Humanitarian assistance to a country at war

Does it make sense?

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Like many of his age mates, my 16 year old son Karri is a sceptic. He has seen the results of wars in the former Yugoslavia from many angles and in many places. He has visited Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro and Muslim-, Croat- and Serb-controlled parts of Bosnia. During these visits, he saw the destruction of Mostar, the tell-tale signs of ethnic cleansing - houses without a roof but no bullet holes in the walls - in Western Slavonia, refugee camps in Dalmatia, and rusting tanks in the Brocko corridor. He also saw the attempts of the UN to help: the huge Iljushin 74 planes chartered by the UN for the Sarajevo air lift, the little Volkswagen Golfs of the UN Military Monitors trying to follow the tanks of the warring factions, the long convoys full of humanitarian aid negotiating the icy mountain roads on their way to Central Bosnia, the mountains of wheat flour unloaded from ships in the harbour of Ploce for the World Food Programme, the fitting of WHO prostheses for patients with amputated legs and the ubiquitous plastic sheet with the UNHCR logo covering broken windows and roofs all over Bosnia.

All this duly impressed him. Yet, his final analysis was 'Does all this make sense? The war continues. Both civilians and soldiers are killed and wounded daily, historical values, schools and health care institutions are being destroyed without mercy, the hatred increases. Your food and drugs do not solve anything, they do not bring any lasting relief. The warring parties do not even like you and appreciate your help. If they want to kill each other, why do you not let them do that? Come back with your aid when the war is over and it has a lasting effect.' Karri is not the only doubting Thomas. The UN humanitarian agencies have found them in all countries that have been approached for donations for the massive humanitarian assistance programme in the former Yugoslavia. Some have only questioned the effectiveness and appropriateness of the aid. Others have claimed that the aid has prolonged the war and suffering. Today, Bosnia enjoys peace - albeit precarious - and the need for immediate humanitarian aid has diminished although by no means ceased. At least for the time being, there is no need to ask in Bosnia whether it makes sense to give humanitarian aid to a country at war. Unfortunately, there will be other crises where humanitarian assistance will be needed. And as soon a humanitarian assistance programme is launched, there will be other sceptics undermining it. It therefore pays to look at the experiences from the former Yugoslavia. The 4 papers in this issue of the European Journal of Public Health by Vuori et al, Healing et al, Kulenovic et al and Weekers et al respectively try to do that.

Vuori's paper outlines the general context in which the UN humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organizations worked and gives a detailed account of the programme of the World Health Organization. Healing et al focus on a key part of the WHO's programme, health monitoring, which is vital for effective targeting of the other parts of the WHO's programme. Kulenovic et al show that serious research is possible even under very adverse conditions. They also touch the sensitive issue of 'enforced' benefits of war. Weekers et al describe the experiences gained from the medical evacuation of war victims from the former Yugoslavia to other countries. Although the war had disrupted the peacetime epidemiological services and systems, the WHO's health monitors were able to gather information useful for formulating advice and supplying appropriate medical aid. The WHO's nutrition monitors even carried out scientifically sound sample studies. Thanks to other parts of the WHO's programme, Bosnia's health care system was kept going, patients with amputations are today walking with WHO prostheses and thousands of people with psychological scars get professional help. The WHO's programme also showed that even during a war it is possible to plan for peacetime health care reforms and take the first steps to implement such reforms. Paradoxically, the war even facilitated some aspects of the reforms by turning necessity into virtue. For instance, general cost-consciousness, a limited drug list and more effective and simpler tuberculosis treatment regime were introduced as wartime necessities but will stay as part of the future system. Sarajevo was an almost ideal place for medical evacuation. Big cargo planes regularly flew empty out of the town and the UN had armoured ambulances to take patients to the airport. Most patients that could be considered for medical evacuation were treated in the local university hospital that, in spite of difficulties, could provide adequate information for the international MEDEVAC committee to check whether the candidates met the medical criteria for evacuation. Finally, there was...
international medical staff that could make impartial assessments. Elsewhere in Bosnia, the conditions were less favourable. As Weekers et al. note, there was a risk of the programme becoming supply driven because of wide media attention following the little Irma episode. Countries donating beds expected them to be filled with patients from Bosnia, sometimes disregarding the medical soundness of the evacuation. There was also local political pressure culminating in armed gangs trying to make sure that the international MEDEVAC committee put their wounded members on the evacuation list.

The 2 key lessons common to the 4 papers are: i) only an impartial system benefiting all those in need can succeed and ii) the best approach is to support and strengthen the local system. In spite of destruction of health care facilities and a massive exodus of health personnel, the Bosnian health care system was surprisingly capable of coping with most problems. This was partly due to international aid but even more so to the resilience and dedication of those local doctors and nurses who stayed behind. But the question still lingers - was it worthwhile? The cynics and sceptics still claim that the humanitarian assistance only prolonged the war. Thanks to emergency aid, they say, ruthless warlords and politicians could simply spend more resources on the war, safe in the knowledge that the international community would care for the sick and wounded, feed the hungry and provide shelter to those who had been driven from their homes or seen them destroyed. This is probably true. Sarajevo would have fallen long ago without the airlift. The beleaguered Moslem enclaves of Szepe and Srebrenica would have fallen much earlier and Gorazde and Bihac would not have endured until the Dayton accord. The inhabitants of besieged cities such as Sarajevo, Mostar, Tesanj and Maglaj might have been spared the horrors of continuous bombardment, sniping, hunger, cold and the see-saw battle between hope and despair. Without humanitarian assistance, there might well have been peace in Bosnia much before Dayton.

But would the outside world have accepted the conditions of this peace? Before the fall of Szepe and Srebrenica, I used to ask how many more people will be butchered on all sides if the besieged areas are taken. How many tens or hundreds of thousands more people will be forced to flee their homes! How many thousands more children will become psychologically scarred seeing their homes destroyed and their parents killed?

It was not the fault of the humanitarian assistance that these horror images to a large extent materialized in Szepe and Srebrenica and partly in the UN Protected Areas of Croatia. It was the fault of the failure of politics and diplomacy. On the contrary, humanitarian assistance has helped much of Bosnia, most notably Sarajevo and Bihac, to endure so that they now have a real chance for a peace that is acceptable for them and the international community. Although diplomacy played an important role, humanitarian assistance also contributed to the fact that the Dayton peace talks were attended by 3 sides instead of 2 - or even only one. Thanks to humanitarian assistance, the international community can keep its head high.

REFERENCES


