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Humanitarian Emergencies: Why Does Kosovo Get More Aid Than the Congo?

By

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Introduction

The lives of tens of millions of people around the world are threatened by conflict, ethnic violence, drought and natural disaster. A large number of organizations – governmental, non-governmental, and United Nations – are devoted to providing humanitarian assistance to helping victims of humanitarian disasters survive.

Humanitarian aid to persons impacted by conflict or natural disaster is a growth industry. In 1990, international humanitarian assistance amounted to about \$2 billion; by 2000 the total was up to nearly \$5 billion.¹ The huge humanitarian crises in Afghanistan and several regions of Africa likely mean additional large increases in humanitarian in 2002 and again in 2003.

The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance with its share in recent years amounting to about 35 percent of the world total. The 15 member countries of the European Union plus the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) are the second largest donors, and Japan ranks third.

The needs of refugees, displaced persons, and other victims of humanitarian disasters and conflicts are usually predictable. Protection, clean water, food, shelter, clothing, sanitation, and medical care in varying mixes are the requirements for sustaining lives in emergency situations.

But the response to those needs varies tremendously around the world and from emergency to emergency. An incomplete but illustrative measurement is UN spending on different humanitarian emergencies. In Kosovo, in 1999, for example the UN spent

¹ OECD/DAC estimates. 2000 figure does not include approximately \$1.5 billion spent on refugees within donor countries.

\$207 for each affected person; In Sierra Leone, the UN spent \$16 for each person; in Congo the UN spent \$8 per person.² These figures are not all-inclusive as they do not include bi-lateral humanitarian aid programs which would narrow -- but by no means -- close the gap. UN spending on refugees is largely determined by voluntary contributions from donors and thus, the major donors to the UN voted with their pocketbooks that they were far more interested and concerned about Kosovar refugees and displaced people than Congolese.

What I want to do is to suggest brief answers to three questions: First, why do some humanitarian emergencies receive more attention than others? Then, I want to turn the first question upside down to respond to a second question: How do you identify humanitarian emergencies which are not getting the attention they deserve? And finally I want to ask what my organization – Refugees International – and other organizations might do to help remedy the situation.

Why do some humanitarian emergencies receive more attention than others?

Answers to this question usually focuses on three topics. First, media coverage of the emergency; secondly, the national interests of the aid donors, and third, the influence of aid organizations.³

Media coverage. This is what is often called “the CNN factor” Humanitarian emergencies which receive extensive publicity, such as Kosovo and, recently, Afghanistan are believed to get more attention and assistance from donors. Thus, humanitarian emergencies which are unpublicized, such as the Congo, may receive less assistance. The theory behind the “CNN factor” is that people and governments respond to the needs of people they see on their television screens.

National Interests of the AID donors. Humanitarian assistance is perceived by the big donors as an arm of their foreign policy. Afghanistan is a recent example in which the United States and its allies perceived that providing humanitarian aid to Afghan civilians was important to achieving political and military objectives.

Humanitarian aid in Kosovo in 1999 had an even closer link to the interests of the large powers, especially the Europeans. Certainly, one reason why large amounts of aid was provided to Kosovar refugees in Macedonia and Albania was to prevent the refugees from trying to immigrate to other countries in Europe. “Keep the refugees comfortable in

² Jefferys, Anna, “Giving Voice to Silent Emergencies,” *Humanitarian Exchange – the Magazine of the Humanitarian Practice Network*, March 2002 (revised October 2002).

³ A recent study of these factors is “Olsen, Gorm Rye, Carstensen, Nils and Hoyen, Kristian, “Humanitarian Crises: What Determines the Level of Emergency Assistance? Media Coverage, Donor Interests, and the Aid Business,” prepared for an October 23, 2002 conference in Copenhagen on forgotten humanitarian crises. See: <http://www.forgottencrises.dk/speakers.htm>

Macedonia – and they won't try to go to Paris" was how one relief worker described to me a factor underlying the generosity of European aid donors. U.S. humanitarian aid to Haiti in the mid 1990s had much the same purpose: keep the Haitians at home.

Influence of aid organizations. Another factor influencing the level of humanitarian aid is the lobbying and influence of aid and citizen's organizations for a particular cause. Southern Sudan, for example, is cited as one area in which donors have provided humanitarian assistance over a long period of time primarily because aid agencies and non-governmental organizations have maintained pressure on donor countries to provide assistance.

An even better example might be the cause of the Tibetans versus that of the Uighers. The plight of the Tibetans, whose culture is being overrun by the Han Chinese, is familiar to most of us. But how many have ever heard of the Uighers – a people in western China who have a similar cause? Why? Some observers have said the difference is that the Tibetans have a support structure of foreigners and foreign organizations plus a charismatic leader – and the Uighers do not.

So, what is the answer to the question as to why Kosovar refugees received \$207 each in UN assistance in 1999 and Congolese refugees and displaced persons received only \$8? The Kosovars had on their side at least two of the above three factors: their plight had the attention of the media and they were important to the national interests of the large donors of international assistance. The Congo had none of the three factors listed above operating in its favor.

We also have to acknowledge a racial and ethnic factor which influences the level of humanitarian assistance. Donors may be more generous with people who "look like them." This is true not only of Americans and Europeans, but others. Aid from rich Islamic states, for example, tends to be dedicated to helping other Muslims – and I would comment in passing that contributions to UN humanitarian organizations from most oil-rich countries are low and sporadic.

Traditional ties with other states play a factor. The British have taken the lead in trying to resolve the conflict in Sierra Leone, a former colony. France is famously perceived to be partial to French-speaking people and countries. And the traditionally close ties between Germany and Croatia contributed to the German decision to recognize Croatia as an independent state in 1991, thereby contributing to the violent breakup of Yugoslavia.

Important in some cases also are that, despite the UN and donor willingness to work in the country, the situation is so dangerous or the local authorities so obstructive that it is difficult to carry out humanitarian aid programs. North Korea is a country which has placed so many restrictions on aid agencies that many have been unable –or unwilling – to work there, despite the need. Chechnya is a region in which the lack of security for

humanitarian aid workers chills efforts to provide humanitarian aid to the victims of the conflict between Chechens and Russia.

How do you identify humanitarian emergencies which aren't getting the attention they deserve?

The answer is that you turn upside down the three factors influencing humanitarian assistance listed above. Neglected, forgotten, or what are often called “silent emergencies” are those in which media coverage is sparse, in which the national interests of the large donors of humanitarian aid are not engaged, and where the country or region lacks a “support system” of influential and interested foreign aid organizations.

ECHO has worked toward developing a methodology to identify “forgotten crises” and expressed a commitment to increase assistance to forgotten emergencies. ECHO has identified the following countries as priorities for increased attention: Chechnya, Burmese refugees in Thailand, Western Sahara refugees in Algeria, and Uganda.⁴ However, observers have noted that despite the ECHO pledge to address forgotten crises, former Yugoslavia was again the largest recipient of European humanitarian aid in 2001.⁵

Another factor to be taken into consideration in identifying forgotten humanitarian emergencies is the level of contributions provided to UN agencies, especially the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Programme, to address the emergency.

To assist the victims of humanitarian emergencies, the UN issues “appeals” to member states to contribute to a fund to help the people of the country in need. The response to those appeals determines the level of UN assistance. A look at the response to the World Food Programmes appeal for 2002 gives an idea of neglected countries. The most undersubscribed appeals for food in 2002 include the following: Palestinian territories, Southern Africa, Pakistan, Eritrea, Kenya, and Central America.⁶ Conclusions reached from this data should be used with some caution, however, as bi-lateral food assistance often fills some of the needs identified by the WFP. For example, the United States provides substantial bi-lateral food aid to Central America.

⁴ Nielson, Poul, speech October 23, 2002.

http://europa.eu.int/rapid/start/cgi/guestfr.ksh?p_action.gettxt=gt&doc=SPEECH/02/510|0|RAPID&lg=EN&display=

⁵ Jefferys, *op cit*

⁶ “Status of 2002 Food Aid Needs and Shortfalls”, WFP – assisted Emergency and Protracted Relief and Recovery Operations (As of July 2002).

What can Refugees International -- and other non-governmental organizations -- do to help focus attention on forgotten humanitarian emergencies?

My organization, Refugees International, is a non-governmental advocacy organization speaking on behalf of refugees, displaced persons, and other vulnerable people around the world. We are independent and we do not accept funds from governments or the UN.

We work as follows: our advocates visit the sites of humanitarian crises and talk to refugees and relief workers to determine the most urgent humanitarian needs of the people and the gaps in filling those needs. Sometimes, for example, the biggest problem is lack of food. Other times it may be shelter, and on some occasions it may be protecting innocent men, women, and children from being killed or injured in a conflict.

The purpose of our visits to humanitarian crisis areas is to stimulate humanitarian action on behalf of refugees and other vulnerable people. We distribute our findings and recommendations for actions to policy makers, the media, and the public, and push for action by governments and UN agencies to save lives.

We call ourselves an early warning/early action humanitarian organization. We try to identify developing humanitarian crises as quickly as possible and to stimulate early action to prevent human suffering – especially for the most vulnerable, most forgotten, and most neglected people. We are not a large organization and thus we must pick the places we work carefully, because we can't go everywhere that our services might be useful.

The objectives of my research during the 30 days I have spent as a Fleishman Fellow at Duke University have been to determine how “silent” or neglected humanitarian emergencies can be identified. The next step is to design a course of action by which Refugees International can contribute to spotlighting the unmet needs of people who are not seen on your television screens, are not factored into the foreign policy interests of the rich donor countries, and do not have a lobby of foreign supporters and aid organizations.

I foresee two immediate practical applications of my work here at Duke. First, we will use my research to help identify neglected emergencies in which our advocacy work would be useful in spotlighting little-known humanitarian problems and issues. Once we identify a neglected emergency we can send a mission to the crisis area. A “mission” to us means that one, two, or sometimes three of our advocates visit a humanitarian crisis area, study the problems, and formulate recommendations for action to help vulnerable people. A mission is our preferred method of responding to a neglected humanitarian crisis.

However, even if we are too busy elsewhere to launch a mission immediately, we can undertake a study of a neglected crisis through our research associates and distribute

our findings and recommendations via our web page, at meetings and conferences, and in the media. Our objective would be to inform the public, the media, governments, and aid organizations about issues and people who are worthy of their attention.

Thus, I believe that my fellowship here at Duke will be useful to Refugees International in helping us improve our coverage of humanitarian crisis around the world and in selecting the crises in which we choose to work.

I want to extend my thanks to Joel L. Fleishman and the Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy for making this fellowship available to me. This month of study and reflection was highly rewarding to me as I was able to formulate new directions and new priorities for my work and the work of my organization. I have made new friends from around the world as well as here at Duke and I look forward to our continued collaboration and cooperation. Thank you.
