us your bombers, and you can have our baskets."

On one level, state terror campaigns and those of non-state actors are the same. The terror of knowing you could be killed by a bomb hidden in a basket is no different from

the terror of knowing you could be killed by a bomb dropped from a warplane.

But on another level they're different.

Guerillas and insurgents almost invariably fight for liberation and freedom from oppression and exploitation. Imperialist states invariably fight to achieve the opposite—to subjugate, dominate, plunder and exploit.

The magnitude of terror is also different. In the latest campaign, hundreds of Gazans and Lebanese have been killed, most civilians. A handful of Israelis have been killed, most soldiers. Gazans and Lebanese will live with the effects of devastated civilian infrastructure for years. Israel's infrastructure has been scratched by a few pinpricks.

(1) Washington Post, July 14, 2006.

(2) Globe and Mail, May 26, 1999.

(3) Yoram Peri, in the Globe and Mail, July 14, 2006.

(4) New York Times, July 20, 2006.

(5) New York Times, July 19, 2006.

(6) Ibid.

(7) Ottawa Citizen, July 20, 2006.

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