

LE PIÈGE *

Quand l'aide humanitaire remplace la guerre

The subjects dealt with in Rufin's book ¹—the misappropriation of humanitarian aid or its use for political ends, relief activities and publicity, the question of whether or not to denounce objectionable practices publicly—are issues of current importance. The author, who has himself done field work, starts his book with a brief history of humanitarian activities, the first of which, in the Western world, were carried out as early as the beginning of the 19th century.

More recently, in the 1970s, there appeared organizations “without frontiers”—initially doctors, followed later by all manner of professions—people who turned up on the fringes of conflicts in the Third World... and on TV. For these groups, the adoption of a political stance must accompany their work in the field. Through the mass media, they manipulate public opinion with no regard for law or discretion. These organizations, which often have huge sums of money at their disposal, are unfortunately all in intense competition with one another and, in the ardour of the race, publicity often outstrips performance.

Rufin denounces the *myth of political impartiality* in humanitarian aid, especially when destined for refugee camps. To be sure, displaced civilians do benefit from such assistance, but so do the combatants, who find «humanitarian sanctuary» in the camps where they can rest and take on supplies. This at least partial “misappropriation” of humanitarian aid is practised not only by guerilla movements but also by governments (the author cites examples of this in Kampuchea, Ethiopia and Nicaragua). Here Rufin advances one of his two main themes, that of the balance between usefulness and risk. “A government makes its territory accessible to emergency aid when, in its view, the *usefulness* of the aid exceeds the *risk* involved. And it closes its frontiers again when the risk appears to be too great” (p. 261).

Rufin's second major theme, which is similar to the ideas of Shawcross on the subject (see *Poids de la pitié*, Paris, 1985), is that humanitarian aid is an extension of politics or, more precisely, of diplomacy. Indeed, in a world where the two superpowers are approximately balanced, the aggression between them has more recently taken the form of exploiting *intranational* antagonisms. In this context, by undertaking new forms of international action to aid civilian populations (and action implies *control*, power over), “humanitarian activities play the role of diplomacy in these internal conflicts which are the present-day manifestation of the superpower struggle” (p. 282).

* The Trap — When humanitarian aid supersedes war

¹ Jean-Christophe Rufin, *Le piège. Quand l'aide humanitaire remplace la guerre*, J.-C. Lattès, Paris, 1986, 336 p.

At several points in the book, the author criticizes some Red Cross organizations, in particular the ICRC, which he takes to task essentially for having too great a respect for the law which, according to Rufin, paralyzes the organization and makes it a "hostage of the States" (p. 317). He considers that respecting the law merely strengthens the position of those who exercise power. There are times when one must break the silence and denounce government abuses. But Rufin, who obviously knows the "field" well, is aware of the price of that denunciation: the abandonment of the victims. Thus, he does not commit himself, leaving open the question as to which of these approaches he favours. The choice between relieving immediate, acute suffering and refusing to provide aid which would, at least partially, be used by an authoritarian or even dictatorial power constitutes an abiding dilemma, with regard to which no-one in fact is ever entirely in the right.

Le piège is a good book. Leaving aside the inaccuracies and generalisations which are almost inevitable in a book written without the benefit of hindsight, there are two aspects of Rufin's book which deserve criticism:

1. The book plunges headlong into the subject and seems to condemn the spread of the movements "without frontiers", but the reasoning is not carried to its logical conclusion: the author does not point out the danger posed by this proliferation of non-governmental organizations which are prepared to accept numerous compromises in order to be able to operate. In fact, it is this very diversity of institutions which works in favour of the host governments, giving them the opportunity to choose the organization that will be most favourable to it, which will be too weak to resist pressure from it. In the reviewer's opinion, only a strong institution, or a number of institutions upholding the same principles, can simultaneously carry out activities which truly assist the victims and, as is often the corollary, resist government pressure.
2. In his introduction, Rufin states that he will not deal with what he calls "the law of war", thus disregarding everything which according to him has bearing on prisoners of war. This makes for an unbalanced presentation of the ICRC's work. A more thorough discussion of international humanitarian law would show the importance of protecting the victims, the beneficial aspect of the law. If the victims do not benefit from this body of law (Rufin's argument, which is why he states that the work of the ICRC, so respectful of the law, does not always benefit the victims), then we should not be content to leave the situation as it is, or try to provide a remedy by sending medical teams into the bush by night; rather, we should create a body of law which truly protects the victims. Developing international humanitarian law and, above all, monitoring its application require of the ICRC, among other things, respect for the "rules of the game", that is, dialogue with the States. Such activity may well imply the breaking of silence in order to provide information, to

encourage further thought, to provide better assistance. But the effectiveness of humanitarian work cannot be measured primarily by the audience ratings nor by the clamour of the publicity-conscious. A commitment to aiding the victims requires modesty, tolerance and also, no doubt, a measure of silence.

The debate which Rufin would like to instigate is an important one. Great attention must be paid to the danger of humanitarian assistance being used for political ends. Rufin's book, more an outline than a thoroughgoing treatise (and the better for it!), represents a valuable contribution to the debate.

Jean-Luc Blondel

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS IN GREECE, 1967-1971 *

Dangerous ground

Many studies have been written on the issues relating to the protection of political detainees and to ICRC activities in favour of persons detained in their own countries.

Mr. Siegrist's study, an abridged version of the thesis presented for his doctorate in political science, is nevertheless of great interest, since the author—taking the specific case of the dictatorship in Greece as the starting point—attempts to draw conclusions which go far beyond the framework of that one conflict.

This readable and well-arranged book is divided into two distinct parts.

In the first, theoretical part, the author begins by recapitulating some basic themes, such as the origin of the ICRC, its aims, work and resources, and then turns to a highly sensitive and controversial issue—that of the ICRC's legal status. In a few densely-packed pages, Mr. Siegrist goes on to recall the origin of ICRC action in favour of political detainees, before examining the *legal bases* for such activities (the fundamental principles of the Red Cross, its doctrine, etc.).

* Roland Siegrist, *The protection of political detainees: The International Committee of the Red Cross in Greece, 1967-1971*, Ed. Corbaz, Montreux, 1985, 171 pp.: English.