Loaves and Fishes
Famine Challenges in the New Millennium
Sue Lautze[1] [2]
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Thank you.

It is a great pleasure to be here to speak with you today. I would like to take this opportunity to make three points regarding Famine Challenges in the New Millennium.

1. We need to quit deceiving the public with simplistic, frightening and disempowering messages about famine "victims", and to start motivating the public to get involved in saving lives and alleviating suffering as an expression of all that is good about our common humanity;
2. We need to restore the integrity of our relief institutions, in particular their independence, neutrality and impartiality;
3. We need to recognize that there are serious consequences and implications for the people who are vulnerable to famine that arise from some of the strategies involved in the War on Terror.

In February 1997, a Tufts University official told the Boston Globe of his vision for the newly established Feinstein International Famine Center that had just been given a $2.5 million endowment. "Within three to five years, I believe the center will be saving hundreds of thousands of lives in the world each year" he said.[3] . The promised "three to five years" has now passed for the Famine Center and while we are successfully meeting many of our goals, no one could claim that we are "saving hundreds of thousands of lives" each year. The idea that a $2.5 million dollar gift and a staff of three people could save "hundreds of thousands of lives" annually is just one small example of what we could term here the "Loaves and Fishes" approach to famine prevention and response. A more recent example of the "Loaves and Fishes" approach is the $20 million dollar budget in the new "Famine Fund", which is 1/10 of the amount originally requested by USAID. This $20 million is not only intended to reduce famine vulnerability but (in addition to exceedingly modest new funds) is intended to *eradicate* famine from Ethiopia, according to one senior AID official. Given that there were 14 million people officially at risk in the recent crisis in Ethiopia, the $20 million translates into $1.43 per person. To put it another way, it equals less than ½ hour of the current spending rate of

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$42 million/hour on defense.[4] What can only be more disheartening than this calculus is the tremendous amount of effort USAID has had to invest in establishing the Famine Fund.

My work has taken me to such areas as Sudan, North Korea, Africa's Great Lakes Region, Afghanistan and Ethiopia. Even though these crises are characterized at times by higher degrees of political engagement by the US than other disaster zones, I have watched the bottom of the barrel of resources, of political commitment, of engagement and of compassion get scraped time and time again. The idea that we are far – very far – off the mark in terms of long-term, substantive, meaningful, effective engagement with areas of the world characterized by deep vulnerability to famine is routinely dismissed by unacceptable statements including:

We're doing all we can
We are exceptionally generous
There are other, more pressing concerns
We have to prioritize limited resources
Our hands are tied

To this, one could add a quote from a member of the NSC in the Clinton Administration with respect to its uneven attempts to forge a peace in Sudan. "No, really, what we're doing is pretty good engagement – for Africa."

Global suffering is made more relative and is increasingly accommodated with each chronic crisis turned acute. In short, our standards are slipping, and slipping badly. In an interview with British aid officials in London last year, Ethiopia's appalling malnutrition statistics were dismissed as nothing to become alarmed about. "It's just another normal bad year", they said.

Thirty-five years ago, an ambitious Nigerian secessionist movement hired a Swiss public relations firm to beam the images of malnourished Biafrans into the living rooms of the West for the very first time. Twenty year ago, a mediocre rock singer and a BBC journalist were able to turn the Western world on its head by exposing the famine in Ethiopia to the world, forever solidifying a continental shift in popular perception from "Starving Europe" to "Starving Africa". Where such images were found to be compelling by the Western societies of the late sixties and mid 80's, today the public is so inured to such suffering as to be completely disempowered by the images.

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[4] Garamone, J. (2003) "Budget Request Funds War on Terror, Transformation", American Forces Information Service, February 3, 2003.

Since the murder of 18 US Marines in Somalia in 1993, the US public has been increasingly encouraged – or at least not actively discouraged from – thinking about people affected by famine and crisis as populations that should be considered as Very Dangerous to Americans. The regrettable popularity of Robert Kaplan's racist The Coming Anarchy article in 1994 underscored a different popular shift, this time from pure compassion for people affected by disasters -- which reached its apogee during the Ethiopian famine of 1983 – 4 -- to pure fear of what are otherwise highly vulnerable populations. This trend has accelerated since the devastating attacks in New York and Washington on September 11th, 2001.

The depiction of crisis-affected populations as dangerous is useful for those who would otherwise not wish to resolve the complex problems threatening lives and livelihoods in the marginalized areas of the world: it allows for disengagement to be rationalized and for ever-increasing levels of suffering to be accommodated, to be accepted as "normal". The depiction of "Africa" as a continent-wide "basket case" of failed states, chaos and hopelessness can stand unchallenged.

It is important to reflect upon this shift further. The erosion of protection regimes for refugees over the past two decades (but especially since the end of the Cold War) has been observed and documented. Providing safe havens for populations with a well-founded fear has gradually given way to extreme measures to prevent populations fleeing for their lives from ever leaving their home countries. We are in a time of building higher walls and circling the seas to contain refugee flows. The Administration's recent threats to the people of Haiti to not attempt to come to America in the middle of that crisis passed almost without comment, so accepted now is the death of the refugee protection regimes.

These moves have been justified on grounds as necessary protections for Western countries. What is notable about the more recent acceleration of recasting endangered populations as dangerous[5], is that the language has shifted from protecting countries (for example, the jobs that might be lost to migrants) to protecting individuals within countries. We are being encouraged to conflate mentally the starving pastoralists of Somalia with the educated, trained and financed Saudi extremists who flew the jet planes into the World Trade Center on September 11th. People living *in extremis* are now assumed *to be* extremists. It is not just our jobs and communities that are threatened, we are told, but our very families. You, me. We are all at risk now.

We should not be afraid of the meek and humble; rather, we should be afraid of the ambitious and powerful. In re-casting the rationale for famine prevention globally in terms of the War on Terror, we run the real risk of responding to disasters for the wrong reasons. Because we are being made to be afraid of the poor, we are compelled to act for our own protection.

At times historically, fear of the poor has translated into very real forms of assistance and engagement that actually benefited people coping with crisis, for example, the Indian

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[5] I thank Peter Walker for this useful turn of phrase.

Famine Codes that were implemented by the British for entirely self-interested reasons of protecting the colonies. The difference today is that fear is being translating into exclusionary measures rather than being mobilized to support inclusive programs that provide protection to life and livelihood.[6]

In the end, we are facing two grim realities today that do not bode well for the future of deeply marginalized populations. On the one hand, the poor of the world are being targeted as potential threats to us in the War on Terror, but the resources needed to address the challenges of extreme poverty are nowhere near the level of resources made available to other causes in the War on Terror. The solutions offered are to contain rather than resolve crises. On the other hand, with the poor cast as dangerous, the humanitarian gesture of providing assistance to saving lives and reducing suffering is itself morally diminished in the eyes of the public. Why should we feed the mouths that bite us?

It is time to quit deceiving the public with these simplistic, frightening and disempowering messages about crisis-affected populations. The non-governmental organizations in particular need to start motivating the public to get involved in saving lives and alleviating suffering as an expression of all that is good about our common humanity – and as a duty to address the harshness of globalization and relieve the terrors of war, poverty and crisis.

This brings me to my second point about the integrity of relief institutions.

It can be argued that the institutions of US humanitarianism are challenged by recent developments in the world. Over the past ten years or so, USAID has faced a myriad of political challenges. USAID has fought back – and continues to do so. Nevertheless, over time, USAID has lost staff, prestige, power and resources but most damaging of all, flexibility. OFDA is one example. As outside observers, we are noticing that this once nimble office that was at the forefront of disasters and represented the very best in American compassion seems now to be increasingly encroached upon by political interests that seek to form and model the processes of crisis response to suit their own interests. The result is an office struggling to manage growing bureaucratic obligations and political whims while responding to the major crises around the world. The tensions between humanitarians and politicians are as old as relief work itself.

Since Henry Dunant left the battlefield of Solferino in 1859 and headed to Geneva with ideas about an international Red Cross Society, advocacy for the idea that wars should have their limits has always been nurtured foremost by humanitarians and as an inconvenient afterthought by politicians. It has always been a losing battle for humanitarians. Wars of all ilk will happen; the best humanitarians can do is to civilize them.

Throughout history, humanitarians have known that political and military authorities would *always* be interested in manipulating humanitarians to their advantage. This is the logic of humanitarian principles, long recognized as a Faustian bargain necessary to

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[6] Alex de Waal, personal communication, March 21, 2004.

ensure that some measure of assistance can be provided in what Hugo Slim notes are "environments essentially hostile to humanitarian ideals". Much has been debated about the relevance of the humanitarian principle of neutrality, especially as NGOs find themselves no longer limited by the Cold War realities that once kept them on the edges of conflict but rather deeply integrated into the logic of today's wars.

The real challenge to the NGOs today, however, is not the much-discussed question of neutrality, but rather the humanitarian principle of independence, on which there has been conspicuous silence in the humanitarian world. Independence is the humanitarian duty to abstain from being used as instruments of government policy. In recent years, there have been no graver violations of humanitarian principles than the principle of independence. A select group of US NGOs have nearly perfectly cornered the market for humanitarian grants from the US Government. Almost without exception, they have become dependent upon the US Government for increasing shares in their annual budgets.

Like puppets on a string, these organizations are finding that they are no longer in control of their limbs, even as they unwittingly become more closely linked with US political and military agendas. These organizations should know better than anyone that vulnerability is a function of co-variant risk. The lack of diversity in their portfolios is a liability that many now wish they had not accepted, but the cost of opting out would spell near death to some of these organizations. Should any of them elect to opt out of these arrangements, there is a bevy of NGOs poised to take over the much-sought after resources. The integrity of relief institutions is in deep crisis.

Since the end of the Cold War especially, relief workers have gone from being hailed as servants of civility to being targeted as an arm of US foreign policy abroad and viewed as ineffectual do-gooders at home. The continuing attacks on relief workers in Afghanistan on the one hand, and the declining share of public contributions to NGO coffers on the other, demonstrate that these are threatening developments for humanitarians.

Who is responsible for this loss of humanitarian space, for this merging of development and security (as Mark Duffield describes it)? Surely it is reasonable to expect the US Government to use every tool in its war chest to move aggressively against threats. Every country in the world and throughout history has done the same thing. One must argue that the fault is shared by humanitarians – especially NGOs -- for failing to defend those minimum conditions necessary to provide aid and protection to people in crisis, without being compromised by larger political, economic or military agendas.

The politicization of humanitarian assistance by the US Government predates September 11, of course. The first provision of US Government-funded humanitarian assistance was to Cuba between 1898 – 1902, a time that coincided, not accidentally, with the US military occupation of Cuba.

What has changed, however, is the value of the political asset expected from official humanitarian assistance. Throughout the Cold War, US-funded humanitarian assistance was expected to be at least marginally useful in the construction of the image of America

as a giving, caring, merciful country; a ballast against the steely coldness of godless Communism. It also was a time of US commitment to multilateralism and of recognition of the value of international cooperation.

With the rationale of the Cold War gone, humanitarianism found a fleeting, golden moment when it looked as though humanitarian efforts would be pursued on humanitarian logic alone. Boutros Boutros Ghali's Agenda for Peace, the initial humanitarian intervention in Somalia, and the creation of a safe haven for Iraqi Kurds were the hallmarks of this brief period. Since then, however, with disaster-affected populations increasingly characterized as problems to be contained, the political function of official humanitarian assistance has become more overt and aggressive.

This brings me to my concluding point regarding the some of the other consequences of the War on Terror.

Well-established democracies provide effective protection against famine. However, the types of democracies needed to effect this protection are not currently in vogue. We are learning that promoting and defending American-style governance projects, such as regime change, can actually heighten famine vulnerability. This can happen in several ways, but the emerging thesis is that an overriding interest in the governance project that comes at a cost of minimum guarantees of basic human needs leads to sharply increased vulnerability. Rather than democracy providing protection against famine, acute vulnerability is being viewed as an acceptable cost in the transition to democracy, as can be witnessed in Ethiopia, Uganda and Afghanistan today. With American-style democracy looked to as the prophylaxis against terrorism, a colleague of mine has described this as the "hijacking of human security by homeland security".[7] Nowhere is this truer today than in Afghanistan, where the quality of security within the home – especially for women – has deteriorated to the point that nostalgia for the return of the Taliban is dangerously on the increase.

To conclude, the time has come to lead not with fear but with true compassion, to respond not with threats but with empathy. The War on Famine deserves to be resourced on a level similar to the War on Terror, but for entirely different reasons. For one, in funding the War on Terror, we've proven that we can afford such endeavors. Secondly, healthy, industrious and safe societies are good for the world generally but for the US in particular. Three, this isn't a problem that is going to go away. We can elect to be defeated by that fact, and stay comfortably believing:

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[7] Angela Raven-Roberts, personal communication, March 18, 2004.

Or, we can use the full range of American resources to conquer the real threat to our shared humanity and shared security: sharing the globe with a growing population of desperately impoverished, disenfranchised and disempowered people. What will our choice be?