

After the Kosovo conflict, a genuine humanitarian space: A utopian concept or an essential requirement?

by

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Quand on sait faire les choses, ça finit par se savoir

Paul Cézanne, painter

Many words have been put to paper and much has been said on radio and TV about the most recent Balkan crisis — the Kosovo conflict of spring 1999. Analyses, lessons learned, evaluations, conferences and seminars of all kinds have taken place in several Western countries, gathering a select number of representatives of humanitarian agencies, governments and the military — both national armies and NATO. Those representatives have ended up becoming a sort of members of a “club”, meeting over and over again to repeat largely the same things on the same subjects.

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Having participated in some of those gatherings, I have come to the conclusion that a number of ideas expressed there merit further comment. There also are a few concepts that likewise deserve to be drawn to attention. Not in order to “convert” others to the way the International Committee of the Red Cross thinks, but to plead for the concept of an independent and genuine “humanitarian space” which can best serve the interest of all those — men, women and children — who become victims of a conflict. We have been fighting to preserve that humanitarian space not only in the Balkans, but also in Angola, Afghanistan, Iraq, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Chechnya, Colombia, East Timor and countless other places. I believe that the concept has been increasingly blurred and disputed in the recent debates, and that its universality, which must be preserved in all conflicts and in any country, has been threatened by the recent Balkan crisis.

One of the purposes of this paper, though it originated from observations made in the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict, is precisely to remind the reader that — while the whole Western world held its breath at the sight of state-of-the-art military technology being deployed in the Balkans and the primal suffering of hundreds of thousands of civilians — dozens of other conflicts dragged on and millions of other innocent men, women and children continued to be killed, wounded, maimed or forcibly displaced on virtually all continents. And humanitarian agencies kept struggling to alleviate that suffering as well.

In this paper the following issues will also be questioned: the reduction of humanitarian action to essentially providing relief aid through appropriate logistics, thus forgetting the basic protection of the individual foreseen in international humanitarian law; the tendency to “level down” the humanitarian concept and humanitarian action to accommodate all components (multilateral and bilateral aid, military and civilian operations); the worrisome trend towards substituting political for humanitarian action; the even more worrying tendency to label almost anything as “humanitarian”, thus creating dangerous confusion among the general public, but above all among the victims of a conflict.

On the other hand, I shall not go into the legitimacy of “humanitarian wars” or “humanitarian interventions” — in other words the *jus ad bellum* that differs substantially from the *jus in bello*, or international humanitarian law, with which the ICRC is concerned. Nor shall I embark on the difficult task of defining what a “humanitarian intervention” is or is not. Many articles and books have already been written on the subject, and I would not be in a position to add anything substantial to this debate.

Beyond Kosovo, millions of people in distress

In 1999 the disturbing evidence that whatever happens in Europe from the humanitarian point of view is seen through a magnifying glass, compared with other tragedies far away from our borders, was striking indeed. It was not new, of course, nor was it really surprising: we all tend to be more sensitive to the suffering of people who are close to us, geographically as well as culturally and physically. There is an “identification factor” in the conflicts in Europe which makes the sight of suffering less bearable than when innocent people agonize under distant skies. *It had already surfaced during the Bosnian war and it was confirmed in Kosovo.*

At a less visceral level, however, the concern for the suffering inflicted upon human beings ought to be the same. This is possibly the main thing that sets humanitarian organizations — at least most of them — apart from politicians and military alike. They are not concerned with strategic, economic and political considerations; all they care about is helping the men, women and children affected by war, wherever it takes place. It can sound commonplace, but it is not, really: “The entire body of international humanitarian law is based on the idea that it is possible to separate humanitarian concerns from political concerns.”¹ Nowadays, however, strategic and tactical interests tend to prevail over humanitarian considerations. Sheer selfless concern for the plight of hapless men, women and children caught up in a conflict is

1 Y. Sandoz, “Réflexions sur la mise en œuvre du droit international humanitaire et sur le rôle du Comité international de la

Croix-Rouge en ex-Yougoslavie”, *Revue suisse de droit international et de droit européen*, 1993, p. 461 ff.

not as widespread or as ordinary as one might think when watching the TV in times of international crises, and few are genuinely committed to it. This accounts for the loneliness several humanitarian agencies have experienced and still experience in so many places around the world. Most of today's wars are waged in countries or regions where the so-called international community has little or no strategic, economic or political interests at all. No Western army is particularly keen on intervening purely for humanitarian reasons in those countries, though the figures and the type of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law can easily be compared to, and often exceed, those in the Balkans.

The indifference and forgetfulness shown at political and military decision-making levels towards those conflicts and those people is painful to watch and impossible for humanitarian workers to accept. The many time- and energy-consuming evaluations carried out since the end of the Kosovo conflict in June 1999 have left an unpleasant aftertaste of self-centred contemplation intended to draw lessons that we all know will not be applied to any major humanitarian crisis outside Europe.

Are the military more rapid and more effective than humanitarian agencies?

The strong presence of representatives of the military — both at national and Alliance levels — in those seminars, conferences, etc., and their very affirmative stands in the ensuing discussions, have been the clearest indication that the military henceforth want to be, and possibly already are, indispensable players in the humanitarian response to political crises (provided that they take place within European borders).

This is no place to debate the validity and legitimacy of such an aspiration. Humanitarian emergencies and needs are frequent and huge enough for many different players to help alleviate the suffering of people in distress. The question is, instead, the way the military carry out a humanitarian intervention.

There have been repeated claims over recent months that modern, professional armed forces are faster and more effective in the

delivery of humanitarian assistance than their civilian counterparts. A much-cited example is that of Zaire in 1996. Another is the first weeks of the Kosovo crisis, with the human tragedy in Albania and Macedonia unfolding daily on our TV screens. Still, what about Somalia? What about Sierra Leone? What about Burundi? What about all those conflicts, forgotten or not, where humanitarian workers were and are left to cope alone, where there are no cameras to film uniformed men and women distributing shelter material and food and show them to pleased audiences at home, in order to prove that the military are not “bad guys” and that public money is not only used to fight?

The Somali catastrophe of 1991-92 is a good example of what humanitarian staff can achieve despite the absence of any political and military intervention. Somalia in the early nineties was a turning point for several reasons. It was the first “collapsed State” the humanitarian community had to contend with: the whole country had become a sort of no man’s land, the situation was one of all-out violence inducing countrywide famine and the suffering of hundreds of thousands of civilians was almost unprecedented, even by African standards. A whole town — Baidoa — had been turned in June-July 1992 into an open-air “terminal ward”, where the ICRC and the local Red Crescent alike would tour with trucks at dawn and collect dead bodies of men, women and children like municipal trucks collect garbage bags in our urban environment. Baidoa was a silent place, where the only sound was that of our cars moving around and of gunfire all over. It was a colourless place, where bodies, the rags covering them, streets, houses and camels were all of the same colour: that of the mud and dust carpeting everything.

Working in Somalia was, for the few humanitarian workers present in the country — basically the ICRC, Save the Children Fund and *Médecins sans Frontières* — a highly risky business. Several of them, including three ICRC expatriates, were killed and countless were those who, at one time or another of their stay in Somalia, brushed against death. Stray bullets were as ordinary as the air we breathed and getting through to the next day alive was a sort of Russian roulette. Yet Somalia remains, almost ten years later, possibly

the brightest example of what humanitarian agencies can and do accomplish. Life was hard; work was even harder. Lots of compromises had to be accepted, including armed escorts, in order to achieve the goal of saving lives. But a handful of humanitarian workers managed it, through patience, humility, adaptability. And the trust of donors. In the space of a few weeks more than a million Somalis were saved, through the ICRC network of community kitchens (all run by women who did not care about the clan divisiveness), from a sure death by starvation. Helicopters, freighters, small boats and hundreds of trucks were used to keep the pipeline going all the way to the most remote parts of Somalia. I could easily cite other examples of lonely and effective work in messy and dangerous situations.

I am not writing this out of a sort of nostalgia for “the good old days”, but because I have been struck at a number of seminars, workshops, etc. on Kosovo by the repeated assertion that the military are indispensable in today’s humanitarian crises since they have logistics, know-how and resources which the humanitarian agencies lack.

The question is not whether the humanitarian workers or the military can do the job faster or with more means. The question is: *Who does what, and why?* Let us not be naive, but face up to the current reality: Western armed forces “can deliver positive political visibility on their home front in a way that NGOs can only dream of. (...) Although the informed tax-payer would surely spurn the relatively high costs of humanitarian interventions by their army in foreign countries, the continued ability of the military to earn credit from politicians is probably still unrivalled, provided, that is, that they do not come home in body bags.”² It would be absurd and inappropriate to claim that the military cannot support humanitarian operations. The involvement of armed forces for such purposes is not new; we can trace examples all the way back to the time of Alexander the Great or, closer to us, during the Napoleonic wars and into the 20th century.

² N. Stockton, “The role of the military in humanitarian emergencies: Reflections”,

Refugee Participation Network, Issue 23, January-April 1997.

Their engagement in humanitarian operations, however, was never devoid of political and strategic interests: "Sometimes assistance was seen as a humane gesture to the vanquished, but it was invariably mixed with the desire to help secure loyalty from newly subject populations."³ In our day and age, dominated by *realpolitik* and by the ever-growing influence of the media, things do not appear to be that different: "(...) the temptation to use humanitarian assistance as a pawn to achieve political goals (or worse, its use to cover up the shortcomings of the international community when it is unable to prevent or address conflict situations) is often there."⁴

There are two functions that can be unanimously acknowledged as pertaining to the military in what has been called the "humanitarian arena":⁵ ensuring that the environment is safe for humanitarian action to be carried out, and giving logistic support to the work of humanitarian agencies. For very often the question is, how can humanitarian workers be effective when the environment is such that any attempt to help puts their lives in jeopardy? They have to be able to perform their job in the best possible conditions. This requires not only a secure environment — which can indeed be provided by the military, but also financial resources — which must be provided by the donors' governments. If the donors bet on their national armies rather than fund the humanitarian agencies, because the military can be more easily controlled and are interesting in terms of visibility, then those agencies will find themselves in dire straits and will most probably not have the logistics, pipelines and human resources they desperately need. This is, first and foremost, what humanitarian organizations ask governments and military alike to provide them with.

3 J. Nederveen Pieterse, "Humanitarian intervention and beyond", in J. Nederveen Pieterse (ed.), *World Orders in the Making*, MacMillan Press, 1998, p. 31.

4 A. Donini, "Beyond neutrality: On the compatibility of military intervention and

humanitarian assistance", in *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, No. 2, 1995, p. 40.

5 T. G. Weiss, "Humanitarian action in war zones", in J. Nederveen Pieterse (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 31.

The humanitarian gesture should not be brought down to the mere provision of relief supplies

The debate that has taken place since the end of the Kosovo conflict has essentially focused on the setbacks (on the humanitarian agencies' side) or the success (on the military side) of relief operations in Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo itself. All efforts and results have been evaluated according to a quantitative approach, and good or bad marks have been assigned accordingly.

Few people, however, have spoken up for what appears to be the very essence of any humanitarian intervention: the protection of the individual. I do not mean protection in terms of security only, but also, as provided for by the Geneva Conventions, in terms of respect for a human being's physical and moral integrity.

One of the pillars of international humanitarian law — and thereby of the ICRC's work — is that those two aspects are inseparable. Any kind of relief operation is seen by the ICRC as an integral part of the broader protection concept. Relief can be a means of protecting civilians in a war, but it is of course not the only one. And sometimes it is not even the most relevant one.

In order to provide the protection laid down by international humanitarian law, the ICRC must be in a position to work on all sides and to remain on speaking terms with all parties to a conflict. How could it otherwise envisage protecting persons detained by one side or the other, or assist the wounded and the homeless, if it were not able to "cross the lines"? This is one of the main reasons why the ICRC kept expatriate staff stationed in Belgrade throughout the whole conflict. Such a presence enabled its delegates to assist impartially all civilians in need throughout the region — in Albania and Macedonia, of course, but also in Montenegro and Serbia proper, without forgetting Kosovo, where the ICRC was able to return a few weeks before the end of the war. That uninterrupted presence in Belgrade allowed ICRC delegates to visit the three US prisoners of war in Belgrade and to re-establish a link with their families, while other delegates visited the two Serb prisoners of war held by the US Army in Germany. And since the end of the conflict in June, it has enabled regular visits to take place to more than 2,000 Kosovar

detainees held in Serbian prisons, as well as efforts to resolve the missing persons issue that is a tragic and enduring legacy of any conflict, especially in the Balkans.

To accomplish all this, it is essential that at any time during a conflict the impartiality and neutrality of humanitarian operations be respected and preserved. It is no easy task for an ICRC delegate to assist and protect impartially and neutrally all victims of a war. Like any other human being they have their own ideas and feelings which they sometimes find hard to conceal or overcome. But because of their commitment to the principles that govern Red Cross action, they have to do so. It is a hard test of discipline and self-control. Some give up on the way, as they find it too difficult to accept and abide by those principles. Those who carry on, however, will find out after a while that it is also a manner of reducing reality to its simplest expression, in that we deal with only two categories: those who suffer, whom we endeavour to protect and assist; and those who cause suffering, to whom we make confidential representations aimed at obtaining respect for and enforcement of the rules of international humanitarian law. These two categories are not carved into stone, for victims can and often do become aggressors, and vice versa. In the final analysis there are simply human beings, bad or good depending on circumstances. If we ICRC delegates become embroiled in considerations of political opportunity, of partisanship, of dividing the world into good guys and bad guys, we lose sight of the only truth humanitarian workers need to carry out their work: a man or a woman can become a victim at any time, and when that happens he or she is entitled to our protection and assistance.

Such protection and assistance can, however, be given only if a truly humanitarian space is available and respected by all.

What is a humanitarian space?

A humanitarian space is more than a physical area, it is a concept in and through which impartiality and non-partisanship govern the whole of humanitarian action.

Is it an unrealistic dream? I do not think so, of course! But in any case, the whole Red Cross idea is a dream, the dream of a man

who, 141 years ago, thought that a humanitarian space was not only necessary but feasible. In those early days not many shared his belief. Facts, however, have proved that his ideas were reasonable and realistic. Conflicts have changed greatly since Henry Dunant's experience in Solferino. At that time, and until after the First World War, only soldiers were involved in and victims of war: they fought, won or lost, were wounded, killed or taken prisoner. They needed assistance and protection, and the Red Cross was to provide both. Then came the Second World War, with its unprecedented toll of civilian suffering, casualties and devastation. The Red Cross experienced great difficulty in giving the civilian victims either protection or assistance, overwhelmed as it was both by the scale of the tragedy and by its political dimension. The very purpose of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 was to provide it with new and more adequate legal tools. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, and especially in the last decade, civilians have become the almost exclusive victims of conflicts which are fought because of them, via them and on their behalf. Nowadays civilians account for 90 per cent of war-related casualties.⁶ They have become targets, whereas the military are tending to wage war with means that render them increasingly immune from harm.

The war in and for Kosovo was an excellent example of this. When the international conflict began on 24 March 1999, it was clear from the start that the Western powers were not prepared to accept casualties among their own forces (the so-called "zero casualty" strategy). And indeed there were none. However, those same Western powers caused casualties among the civilians in Serbia — or even in Kosovo, for that matter — by conducting military operations which, by their very nature, would reduce to a minimum the risks run by the military yet leave the civilians exposed.

The war was called "humanitarian". A tragic contradiction in terms, for how can a war — essentially something that causes destruction, losses and unspeakable suffering — be "humanitarian"?

⁶ Stockton, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 14.

Even if the motives are of a humanitarian nature — defending the basic rights of any human being — war itself cannot be “humanitarian”. This most inappropriate label, widely used in the propaganda communiqué of spring 1999, has been very detrimental to the humanitarian concept itself, and to humanitarian action as such. The “merging” of military and humanitarian operations has been facilitated by this gross contradiction in terms, and the ensuing confusion has grown exponentially. Bombing and wounding or making people homeless was labelled as “humanitarian” as providing relief and assistance to the Kosovar victims of the Serb military operations within Kosovo. The same military that bombed Serbia provided aid in Albania and Macedonia.

In the face of such a glaring inconsistency how could the message be put over, in those circumstances, that “humanitarian” means impartial and neutral — two core principles for all types of humanitarian intervention? And how were the humanitarian workers and organizations to be distinguished from the “humanitarian” soldiers shooting a gun with one hand and carrying a bag of flour in the other? What could possibly be done to ensure that, even though armed forces were inside and around refugee camps, those camps would be considered a “humanitarian space”, thus entitled to protection, and not a military target?

There is a sign borne by all Red Cross vehicles and premises all over the world: it is a gun with a red X superimposed upon it, and it means that no weapons are allowed in. This sign has not been adopted because of a general aversion to arms, but because it was recognized that — for the red cross emblem to be effective — it had to be protective in itself. And the only way to accomplish that was to exclude any other kind of protection and place all individuals within Red Cross premises on an equal footing. This is a humanitarian space in physical terms. But even more important is the concept of a humanitarian space in moral terms, namely a space that is not delimited, that is made up of tolerance and respect for each and every individual once they are wounded or captive, displaced persons or refugees, no matter to which side they belong. In that humanitarian space, both moral and physical, humanitarian organizations are allowed

to intervene according to their principles of neutrality and impartiality, which must be fully recognized and respected by all parties. Then, and only then, the humanitarian gesture becomes not only possible, but effective.

During the Kosovo conflict there was little, if any, humanitarian space left. The extremely politicized international context in which the war was prepared, decided and conducted left almost no room for it. Impartiality and neutrality became terms heard with increasing suspicion, taken instead to mean that the ICRC was “on the other side”, whoever it was talking to. For the reasons explained above, the confusion between military and humanitarian operations was at times almost paroxysmal. The criterion of efficiency at all costs (and what costs ...!) became the essential parameter to which all others were to be subordinated. Little consideration was given to the fact that some humanitarian agencies — despite their initial very real and fully acknowledged difficulties in responding appropriately to the tremendous material needs — had experience and know-how which can, at times, be more valuable than the availability of countless trucks, helicopters and planes. Even less consideration was given to the huge mess that the transformation of humanitarian action into a sort of “humanitarian stock market” would create, or to the extensive and persistent damage it would entail for years to come.

Even more worrying is the failure to consider all this in the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict, at those conferences and seminars I mentioned in the beginning.

“Simplifying” humanitarian action

Paired with the globalization and “commercialization” of humanitarian action is another trend which has also emerged in recent months, namely that of wishing to “make things less complicated” by trying to reduce humanitarian action to a couple of simplified — and simplistic — concepts based, once again, on speed, efficiency and effectiveness.

I have no intention of implying that those are not important criteria, or that humanitarian action should be slow, inefficient and ineffective. However, agreement should first be reached as to the

parameters to be used to evaluate efficiency and effectiveness. In terms of relief, this is relatively easy. But relief, as already pointed out above, is not all that humanitarian action means. How are speed, effectiveness and efficiency to be measured when confronted with the need for protection of individuals or communities? Are those “marketing” criteria applicable to the humanitarian space mentioned above? That space is above all a certain state of mind, and it concerns all parties to a conflict, at all levels of the military and political hierarchy, down to the last soldier or policeman or civil servant, or civilian for that matter.

A humanitarian space is the result of a culture that upholds humane conduct. The Western world should be to the fore in promoting such a culture. But it cannot express its willingness to make our world more humane by putting the corresponding labels on things and adopting a “market-oriented” approach in terms of humanitarian action. Above all, the so-called international community should acknowledge and accept those differences between the military approach and that of the humanitarian agencies, so as to avoid the confusion that creates such difficulties should avoid eliminating those differences between the military and the humanitarian approach that seem to be so difficult to handle in times of crisis, and even afterwards.

When the community of States decided to give a specific mandate to the ICRC to assist and protect all victims of international — and possibly internal — armed conflicts, and assigned to the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees the task of assisting and protecting civilians compelled by war to flee their country, it did so because it recognized the impossibility for governments to act impartially and neutrally when humanitarian action is required.

In recent years, however, a basic contradiction in the international community’s behaviour and stance has become increasingly apparent: the more time goes by, the more often governments tend to favour a bilateral approach in humanitarian matters rather than a multilateral one, be it with the United Nations or with the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement. Or at least the stance is ambiguous: governments give to international humanitarian organizations with one hand, while actively promoting bilateral initiatives — very often through their respective armies and/or National Societies — with the

other in order to boost their image and media feedback. In this day and age, when humanitarian action seems bound to become first and foremost a media business, and the first one to display its flag on the spot is the winner of the “media war”, there is no such thing as bilateralism. In the rush for visibility and prime-time, with the ensuing corollary of “tragedy dumping”, there seems to be little room left for humanitarian action as originally conceived and translated into reality when the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees were signed and ratified.

Differences between the work of humanitarian agencies and that of the military must be not only identified, but also maintained and respected. Nobody can better explain this than a high-ranking military officer who has had extensive experience of military and humanitarian intervention in the Balkans and who advocates a clear distinction between military and civilian tasks: “Military operations may require considerable experience and a certain state of mind, but the same applies to humanitarian assistance. It demands a thorough understanding of the needs of the people, good access to and relationships with local authorities and with other governmental and non-governmental organizations, patience and a self-sacrificing attitude. These things do not always easily sit in a military mind.”⁷ For that matter, why should the military wish to become humanitarian workers? As Major-General Brinkman cleverly put it: “Experience shows it is very difficult to be a guard and a nurse at the same time.”⁸ And it can be added that more often than not people tend to forget that humanitarian work is a profession and that humanitarian agencies are evolving more and more into professional enterprises working according to very strict criteria of accountability. The military can perfectly well perform certain jobs — as indicated above — within the framework of major humanitarian operations, provided nobody forgets that military operations and humanitarian programmes have divergent and sometimes even contradictory and irreconcilable requirements.

⁷ Maj.-Gen. J. W. Brinkman, “Humanitarian intervention: A military view”, in J. Nederveen Pieterse (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 176.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Any further merging at times of political and humanitarian crises would mean creating further confusion and losing track of our respective identities. Humanitarian agencies and the military can cooperate — as they have so often done in the past — but in full respect for their differences and “corporate identities” and with a clear separation — rather than integration — of their respective functions. It is not an easy job, for sure, because neither the humanitarian agencies nor the various national armies, and consequently the components of NATO, are homogeneous among themselves. A real effort is being made within the humanitarian community to come to some sort of agreement on basic principles and procedures according to which humanitarian action should be carried out. There is also a lot of work being done to achieve the same kind of basic agreement between the military and the humanitarian agencies through the CIMIC (Civil-Military Cooperation) concept. This seems to be the appropriate way of doing things, rather than wanting to artificially mould the whole of humanitarian action into a hybrid construction where everybody would do everything.

Conclusions

The humanitarian community today is confronted with a major challenge: that of preserving the existence of means of assistance and protection genuinely free of political considerations and influence. More and more often in the past months and years it has been noticed — and even said explicitly — that humanitarian action has become a substitute for political initiatives and solutions. It has come to serve as a sort of showpiece that eases the governments’ conscience while giving scope for “political” gesticulations which often conceal the lack of any real political action. In recent years, humanitarian assistance has become the West’s favoured response to political crises beyond its borders: “This is partly the result of it being a lowest common denominator among donor governments that can no longer agree — or fund — strategic aims in marginal areas of the global economy.”⁹

⁹ M. Duffield, “Containing systemic crises”, in J. Nederveen Pieterse (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 88.

As mentioned above, the ICRC's impartiality and institutional neutrality are viewed with growing suspicion that is increasingly difficult to dispel. The Kosovo conflict has clearly confirmed a trend already detected in other conflict situations: humanitarian aid is more and more often combined with political and economic leverage. Humanitarian assistance is being increasingly pressed into a non-humanitarian role and is therefore on the way to losing its neutrality and impartiality. The integration of military and humanitarian operations — rated as a success in Macedonia and even more so in Albania in April–May 1999 — has led to a deterioration in the quality of the humanitarian space. As one of the many consequences, the risks for humanitarian workers — who are often hard for an outsider to distinguish from members of armed forces actively involved in military and humanitarian operations labelled “humanitarian interventions” — have grown accordingly.

It is to be hoped that decision-makers at all levels, be they civilians or military, will end up understanding how precious the Red Cross principles of impartiality and neutrality are, and how beneficial those principles can be to any humanitarian operation, whether by the Red Cross or not, aimed at truly protecting and assisting the victims of conflicts throughout the world.

Many government and military officials seem to understand this. Even so, when they go “into action” they find it difficult to abide by their commitments. We therefore constantly have to struggle to remind everybody, when a war breaks out and for as long as it lasts, that a space set aside for humanitarian action is the *conditio sine qua non* for bringing protection and assistance to those human beings who are entitled to them.

In these circumstances there is no “all or nothing” solution. The military should not be sidelined, nor should they be taking over responsibilities and tasks from humanitarian agencies: “Doing nothing (...) [is] highly questionable. (...) Doing everything (...) [is] equally chimerical.”¹⁰ But “doing something” is a viable alternative for us all.

¹⁰ O. Ramsbotham/T. Woodhouse, *Humanitarian Intervention in Contemporary*

Conflicts, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 218.

Moreover, we should all remember that: "There are no easy solutions (...). Engagement must be patient, informed, flexible and determined."¹¹ And, I would like to add, it should be as close as possible to all those who are in distress and need our help.

Résumé

Après la crise du Kosovo, un véritable espace humanitaire : une utopie peu réaliste ou une condition essentielle ?

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Sur la base des expériences faites par le CICR au cours de l'action humanitaire pendant la crise du Kosovo, l'auteur plaide pour le concept d'un « espace humanitaire », condition essentielle pour atteindre les victimes de conflits, assurer leur protection et leur apporter l'assistance dont ils ont besoin. L'auteur rappelle que l'action humanitaire en situation de conflit armé ne doit pas se limiter à la distribution de secours alimentaires. Le « geste humanitaire » doit assurer aux victimes un minimum de sécurité également : la « protection ». Par ailleurs, l'auteur examine des questions d'actualité comme le rôle des forces armées dans l'action humanitaire, les rapports entre l'aide bilatérale et les actions multilatérales, ou encore la fâcheuse tendance consistant à se contenter d'organiser des actions d'assistance au lieu de chercher des solutions politiques durables aux conflits qui sont à la base de la catastrophe humanitaire. Pour conclure, on rappelle qu'il n'y a pas de réponses faciles aux nombreuses questions qui se posent aujourd'hui à tous ceux qui s'intéressent à l'avenir de l'action humanitaire. Il paraît toutefois évident que l'action humanitaire doit se conformer aux deux principes qui guident l'action de la Croix-Rouge : la neutralité et l'impartialité.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.