

# The politics of humanitarianism: humanitarian intervention as "the mirror of global politics"\*

by the United Nations and other heads of state.

By Silja Sukselainen (Helsinki)

One of the many debates that globalisation has raised is on the question of whether some kind of global values are emerging along with the other processes that make up globalisation. What is meant by "global values" is "a commitment to humanity as a whole rather than to individual states and/or nations". (Held & McGrew, 2000, p.429). This debate is also of central importance to discussions of global governance, which deal with the mechanisms to uphold global norms and values.

The dilemma of global governance is the discordance between the idea of global or transnational values and the structure of world politics, which is based by nation-states. There is of course nothing new in stating this fundament of international politics.

But to get into the question of global values and where they stand in the current world, it is necessary to look at what their significance is when it comes to real action. One clear way of assessing the setting of global values is through humanitarian action and especially humanitarian intervention, which combine caring for humanity and the risk involved for the national interests of the state.

It is also interesting to study this discordance in a situation where the discordance is generally acknowledged by those in a position of power. The failed humanitarian action of outside powers during the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 that cost according to different estimates 500-800 000 lives and forced about 2 million people to become refugees, is an example of this situation. During his visit to Kigali in 1998 the American President Bill Clinton offered his apologies to the Rwandan nation on behalf of the international community for their failure to get involved in the humanitarian operation and the cause of the failure has been admitted as a lack of political will to get involved. This apology has been repeated

This article seeks to take a look at the interaction of humanitarian and national considerations in a humanitarian crisis. The purpose of the article is not take position on humanitarian interventions and their legitimacy as such, but to use it as an manifestation of the state of world politics. This could take us some way towards assessing the framework in which the development of global values currently takes place.

## Humanitarian intervention

By definition humanitarian involves a concern for human welfare and it implies impartiality as it is concerned with humanity as a whole. Ideally humanitarian action should also be free of particularistic and political considerations of the parties involved and of the aid donors. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees "The fundamental objectives of humanitarian action is to alleviate suffering and save lives. Humanitarian action focuses on people and is based on rights. Political action focuses on states and is guided by national interests and respect for sovereignty" (MacFarlane, 2000, p. 2). Apart from the

*"Humanitarian intervention deserves to be put in quotes because it is a deeply ideological notion. Marking a frontier of international relations in the age of globalisation, humanitarian intervention raises the question of political responsibility in the era of globalisation. Since we are aware of and connected to events taking place in distant parts of the world, informed of the sufferings of people in distant lands, what are the consequences for our way of being in the world, for our sense of political engagement? The emotion involved may be termed long-distance compassion; the realities are murkier. On the one hand, humanitarian intervention inaugurates a new kind of citizenship, the citizenship of humanity, while on the other it treads in the footsteps of conventional inter-state politics which, however, itself is in transition. Humanitarian intervention is a two-faced operation, idealism caught in the wheels of realism, realism outflanked by realities."*

(Pieterse (1997) *Sociology of Humanitarian Intervention: Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia Compared*. p.72)

political interests of the parties to the conflict, the participation of external powers and donor states is contingent on political interest. If donors don't see their vital interests as being threatened, they can be unwilling to accept risks and expenses for getting involved.

Humanitarian aid to victims of catastrophes and conflicts is not a new concept. In Europe action was being co-ordinated during the wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and especially during the

world wars. At the international level there was clear progress after the world wars, for example by way of codification of international humanitarian law. As mentioned above, humanitarian action has, however, been in conflict with the concept of national sovereignty that was firmly established as one of the fundamentals of the United Nations. The debate on the inconsistency between a common humanity and exclusive communities has a longer history and has been considered by many such as Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes. Humanitarian implies something based on a common humanity that transgresses national boundaries. The concept of intervention, however, itself in

\* Pieterse, 1997, p.90

based on the nation-state paradigm as the “intervention” implies interference in the internal affairs of another that is considered sovereign. The state is only responsible to its own citizens and to get involved in an act of intervention that transgresses its mandate, it must get its citizens’ approval for it (Parekh, 1997).

In the 1990’s international humanitarian action has been much exposed with large numbers of conflicts breaking out around the world. A significant change in this action has been, however, that military action has become part of it in a new way. Humanitarian intervention as such is an “intervention in the internal affairs of another country with a view to ending the physical suffering caused by the disintegration or gross misuse of the authority of the state, and helping to create conditions in which a viable structure of civil authority can emerge”. (Parekh, 1997, p.53). It is distinct from humanitarian aid which only aims to relieve suffering and not bring about peace and order. It is also slightly different from traditional peace-keeping, which only aims at securing a peace-making process without attempting to become itself part of this solution. In these new humanitarian interventions political and humanitarian aspects have become even more intertwined.

#### After the Cold War

During the Cold War humanitarian action was closely related to the strategic aims of the two power blocs, which prevented its impartiality from being materialized. The decisions of humanitarian aid were to quite an extent, explained by the logic on the bipolar world. After the Cold War the opportunities for humanitarian action have changed quite significantly. In this “new world order”, the realization of truly universal human rights without the influence of political agendas was seen to have become possible. The United Nations, paralysed by power politics during the Cold War, was accorded a great role in this new development. This new vision has also been called “new humanitarianism”.



For many, the development of the 1990’s has given reason to optimism about the possibilities to realize universal humanitarianism as humanitarian action has been much exposed. The critics of this development, on the other hand, see the ideology of new humanitarianism as being only a cover for world powers to pursue their national interests. Especially the military aspect of the humanitarian interventions raise many doubts on the motivation behind such action. Although, during the 1990’s also the role of non-

state actors, mostly NGO’s grew in importance, the role of nation-states remained crucial, as they are often the only ones able to provide the resources and material necessary to get humanitarian aid through to the conflict scene.

What the decade after the end of the Cold War has mostly shown is the contradiction within the international system: values are universal but their application is selective. In certain conflicts the international community gets involved, but it is reluctant to do so in many others. Since the international community is perceived to be more free to act in humanitarian crises and the universal humanitarian rights are so emphasised in international politics, one is left to wonder why this is so? What is crucial in a decision on humanitarian assistance? Clearly, it is impossible and perhaps not even desirable that the international community get involved in all conflicts. But there are conspicuous cases, such as the Rwandan genocide where the sheer number of victims and all the information available at the time raise serious questions.

The selectivity of the action can be seen as proof that political interests still affect the decisions of humanitarian action even in the post-Cold War world. The reason for the lack of involvement in Rwanda has generally been acknowledged to have been lack of “political” will. Is it simply a matter of realist-style national interests? On a very superficial level it seems easy to pinpoint the strategic interests behind the operations (e.g. the Gulf War) but how can cases where it is generally accepted that none existed (e.g. US operation Restore Hope to Somalia) be explained? We must go further.

In his article *Sociology of Humanitarian Intervention: Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia compared*, Jan Nederveen Pieterse sees that, humanitarian interventions reflect a state of transition in world politics. The traditional model based on nation-states has changed and the concept of sovereignty crumbled. Values, however move on transnational level. Humanitarian interventions thus, reflect the ambiguous nature of the situation. The lack of a general doctrine on humanitarian intervention, of their authorisations and decision-making is the principal problem of humanitarian interventions. These issues have been left to the Security Council, where national interests affect decision-making. The decisions are based on a calculation involving both considerations of common humanity on one hand and national interests on the other. This is, according to Pieterse how humanitarian interventions serve as a “mirror of global politics as they really exist”.(Pieterse, 1997, p.90)

What then affects a decision on humanitarian intervention?

**The decision of intervention:  
the case of Rwanda and the United States**

Although the United States is not a prime example to be studied in the case of Rwanda as such due to its historically non-existent ties (and therefore interests) to the region, it offers the easiest way to study this process at a general level. The United States also has an undeniable role on the international scene and a capacity to intervene, which makes it easier to observe its action. The United States was quite reluctant to invest in the UNAMIR peace-keeping force (set up to enforce the Arusha peace accord that ended the civil war in Rwanda in 1993) and desired the operation to be carried through with minimal expense, even as clear warnings of massacres were pouring in. (For a short historical background on the events of the genocide, see annex 1).

The decisions to participate in an intervention involve both international and domestic considerations. The processes are not uniform and vary between different states according to historical ties, political systems and cultures, internal decision making systems, international roles etc. Assessing the process in a particular case, would require going through these different elements carefully.

Peter Viggo Jakobsen has studied decisions of involvement in peace-keeping operations (meaning here also humanitarian interventions) in a number of conflicts including Rwanda (Jakobsen, 1996). According to him five main questions affect the decision: how "clear" the situation is in terms of international law and whether it has international support, whether there are national interests related to the conflict area, whether the donor state has national approval from its citizens, the role of the media and what are the chances of success of the operation.

In the Rwandan case there was no ambiguity of the violation of universal humanitarian values but the international community was reluctant to get involved. After Somalia, a successful operation was needed and Rwanda was soon judged to be hopeless. The international atmosphere was one of avoidance. The lack of timely and sufficient involvement has been blamed on lack of adequate information on what was happening. It has, however, been established in a number of reports made after the events, that there was abundant information and external powers were well aware of what was happening, if not about the exact magnitude. It was a matter of lack of will, which was covered with the concept of genocide. The Geneva Convention demands that its signatories act when signs of genocide are discovered in one of the states, so the term was avoided even though the conditions were known to be fulfilled.

When understood in a strict, realist way, national interests don't go very far in explaining most cases of intervention. In the Rwandan case, however, it can simply be stated that the US didn't have any national interests involved. The US didn't have a historical tie to the region as for example Belgium and France, many hardly knew where the country

was and the area was seen as quite a hopeless region.

The role of the media and domestic support for an operation are closely connected, but not exactly as is usually claimed. The media, is of course, crucial in bringing an issue to general awareness of the public and public opinion, in its turn influences the political leadership. The media, however, does not usually affect political decision making itself, but rather the media looks to the political leadership for issues to bring on the agenda. Media rarely affects public opinion significantly, unless the issue has been taken up by the political leadership. This was, for example discovered by Jonathan Mermin in his study on the role of the media in the public support for the operation to Somalia (Mermin, 1997). This same also applied to the Rwandan case, where media exposure didn't seem to have had much effect, before political leadership got more active in the summer following the genocide.

In the Rwandan case it is significant to note that a certain policy orientation had recently been reached in Washington on the question of interventions. The failure of Somalia (reminiscent of the old legacy of Vietnam) had traumatised the political leadership which wanted to minimise the risk of getting involved in an operation that would end up in bringing more body bags home in front of the TV cameras. The revision of the intervention policy resulted in Presidential Decision Directive 25 in May 1994, three weeks after the genocide began. The directive tightened the criteria that had to be fulfilled for the US to get involved in an operation, including demanding the presence of clear national interests. The government simply wasn't interested in getting involved. There were of course different opinions within it, but in the end the decision was based on the estimate that the operation couldn't be carried through well enough for its political and financial costs. Based on interviews of several government officials (PBS Frontline, 1999) it was a matter of avoiding facing reality and of getting stuck on the question of whether it was actual genocide or not.

To create a completely accurate picture of the decision-making process, other actors should be studied as well (NGOs, congressmen, lobbyists etc.). The purpose here is not to make a full enquiry into the process, but rather get a notion of the elements involved.

### **Conclusions**

Behind the apology offered to the Rwandans was a contradiction between universal humanitarian values and political calculation grounded in the nation-state paradigm. The apology crystallises the gap between the reality and the ideal. The gap is generally acknowledged and humanitarian interventions seem to reflect it quite clearly. How this discrepancy can be resolved and whether global values are emerging are other, very important questions for the globalisation debate to consider. Meanwhile, humanitarian action, due to its nature, shows us where truly global values fit in the world's political system. For a more



up-to-date view on the matter, involvement in The Democratic Republic of Congo or Sierra Leone could be analyzed. At first glance, however, the setting doesn't seem to have changed significantly since the Rwandan genocide.

massacres were delivered to the UN. In April the country's Hutu President Habyarimana's plane was shot down and extreme Hutus were suspected. The Hutu militia and the Rwandan army began massacres that were answered by an

attack of the Tutsi RPF. Due to its limited mandate the UNAMIR was basically motionless during these massacres. The UN decided to cut it down further at the end of April. There were signs of a genocide but the word was carefully avoided. When the information couldn't be avoided anymore the UN decided to send more troops. In May there were hundreds of thousand of refugees crossing the borders to the neighbouring countries and about 500 000 million were estimated to have been killed. In June, under French command the Opération Turquoise was launched and in July the RPF set up an interim government.

### Annex 1

In 1990 a civil war broke out in Rwanda between the Hutu government and the Tutsi Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF). In 1993 the Arusha peace accord was reached but the political process didn't develop well and violence kept increasing during 1993. The UN was keen on operating a successful peace-keeping operation after Somalia. The success was desired to be carried through with minimal expenses and the UNAMIR force was only a fragment of the initial plan. Especially the United States opposed increasing the resources that for example Belgium was pushing for. In January 1994 clear warnings of up-coming mas-



### REFERENCE

Held, David & McGrew, Anthony (eds.) (2000) *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to The Globalisation Debate*. Polity Press, UK.

Human Rights Watch Report *Leave None To Tell The Story* (3.1999) <http://www.hrw.org>

International Panel of Eminent Personalities to Investigate the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda and The Surrounding Events, Special Report. (2000) <http://www.oau-oua.org>

Jakobsen, Peter Viggo (1996) *National Interest, Humanitarianism or CNN: What Triggers UN Peace Enforcement After The Cold War?* Journal of Peace Research, no.2 1996, vol. 33, p.205-215

MacFarlane, Neil (2000) *Politics and Humanitarian Action*. Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies and UN University Occasional Paper no.41.

Mermin, Jonathan (1997) *Television News and American Intervention in Somalia: The Myth of A Media-Driven Foreign Policy*. Political Science Quarterly, Fall 1997, vol. 112, issue 3.

Parekh, Bhikhu (1997) *Rethinking Humanitarian Intervention*. International Political Science Review, Jan. 1997, vol.18.

PBS Online and WGBH Frontline (1999) *Interviews: Philip Gourevitch, James Woods ja Tony Marley* (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/evil/interviews>)

Pieterse, Jan Nederveen (1997) *Sociology of Humanitarian Intervention: Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia Compared*. International Political Science Review, Jan. 1997, vol.18.

Vanderbilt University Television News Archive: Search of Evening News 1994. (<http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu>)

Wheeler, Nicholas J. (1997) *Agency, Humanitarianism and Intervention*. International Political Science Review, Jan. 1997, vol.18.