

title – especially women in rural areas – are by far the most vulnerable case-load. The almost total absence of support to institution-building initiatives that prevailed over the past decade has cast a heavy burden on the shoulders of relief workers, at a time when they needed to concentrate attention and efforts on saving and preserving lives, in other words, to help reduce the “IRC figures”.

Last, but not least, providing relief in troubled areas has sometimes become as questionable as abstaining from helping. For example, in Kalonge, South Kivu, local RCD-Goma forces, duly informed by humanitarian organisations of the distribution of food to the population, provided security throughout the exercise, only to raid and loot the village (with the usual “side-effects” of rapes and killings) after the relief workers’ departure. In Mwanga north of Bunia, a joint OCHA-UNICEF team, having followed a patrol of the Multinational Force a few hours after an attack against the village in August 2003, found themselves compelled to return with the 2 tons of relief items they had brought when it realised that dropping them would only trigger a new attack by the assailants. Only a handful of drugs and a few rolls of plastic sheeting were discreetly left to a health worker. The most troubling aspect of this dilemma, was the absence of any resistance from the would-be beneficiaries to the relief team’s decision not to distribute the bulk of relief items - because the villagers knew too well what would be the cost of receiving them.

The provision of humanitarian assistance in the DRC takes place in a complex mix of contradictory interests and power games that makes any of the few actors on the ground become subject to multi-dimensional negative perceptions- economic, political, media-related, and institutional.

Humanitarian strategy: active resistance to submission and resignation

Since August 1998, resisting succumbing to an overwhelming sense of resignation *vis-à-vis* the effects of the DRC crisis has been the almost unique characteristic of relief actors – joined in late 1999 by MONUC. More particularly, they have had to challenge a perception by some elements of the international community that, in view of the country’s complexity, and of the human, material and financial costs implied by an eventual attempt by the UN to impose peace, “war might be cheaper”. The last *avatar* of that dismissive “*façon de voir*” dates back from a few months ago, when OCHA, in the midst of the Bunia war, referred on CNN to the existence of clearly identifiable weapons of mass destruction in Ituri (machetes, AK 47, absence of state structures), and Human Rights Watch called for immediate response to the massacres. In effect, it took the relief community four years to eventually capture

international attention and – together with MONUC – to obtain a full recognition of the cost of each and every human life taken from all sides by the conflict. Similarly, the cost of non reaction to the humanitarian toll of the crisis only appeared clearly – and hence, left the international community with a duty to react and to fund assistance - once:

- A clearly identifiable slogan had been found – by International Rescue Committee – to depict the reality by world standards; “the deadliest conflict since World War Two”; and,
- Joint initiatives by humanitarian actors, supported or launched by the humanitarian coordination body, opened breaches across the various front lines and imposed, albeit occasionally, the respect of humanitarian principles - while also showing the capacity of humanitarian actors to respond quickly to arising acute emergencies in a hostile and uneasy environment.

From the onset, drawing a strategy has quickly translated into efforts to reduce the confusion about the notion of humanitarian assistance, and to draw a line between life-saving and transitional activities; between emergency support and the long-term, essential need for support to institution-(re)building, and well the maintenance of extant capacities. The notion of saving lives, while countering the logic of war, was the cornerstone of the first Consolidated Appeals (and related humanitarian strategies) elaborated in 1999 and 2000. This involved:

- *Saving lives through a strategy of presence on the ground*, thanks to a constellation of NGOs and UN offices, supported by a network of coordination support offices (OCHA and the Humanitarian Section of MONUC); and a rapid joint response capacity provided by OCHA in the form of a well-defined and UN-agreed upon response strategy, and an airlift capacity, coupled with the ability to get access clearances from all the authorities involved in the operation;
- *Countering the logic of war* is probably the philosophy that has best characterised the humanitarian strategy in the DRC crisis. The task of preserving Congo’s unity and the continuity of its public services – particularly education, health (including immunisation) - has been partly discharged by humanitarian actors, especially during the chaotic period spanning from 1998 through 2001. In order to get better access, humanitarian actors resorted to ground-breaking initiatives such as flying over the frontline to transport Congolese specialists to a crisis affected area, or to help the education system to perform its duties across the country. Although not a deliberate strategy, the symbolic side-effect of preserving or restoring the country’s unity had a powerful impact on those who learned about it, and went a long way to promoting the basic humanitarian principles of neutrality,

humanity and independence, in a country shattered by an overwhelming sense of humiliation and mistrust;

- *Advocacy against chaos.* Over the years, advocacy has become the cornerstone of the humanitarian strategy, and has targeted a wide range of interlocutors, with a particular emphasis on local warlords. First step involved setting the rules of the game – something that was done in Nairobi in November 1998, where a meeting of representatives of the UN, NGOs, and donors elaborated the humanitarian rules of engagement. In 2000, these were translated into Swahili, Lingala, Kilendu, Kihema, and brochures have been widely distributed among armed factions, civil servants, teachers, and health staff. The issue is therefore not about ignorance, but about denial of humanitarian neutrality. More recently, systematic contacts have been made with all the Congolese parties to the conflict, where the following positions have been stressed:
 - o To claim that violence against civilians, and impossible access for humanitarian organisations is caused by “uncontrolled armed groups, men in uniform”, is not an acceptable excuse. To the contrary, it either proves that the party “controlling” the area does not really exercise its full authority, or that it condones such acts by armed elements situated inside its area of responsibility.
 - o To tell the relief actors “let us pacify before giving you access”, or “come over, it is pacified” are unacceptable deals, because a wealth of experience shows that these approaches usually imply so much violence that the so-called “pacified village” can only show 10% of its usual population at best because the others have fled the effects of pacification.

However, advocacy only works with the capacity to deliver when access is granted, which in turn implies that funds are available; that access is granted in a consistent way and that the principle of access is respected; and that actors other than humanitarian can takeover in case of more structural needs (light rehabilitation, education, etc.).

Tools for humanitarian action

Advocacy efforts are anchored in field presence, a philosophy of joint response to acute crises and of priority to the most vulnerable (especially those affected by armed violence, massive epidemic outbreaks or natural disasters of great proportions). Other tools comprise:

- 12 OCHA offices and sub-offices, with two more to be established shortly (at Uvira and Mahagi);
- Support to, and protection of, NGOs when possible and requested;

- A rather flexible interaction with programmes aimed at enhancing economic initiatives at community level, and at promoting reconciliation/cohabitation through income generating activities;
- The Emergency Humanitarian Intervention mechanism (as described in the strategy), embraced since 1999 at the UN level, in collaboration with local and international structures, and a philosophy of systematic response;
- A co-ordination mechanism, in the form of a Humanitarian Advocacy Group, which meets on a weekly basis in Kinshasa and in the field, and includes donors (and the Red Cross movement as observer). Other co-ordination opportunities exist through thematic meetings with NGOs (security, and other specific areas) and thematic working groups on population movements, food security, issues/projects regarding the Congo forest, HIV/AIDS, nutrition, health, and sanitation; and,
- The institutional support to and from the National Crisis Committee (chaired by the former Health Minister) has been a great asset throughout the crisis, providing precious and direct support to OCHA's requests for access. Another form of relationship is now shaping up with the newly created Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs – representing the Transitional Government. A partnership, based upon the principle of a “single desk” for administrative issues regarding humanitarian actors, and on the sharing of responsibilities between the state and non-governmental structures, are likely to be the key features of this new phase of collaboration.

Funding constraints

1998-2002 has seen an impossible “needs versus funding” equation. While the humanitarian strategy proposed to the international community was met with great appreciation, there was an absence of political momentum (unlike in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Sierra Leone). There were simply not enough international actors, and most of the donor community was short of trust towards local actors because of the difficulties in monitoring the funds channeled into the field.

Funding of humanitarian responses in the DRC has been characterised by a structural discrepancy between:

- a high level of engagement from NGOs, and some UN agencies;
- a poor level of *real, consistent, operational* access (with monitoring capacities); and, ultimately
- the capacity of relief organisations to drastically change the overall situation on the ground (the lure of “treating 20 million”).

Such a discrepancy, in the long run, has had an impact on overall humanitarian funding performances. The paradox is most evident with regard to OFDA and ECHO, whose levels of funding in the DRC are among the highest in the world, but are seen as failing to make a difference in the overall perception of “weak funding of humanitarian assistance in the DRC”. The prejudice is entirely to be blamed on a totally wrong vision of the role of relief organisations. Because of their presence on the ground, the latter are expected to uplift 20 million people. A striking similarity can be found with expectations placed on MONUC troops, in a country marked by the eclipse of any national defense capacity.

In contrast with these false expectations, which have cast a shadow on the overall humanitarian performance carried out by relief actors throughout the years of war, the arrival of new institutional actors during the year 2004 throughout the country (state structures, Bretton Woods institutions, UNDP, EU and other long term institutions) is expected to bring about a *new co-ordination of activities between emergency, community initiative, and economic recovery*. As far as humanitarian action is concerned, the different *levels of vulnerability will be the determining operational criteria*.

Next steps

During a workshop on the common humanitarian action plan for 2004, the UN, donors, members of the Transitional Government, and a number of local and international NGOs acknowledged that the task of saving lives would still be a priority for the most operational humanitarian actors, while state structures will be expected to concentrate on paying, disciplining and training their armed elements. The latter should progressively spare millions of civilians from the burden of their only *de facto* enemies. (Ituri, Kivu, parts of Maniema and Katanga are all areas requiring urgent and greater political involvement).

Remaining cases of denial of access and violence (especially in the above mentioned areas) will require high level, civil-military humanitarian field trips aimed at confronting the “vectors of violence” with the effects of armed confrontations, and at getting clear and verifiable commitments. To meet such goals, these trips will be comprised of high-ranking officers from both sides of the conflicting parties, members of the Transitional Government, one or more ambassadors of the P5 countries, and representatives of civil society including the parliament/senate, and NGOs.

The notion of *responsibility* will be the cornerstone of the partnership between humanitarian and other actors at every level (transitional authorities, international community, civil society, and UN system).

Humanitarian actors will endeavor to promote the principle of provincial strategies – thus erasing the *de facto* frontlines created over the years across Equateur, Kasai and Katanga provinces – by repositioning actors and airlift capacities. For instance, humanitarian strategies regarding Lusambo in Kasai or Manono in central Katanga will hopefully no longer be initiated from distant Goma. Likewise, cross-provincial strategies will be conducted according to common humanitarian challenges and/or natural economic ties between various regions, such as those between Beni, Bunia and Kisangani, or those between southern Kivu and Maniema.

In the same vein, partnerships will be promoted between emergency relief and support to economic recovery. Contacts have already been initiated by OCHA and UNDP, between the Bretton Woods institutions and local structures in eastern and northern DRC.

One such initiative towards economic recovery and a better balance between emergency operations and business or community-based recovery can be found in the Kambelebele initiative.⁷ Great efforts are underway between the *Société Nationale de Chemin de Fer du Congo*, OCHA, OFDA, Food for the Hungry International and a number of local actors, with a view to reopening the railway link through the provision of jobs at village level. The initiative also involves, soliciting commitments of Mayi Mayi and former RCD elements against any form of violence, and support to the resumption of agriculture and commercial activities.

Eventually, the main areas of common interest between major actors (Bretton Woods, DDR programmes, UNDP, European Union, and state structures) that are likely to emerge are: road rehabilitation, and the massive provision of seeds and tools – especially along such strategic axes as Kisangani-Beni, Beni-Bunia, Uvira-Fizi-Minembwe, Bukavu-Kindu, Gemena-Gbadolite, and Kasenga-Pweto-Kalémie.

Conclusion

Human insecurity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo derives primarily from the proliferation of armed violence coupled with a total absence of respect of the most basic humanitarian principles among foreign and Congolese war protagonists since the first wave of war in 1996. As a result, survival mechanisms are exhausted after twelve years of extensive looting throughout the country, especially in rural areas.

The daily challenge humanitarian actors are faced with is to provide costly, access and priority-based emergency assistance to the world's most widely scattered population of internally displaced persons, and more globally to an overwhelming variety of vulnerable groups – most of whom would easily be

eligible to self-sustainability had their rights to a normal life not been denied on a daily basis by “men in uniforms”. The changing nature of military and political alliances, coupled with protracted patterns of indiscipline and banditry, and with the appalling status of communication infrastructure, hampers the regularity and consistency of any form of assistance.

In areas such as South Kivu, southern Maniema and chiefly in Ituri, local rivalries between communities have been exacerbated by broader circles of conflicting ambitions, all fed and fueled by the disappearance of state structures supported by a spirit of general interest in natural resources by conventional defense forces. This has, over the years, left the donor community with an ill-founded sense of what to do and a humanitarian Pandora’s box. As a result, the emphasis has put on emergency relief operations (making the DRC one of the first funding recipient countries in terms of emergency assistance from ECHO and OFDA with on average over US\$30 million each per year).

However, this funding has been insufficient thus far, and it has not been matched by support from other funding sources which would have addressed the needs of those communities that are less exposed to the most extreme effects of armed violence or natural disasters, yet suffer direly from the absence of the most basic economic means and collective services.

Placed before abysmal responsibilities, solicitations and constraints since the onset of the armed conflicts in Zaire-DRC, humanitarian actors have opted for a strategy of rapid joint response, active advocacy for access and respect of humanitarian principles, and strong “hints” towards more economic and community-based alternatives to effectively address the sky-rocketing mortality and morbidity figures. In order to address exceptional circumstances, relief organisations and humanitarian coordinators have resorted to no less exceptional forms and levels of “engagement against resignation”, ranging from the opening of “humanitarian air corridors” in the absence of any ceasefire agreement (May 1999), to the extensive use of an Emergency Humanitarian Intervention mechanism. Likewise, concrete steps have been taken towards the reopening of river and rail traffic, and relief actors have resorted to some historical compromises with principles of neutrality (use of the Congolese patriotic chord to get access to civilians across frontlines) and of independence from military forces (Ituri, May 2003). The launch of a transitional government provides the humanitarian community with hope for a rapidly expanding human security (in all its forms) enhanced by a renewed sense of state’s responsibilities.

During these past years of conflict, providing humanitarian assistance and indirectly nurturing the widespread sense of national unity, has amounted to helping a nation “wounded by history” in healing its own wounds, and in keeping the dream (of a country with a great future and regional vocation) alive. In an environment of terror and submission of civilians, it has also rep-

resented a test of humanity for every actor, especially the authorities challenged to overcome their logic of hatred. All in all, it has been a daily quest for decency.

NOTES

1. Michel Kassa is Head of the UN's DRC Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).
2. [UN] Food and Agricultural Organisation.
3. In an environment of insecurity and permanent human displacements, such an estimate, although well known since 2000, has simply been unworkable in operational terms, due to the level of funds available, lack of access, enormous logistical costs involved in responding to such needs, relative absence of equipped and accountable actors. But above all is the conviction that only through respect of civilians (be it obtained from, or imposed on, all armed elements) could agricultural and economic initiatives blossom throughout the country and address in an adequate, relevant and dignified manner the current human malaise in the DRC – humanitarian assistance being only seen as a complementary and quick fix solution for acute cases of vulnerability.
4. United Nations Children's Fund.
5. United Nations Development Programme/ United Nations Office for Project Services.
6. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance and the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office.
7. (Named after the OCHA-initiated workshop in April 2002 in Kindu on the *Peace Train* initiative between Lubumbashi, Kindu and Kalémie).