

sions of local initiative to meet pressing socio-economic needs. It is difficult for external aid workers to learn how to work with or in the same way as self-help groups. More harm than good is done when money and materials make previously self-sufficient and informal groups dependent on external assistance and new internal élites.

After only three years of existence, the Independent Commission ended its formal mandate at the end of 1986. In this short period, it has managed to produce a remarkable series of reports on the burning humanitarian problems of our time. Several more reports on specific issues are in press, in addition to the Commission's final report. There is no doubt that these reports will have a lasting positive impact on the thinking of the Commission's main targets : governmental decision-makers, public opinion and ourselves in the humanitarian organizations.

*Jan Egeland*

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## DISAPPEARED!

### *Technique of terror*

In recent times, tens of thousands of persons have disappeared, usually in a climate of repression and terror. The United Nations has recorded such cases in more than 40 countries. These disappearances are not mentioned as such in instruments of law dealing with human rights. But that does not make any less grave this violation of the basic principles which require respect for the individual in particular and humanity in general.

In view of the upsurge in the number of disappearances and the deep trauma which they cause, the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues was rightly concerned to bring together in a report all of the existing information—taken from both legal provisions and institutions—in order to provoke reflection and—as far as possible—to encourage action aimed at eradicating this wicked practice.

The Independent Commission's brief report \*, published with an introduction by Simone Veil, a Commission member, attempts above all to help defend those whose rights and dignity have been violated. It is not meant as a guide to action, the writing of which would, at this stage, be a risky undertaking. Its aim is to inform the public and to mobilize the international community in order to find solutions to the problem.

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\* *Disappeared!—Technique of terror*, a report for the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues (with an introduction by Simone Veil), Zed Books Ltd., London and New Jersey, 1986, 107 pp.

The authors have divided the report into three parts:

- I. A description of the phenomenon from its tragic individual aspect to the manner in which it violates the law and international moral standards. There is also a description of the social and political settings in which such events occur.
- II. The mandate and activities of existing organizations (both governmental and non-governmental).
- III. Conclusions and recommendations under the heading "We Can Do Better".

Since 1974 the term "disappearance" has been used systematically by human rights organizations and the media, notably with respect to Latin America. The pattern of events is only too well known: the searches, the secret arrests and the abductions in the middle of the night with all of the hopeless confusion and anguish which follow. Disappearances are a form of torture, a two-fold evil striking both the victim himself and his loved ones, who have no way of knowing what has become of him.

One of the more sinister forms of this practice is the abduction of pregnant women. A child born in such conditions will, if it survives, be anonymous and this lack of identity will make it extremely vulnerable.

There is no strict definition of disappearances. At this stage it would be either too narrow or too wide. The authors nevertheless set out the rudiments of a definition. A disappearance has occurred "whenever acts or omissions are committed by government agents or individuals acting with governmental consent or complicity for purposes of intimidation and repression which violate fundamental human rights, with intent to harm a person or his or her relatives, and in which public authorities conceal the fate of the victim and deny their own involvement". (p. 37)

A regime which employs such methods does so as part of a strategy of deliberate terror which is often born of a shaky dictatorship fearing public protest. For, "in the impenetrable obscurity of a well-established dictatorship, disappearances serve no purpose".

Legal mechanisms are blocked, the principle of *habeas corpus* becomes a dead letter and the press comes or remains under intense surveillance. Law and ethics become eroded.

Since individual acts of protest produce no results and the legal system is incapable of offering proper protection, the families of the victims begin to organize themselves. Thus we have seen many private groups spring up.

Research remains to be done to arrive at a more complete analysis of the various systems which lend themselves to the widespread perpetration of this evil in order to establish the degree of responsibility which can be attributed to the authorities concerned.

The chapters dealing with the role of inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations describe the respective mandates of and work done by 14 organizations, including the ICRC, in the fight against disappearances.

This list is useful because it enables the reader better to understand what machinery exists and why it was created. It also shows that machinery's limits.

This book clearly sets out the obligations which all authorities have as dictated by the law and international ethics. But the means for ensuring that those obligations are met continue to be feeble.

The concluding chapter is entitled "We Can Do Better" and explains how those means should be made more effective.

Apart from the above-mentioned research to find better ways of detecting the social and political contexts which produce a higher risk of disappearances, and how better to prevent them, it is suggested that a system could be set up to keep an international watch on situations in which a government has suspended normal laws and rights.

The authors also consider how appropriate and useful an international convention would be.

For the moment, the authors advocate a strengthening of preventive measures, greater efficiency on the part of the judicial authorities, more stringent standards for court evidence, more effective penalties and a campaign to prevent the practice from becoming a simple commonplace.

These recommendations are set out in such detail that their limits are as obvious as their great promise.

Above all, concludes the report, "it is in awareness, of the individual, of the community, of society as a whole, that the greatest hope lies".

This compact book is an informative and well-written attempt to throw light on a subject still shrouded in darkness.

*Clermonde Dominicé*