

The concepts on which the Movement is built, although running through the whole book, come into focus in the last three chapters. "Disasters and Development" provides an important counterweight to the tendency of some relief agencies to lose interest in humanitarian emergencies after the crisis stage passes. The section on the origins of disasters and measures to reduce vulnerability is excellent. The chapter on protecting the victims of armed conflicts is a useful primer on international humanitarian law and human rights law for health-care personnel. Even better is the section on application, which obviously draws on the wealth of ICRC experience. In the complex world of the 1990s, the final chapter, an introduction to humanitarian ethics, is indispensable to anyone in the field of international health. The application of fundamental principles in specific situations is considered in detail. This is perhaps one of the most important parts of the book.

The *Handbook on war and public health* is a very readable book, which deserves to be the companion of all health personnel providing humanitarian assistance. It manages to capture a wealth of experience, and to present it in a way which is useful both as a ready field reference, and for health workers preparing for an overseas assignment. This book is a must for public-health personnel working with displaced populations in developing countries.

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Neil MacFarlane, Larry Minear, Stephen Shenfield, *Armed conflict in Georgia: A case study in humanitarian action and peacekeeping*, The Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Providence, R.I., 1996, 126 pp.

This new book on Georgia is the latest in a series of studies on humanitarian action in armed conflict published in the United States by Brown University's Watson Institute. Previous studies having concentrated on Asia, Latin America, Africa and the former Yugoslavia, it is the first to deal with a country of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

For several reasons it is an interesting study, for it describes humanitarian action in a context of widespread political, economic and social upheaval brought about by the break-up of the Soviet Union, focuses on three conflicts fought in rapid succession and involving different players and regions (South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Mingrelia) and highlights a new and particularly important theatre of action for the international community, not to mention the Russian Federation.

For the purpose of this study, a team of researchers travelled to Georgia in August 1994 and March 1995 and conducted numerous interviews in Vienna, Moscow, Geneva, New York and Washington. The result of their investigations, which lasted one year and included a review of the relevant literature, is unusual in that it blends the standpoint of the humanitarian practitioner with that of the academic analyst. The authors do express regret, however, that they were unable to meet the local authorities during their visit to Abkhazia.

The study covers the period from November 1989 (when open hostilities broke out in the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast)¹ to April 1995; well structured, it is easy both to read and to consult. The three main chapters place the international action in its proper context and throw light on the specific nature of the Georgian problem, particularly its ethnic aspect; they also analyse the various dimensions of the humanitarian crisis, as well as the international response to it and the link between humanitarian action and the search for a peaceful solution of the conflict; finally, they discuss the role of the peace-keeping forces involved and their contribution towards solving humanitarian problems in the field. The work concludes with a number of recommendations for the future.

While it is difficult to summarize the conclusions of so detailed an analysis, a few ideas — which, of course, commit no one but the authors — do stand out in sharp focus.

First, the emergency humanitarian operation carried out in September and October 1993, when Abkhaz forces took control of Sukhumi and southern Abkhazia as far as the Inguri River (now a line of demarcation), was clearly a success: the humanitarian agencies dealt promptly with a sudden influx of about 250,000 displaced persons fleeing Abkhazia to seek refuge in western Georgia, and the worst was certainly avoided.

¹ No political connotation attaches to my use of the term “South Ossetia”, which is proscribed in Georgian political discourse but is generally used by the international community and the press.

Even so, those displaced were able to return only in very small numbers, chiefly owing to the Abkhaz authorities' reluctance to readmit Georgian civilians and to security hazards in Abkhazia itself — not least the presence of mines in the Gali region. The role played by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which was present at the political negotiations and chaired the Quadripartite Commission on the return of displaced persons, is the subject of a lengthy analysis focusing on the relationship between politics and humanitarian action. While the political negotiators believed that everything should be done to promote the swift return of those displaced, given the circumstances a number of the humanitarian players had strong reservations on the subject. The authors thus raise a fundamental question: the humanitarian problem posed by displaced persons required a political solution, yet how could a political solution be found for the conflict without effectively addressing the humanitarian crisis?

The authors also regret the low profile adopted by the international organizations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and urge them to raise it. However, they do mention — all too briefly, of course, in this reviewer's opinion — the action taken by the ICRC in Abkhazia, which started in 1992 with the opening of two permanent offices, one in Gudauta and the other in Sukhumi. After witnessing the takeover of Sukhumi by Abkhaz forces, ICRC delegates maintained their presence on both sides of the front line throughout the conflict. Reminding both parties of the rules of international humanitarian law and the need to respect civilians, wounded combatants and prisoners was a constant factor of the action undertaken by the ICRC, which also provided emergency relief to displaced persons and others in especially vulnerable situations: the latter included elderly Georgians who, having remained at home in Abkhazia when the younger members of their households fled, were particularly exposed to persecution by uncontrolled elements. In a society caught up in violence, it required great perseverance to help these people and to remind the authorities of their obligation to protect them.

The authors' analysis of the many obstacles encountered by the humanitarian organizations rings a bell for anyone who knows the southern Caucasus: safety concerns, logistic constraints, the difficulty of pinpointing the intended beneficiaries of relief operations, diversion of part of the aid to private markets, the absence of any local non-governmental sector and the lack of coordination between the humanitarian agencies themselves are but a few examples.

Chapter four describes the action of the four peace-keeping forces in Georgia: the tripartite force in South Ossetia, made up of North Ossetians,

Georgians and Russians, whose main task was to monitor the implementation of the cease-fire concluded in 1992; the mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which was not strictly speaking a peace-keeping force but had a far broader mandate (it is worth noting how tasks were shared between the United Nations, whose special envoy Ambassador Edouard Brunner strove to find political solutions for the Abkhaz conflict, and the OSCE, which was far more active in South Ossetia); the peace-keeping force of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which consisted in fact of Russian troops then deployed along the Inguri and was mainly responsible for upholding the cease-fire, supervising the implementation of the provisions of the agreement reached between the parties on 14 May 1994 on the joint creation of a security zone, and promoting the return of displaced persons, particularly to the Gali region; and lastly, the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia. The authors express satisfaction with those peace-keeping forces, which were entrusted with very different mandates, for the way in which they “froze” the Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflicts by ensuring that the cease-fire was by and large respected. They regret, however, that the Russian forces deployed in Abkhazia and the United Nations Observer Mission, whose relations were reportedly difficult, did not do more to create conditions in which displaced persons could return in complete safety. With respect to the United Nations Mission, that criticism is tempered by the recognition that it was an observer force rather than a peace-keeping force in the strict sense of the term — an important difference in the world of politics but one which is very often lost on the local population.

In the same chapter the authors also discuss Russian policy in Georgia, its objectives and development, in relation both to the policy pursued by the Georgian authorities and to the conflict in Chechnya. While some criticism is directed at the Russian peace-keeping forces in Abkhazia, which are sometimes seen as an instrument of national policy, it is pointed out that neither the United Nations nor the OSCE was keen to play a substantial peace-keeping role in the region. In spite of the problems raised, however, the study concludes that, on the whole, the deployment of Russian forces did much to meet the needs of the population. Without their presence there would have been a major risk of the conflict breaking out anew.

In analysing the interactions between peace-keeping (in the broadest sense of the term) and humanitarian assistance, the study concludes that they were limited for several reasons: the existence of lasting cease-fires; the fact that operations by the humanitarian agencies were concentrated outside regions where the peace-keeping forces were active; and lastly, the desire of the agencies present in Abkhazia not to make humanitarian

assistance a key factor in political negotiations, since it had to be completely independent if it was to meet the needs of the victims impartially. Some members of the peace-keeping forces who were interviewed suggested that humanitarian assistance was not their responsibility, since others were there for that purpose. In the authors' opinion, the situation was a missed opportunity for synergy.

To my mind, the Georgian crisis raises the interesting problem of the relationship, alluded to earlier, between politics and humanitarian action in all present-day conflicts. Personally, I believe that peace-keeping forces, wherever deployed, should be expected to create conditions favourable for humanitarian action and should be familiar with and implement international humanitarian law as part of their duties. Yet humanitarian action must remain independent — or at least politicians should ensure that there is scope for impartial and neutral humanitarian action, even if such action is not necessarily intended to be a contribution to peace in a comprehensive approach to the problems involved. Some suffering must be relieved simply for reasons of humanity.

Whether or not the reader agrees with the conclusions of this study, they will certainly provide stimulating food for thought.

For the ICRC and other humanitarian agencies, the Commonwealth of Independent States has posed and continues to pose challenging problems. Having for the most part been present for only three or four years in countries with unfamiliar values, cultures, traditions and languages, they find themselves up against cyclical conflicts or conflicts which, though frozen by fragile cease-fires, remain without any political solution. These agencies have to respond to the usual emergencies, but also to adopt a long-term perspective involving rehabilitation and projects designed to make communities self-sufficient again. They are striving to be creative in situations where the future is uncertain. They need to reassess the conclusions drawn from their African experience, since these are not always applicable in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where problems are less extensive but the suffering is just as acute. First and foremost, however, they must ensure that their action contributes towards restoring a climate of trust among divided communities. This implies responsible behaviour untainted by partisan considerations and, above all, listening to others while respecting their dignity and differences.

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