

Humanitarian Aid – a new Political and Military Tool?



Großansicht des Bildes mit der Bildunterschrift: Humanitarian aid has become a strategic tool in conflict areas.

Humanitarian organizations complain that aid is becoming less a response to real need and more a part of military strategy or a reaction to the media spotlight, often guided by political expediency.

For months Iraq has been in the absolute center of the media spotlight. Hundreds of journalists have been reporting on all aspects of the U.S.-led war and continue to file stories on the chaotic postwar situation. The government in Washington, who feared not only media pictures of wounded and killed soldiers, but also images of a civilian population without clean water and adequate food sources that could play badly with Americans at home, realized early on that a plan of action was needed. In April, the U.S. Defense Department made \$1.7 billion (€1.5 billion) available for the rebuilding of Iraq.

A generous gift to a people in need, but one with a darker side. At the same time that money started flowing from American coffers to Iraq, the U.S. cut \$1 billion from its contribution to the World Food Program. According to the 2003 International Red Cross Catastrophe Report, that directly affected 40 million Africans in some 22 countries.

“It was a deadly decision for a continent wracked by civil war, hunger and disease,” Fredrik Barkenhammar of the German Red Cross told Deutsche Welle. “AIDS alone kills 6,500 people a day in Africa.”

According to him, this case illustrates a growing trend. Politicians with money at their disposal often direct those funds to areas that are currently in the headlines, in part to show voters their humanitarian credentials and to prove they take action in crisis situations. The report cites Afghanistan as another example. The country has seen its U.S. aid amount triple since September 11, 2001, although the basic need in the country has generally remained the same.



Bildunterschrift: [Großansicht des Bildes mit der Bildunterschrift:](#) At the same time, the media maelstrom is largely ignoring smoldering hot spots like Angola, Somalia, the Congo (photo). That affects how and to what people donate, according to Wolk-Christian Ramm of the aid agency Terre de Hommes.

“For example, in Aceh in Indonesia right now, there aren’t any cameras catching images of people in need,” he told Deutsche Welle. “As a result, there is hardly any willingness to donate.”

The numbers speak for themselves. Since the beginning of the Iraq war, the German Red Cross has collected more than €4 million (\$3.5 million) for humanitarian efforts there. In the same period, donations for Africa barely amounted to €100,000 (\$115,000).

More harm than good?



Bildunterschrift: [Großansicht des Bildes mit der Bildunterschrift:](#) In Afghanistan there are currently some 350 aid organizations. Aid experts however say quantity does not always equal quality. In fact, the opposite is often the case and the presence of aid workers can even have certain disadvantages.

Frederik Barkenhammar of the German Red Cross complains that aid workers can drive local prices up. For example, they can afford to pay much more for taxi fares and apartment rentals than the local population. The few well-educated Afghans still in the country find it much more advantageous, and lucrative, to work for the foreigners set up in the country than the newly forming civil administration. A driver working for a foreign embassy earns around \$500 a month whereas a doctor in a state-run clinic takes home only around \$45.

Mixing military and humanitarian

A particularly alarming trend, according to the Red Cross report, is the growing military involvement in the distribution of humanitarian aid. Critics claim that aid is being seen increasingly as an instrument of international foreign and security policy, as a way to increase support among the local population and at home. Soldiers passing out food packets makes for good television and the most important battle for many politicians is decided at home in front of the screen.

“The whole field of humanitarian aid has become very interesting as it’s portrayed in the media,” said Peter Runge of the nongovernmental organization VENRO. “Many ministers and heads of government use aid as a way to spruce up their images. It garners a lot of attention, and it has a good affect on the troops, improving their standing and increasing their support at home.”

But this so-called “humanitarian” aid often hides a political or military strategy. According to Runge, it can become hard to differentiate which organizations are independent and neutral, there to help people who are in need, and which are helping people because they belong to a particular ethnic or political group.

Besides the ethical dilemma, such a blurring of the boundaries can have serious, practical consequences for aid workers, according to Ramm of Terre des Hommes.

“The U.S. military assigns humanitarian groups a strategic role, even in the planning stages of a war,” he said. “Besides journalists, the Americans ‘embedded’ humanitarian organizations with the troops.” Who was soldier and who was aid worker was no longer evident”.

Barkenhammar of the German Red Cross has strongly criticized the practice, saying it puts his colleagues in danger. Only when aid organizations can claim absolutely neutrality are they respected and largely left alone by the warring factions. The role of the military and that of humanitarian organizations has to remain separate, he said.