

**FABRICE WEISSMAN, ED., *IN THE SHADOW OF 'JUST WARS':
VIOLENCE, POLITICS AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION*
(ITHACA, NEW YORK: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2004)**

*By Margaret D. Stock**

Doctors Without Borders (hereafter MSF, after “Médecins sans frontières”) is known internationally not just as a humanitarian non-governmental organization (NGO), but as an organization committed to the highest principles. In this provocative collection of essays¹ that discuss the role that such organizations have played in armed conflicts in the past five years, several MSF-affiliated authors confirm their organization’s commitment to these principles with a thorough and nuanced critique. Sparing no criticism of MSF’s own participation in these conflicts, these authors collectively question whether humanitarian organizations have made the right choices. They also set out a prescription for future action: a return to the principle of impartiality in the provision of humanitarian assistance.

In the volume’s introductory essay, Jean-Hervé Bradol, the president of MSF, questions whether humanitarian organizations and the new international emphasis on humanitarian interventions, so-called just wars, have truly benefited the populations they purport to serve. Bradol explains that the search for world order and a “better world” means that every society separates “those who may live from those who can or must die.”² Humanitarian organizations necessarily confront these decisions, and thus “inevitably clash with the established order.”³ The author then posits that “the first condition for the success of humanitarian action is refusal to collaborate in this fatal selection process.”⁴ He thus sets the stage for the essays that follow, which argue consistently that most of today’s humanitarian organizations have chosen allegiance to the dominant political power over the principle of saving as many lives as possible.

In a group of essays labeled “Interventions,” the book examines the conflicts in East Timor, Sierra Leone, and Afghanistan—situations where international armed force has been used against one of the parties to the conflict, followed by international stewardship of the region. In these cases, the involvement of humanitarian organizations is generally thought to have been successful, but this “success” has come at a steep price: humanitarian NGOs have chosen to align themselves with those exerting the military force, thus making themselves complicit in the decisions of those authorities. For example, in East Timor, “certain NGOs like Médecins Sans Frontières did not openly criticize [restrictions by authorities on their provision of aid] and came

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¹ Fabrice Weissman, ed., *In the Shadow of 'Just Wars': Violence, Politics and Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004).

² *Ibid.* at 5.

³ *Ibid.* at 6.

⁴ *Ibid.* at 9.

perilously close to being the health care auxiliaries to a system of terror.”⁵ In Sierra Leone, aid operations were subordinated to the international strategy for ending the conflict, resulting in the fact that thousands of civilians were denied assistance because doing so did not suit that strategy. Finally, in Afghanistan, aid organizations became “political auxiliaries of the Western powers;” this image was cemented when American special forces operating in civilian clothes introduced themselves to locals as “humanitarian volunteers.”⁶

The next set of essays, titled “Involvement,” examines North Korea, Angola, and Sudan—cases in which the international community chose to contain the crisis, rather than ending it. In these situations, “aid is often abundant but inaccessible to those who most need it”⁷ or even contributes to the conflict when it is misappropriated by its participants. Thus, humanitarian organizations providing aid cannot act ethically, their aid being used to aid the oppression of victims of the conflicts.

After these case studies, the authors examine Liberia, Chechnya, Congo, Colombia, and Algeria—situations where humanitarian organizations chose abstention rather than involvement as a policy, usually because the armed conflict was so chaotic that humanitarian aid could not be safely provided. International passivity in the face of the conflicts in these regions has left humanitarian aid organizations practically helpless, except perhaps in their ability to denounce the failure to address the underlying human tragedy occurring in each situation.

Finally, the last section of the book, entitled “Point of View,” contains six provocative essays critiquing the traditional way in which humanitarian aid has been provided in international armed conflicts. Rony Brauman (a medical doctor and former president of MSF) and Pierre Salignon (a lawyer and head of MSF programs) argue that NGOs in Iraq have been severely harmed by the popular perception that they are subordinate to the occupying power. Well-known independent journalist David Rieff writes that in Kosovo, “humanist rhetoric [became] an integral part of the military campaign,”⁸ and NGOs “co-operated eagerly in their own subordination to state power.”⁹ Although this possibility is virtually ignored by international organizations, Michel Agier (an anthropologist and research director at the Development Research Institute) and Françoise Bouchet-Saulnier (legal counsel for MSF) opine that not only do humanitarian NGOs sometimes operate as an arm of the powerful, but many times they contribute to the oppression of victims of a conflict. Eric Dachy, a specialist in child psychiatry, then examines the role of NGOs before the International Criminal Court; he argues that aid workers cannot be witnesses in the legal process without violating the principle of neutrally providing aid to all who need it. The final two essays examine respectively the challenge to traditional aid

⁵ *Ibid.* at 37.

⁶ *Ibid.* at 82.

⁷ *Ibid.* at 17.

⁸ *Ibid.* at 287.

⁹ *Ibid.* at 286.

organizations posed by Islamic NGOs, and the right to health care, a right essentially denied in favor of the property rights of the pharmaceutical companies.

This volume offers a careful and thorough examination of the evolving role of humanitarian NGOs in international armed conflicts. Each essay provides an easy read and yet is detailed enough to provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the history of each armed conflict, making the book exceptionally useful for seminars on the role of NGOs in armed conflicts or humanitarian interventions.

