

Politicisation of Humanitarian Aid and its Consequences for Afghans

Conference Paper Presented by

Mohammed Haneef Atmar

Programme Manager, Norwegian Church Aid Afghanistan Programme

Email: atmar@brain.net.pk

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Dear colleagues,

1. Let me first thank the organisers of this important conference for inviting me to share my views on one of the most critical issues of current humanitarianism, i.e. politicisation of humanitarian assistance, which in the Afghanistan context, has led to exclusion and marginalisation of war-affected Afghans and others in need of help.

2. Today, I will speak from two perspectives. First, as an **Afghan** who has lived through the last 21 years of the conflict and has seen some of his friends, neighbours and family members and many other innocent civilians killed in the war. Painfully, however I have observed how morally poor the international response to our disaster has been. It is painful to see that some of those responsible for the killing of thousands of innocent Afghans are enjoying an international climate of impunity. Even worse is that some have been given asylum in the west or have become new allies of some states in the pursuit of their foreign policy concerning Afghanistan.

3. Secondly, I am talking from the perspective of an 'outsider', an **aid worker** who for the last 7 years has been working at the 'coal face', grappling with the challenges and constraints of attempting to propagate humanitarian values in an environment of 'organised inhumanity'. To give you an idea of the current issues of humanitarian work in the country, I would like to quote from the list of my work related priorities over the past three weeks:

- a. To find out whether or not we can do anything about the massacre of civilians in Bamyan, which took place two weeks ago.
- b. To attempt to find ways of assisting the thousands of children and mothers that die as a result of combined effects of drought and conflict; the thousands of drought and conflict-affected IDPs who have fled their places of origins; the thousands of IDPs who are denied asylum and living helplessly on the borders between Afghanistan and its neighbours.
- c. To lobby the donor countries to help and to make them aware on the potential humanitarian consequences of the sanctions that some of them imposed on Afghanistan through a United Nations Security Council resolution over a month ago, and
- d. For the past two weeks, I have had to negotiate the release of my Afghan colleague who has been in custody of the authorities simply because he is an aid worker, belongs to the 'wrong' ethnic group and is unwilling to pay for his release.

4. In view of the current humanitarian dilemmas in Afghanistan and with reference to the conference topic, I am going to argue the following four points as to how humanitarianism is politicised and what consequences it has brought to the people of Afghanistan:

First, at the risk of stating the obvious, politicisation is the pursuit of political objectives by humanitarian instruments.

5. While aid/politics has a long and complex history in Afghanistan, the current politicisation of humanitarian assistance to the country is indeed the pursuit of domestic and foreign policies of key donor states by 'humanitarian means'. The new and unusual properties attached to the humanitarian aid policies seem to have more to do with the donor policy of isolating Taliban rather than the actual conditions required for principled humanitarian action.

6. During the Cold War years, Afghanistan was initially a 'survival' issue for the West, but after the withdrawal of the Soviets from the country in 1989, *'the narrative of Afghanistan in the West has changed, from heroic freedom fighters to brutal, sexist bandits, despite the fact that the cast of characters remains largely unchanged.'* (Macrae, et al 2000: 44). This change in the Western foreign policy resulted in mutation of the Afghan conflict from a Cold War confrontation into one, which now combines elements of a regional proxy conflict and a civil war (Fielden, et al 2000).

7. While the war has resulted in death of over one and half million Afghans and a similar number of maimed for life, produced one of the world's largest refugee and IDPs caseloads and continues to be, from any perspective, the most significant factor undermining the human rights of Afghans (Niland 1999), the response from the west has been largely based on narrow domestic and foreign policy concerns. In the words of Boutros Ghali, *'Afghanistan has become one of the world's orphaned conflicts – the ones that the West, selective and promiscuous in its attention, happens to ignore in favour of Yugoslavia.'* (cited in Fielden, et al 2000).

8. Currently, domestic and foreign policy concerns over terrorism, drugs, outflow of refugees and protection of women's rights (at rhetorical level) trigger a response from the west which is characterized by a paradoxical mixture of strategic withdrawal, containment and single-issue aggression. In political terms, instead of employing a comprehensive policy of resolving the multi-layered conflict of Afghanistan, which is part of a regional conflict system threatening peace and stability in the region, the powerful states delegate peace making responsibility to UN. It is however transparently obvious that nothing of value is likely to come out from the UN efforts (Maley 1998) without a reasonable level of western commitment and support, both political and economic. Yet, the same powers undermine the peace making efforts of the UN by imposing sanctions with a one-sided arms embargo. This will not only prolong the war and its disastrous consequences for Afghans who already reel under the continued effects of the crisis over the past two decades, but will also undermine UN's role as an impartial peace maker.

9. In an era of 'ethical foreign policy', it is unfortunate to see that western response combines food aid and cruise missiles, that sanctions are in no meaningful way linked to protection and advancement of human rights, and that there are double-standards by which Rwanda and former Yugoslavia qualify for war crimes tribunal and Afghanistan does not despite its horrendous and recurrent massacres.

10. In this geo-political context, humanitarian aid works at best as a fig leaf for political inaction and at worst as an instrument of foreign policy to isolate the Taliban. The principles of humanitarianism, i.e. humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, are increasingly coming under assault from the foreign policy. The politically motivated conditionalities on humanitarian aid, discussed below, have pushed the humanitarianism to serve politics and the humanitarians to act as aggressive diplomats with little or no regard for consequences.

Second, the principle of impartiality has continued to be a casualty of donor politics of humanitarian needs.

11. Over years of crisis in Afghanistan, the principle of impartiality of humanitarianism has systematically fallen victim to political considerations of donor states. In other words,

political expedience of the donor states has determined the purpose, extent and type of 'humanitarian response' rather than human needs alone. During the Cold War period, Afghanistan received the highest per capita aid in its history in a most unprincipled manner. The United States alone provided military and humanitarian aid worth over US\$600 million per annum after 1986 (Girardet, et al 1998:118). According to independent studies, donors were prepared to accept up to 40% wastage (Goodhand, et al, 1999); and some others argue that only 20-30% of the humanitarian aid reached its intended beneficiaries and the rest went astray mostly feeding war efforts (Girardet, et al, 1998:119). While human needs were equally dire in the communist-held and resistance controlled areas of the country, the West was prepared to provide aid only to the latter. Humanitarian aid was thus mandated to play a complementary role as part of the wider Cold War politics to 'make the Russians bleed' (US official cited in Girardet, et al, 1998:120). With the withdrawal of the Red Army and despite the continued human suffering, the rapid fall in humanitarian budgets made it obvious that it was not the plight of the Afghans that mattered.

12. Currently, conditions for Afghans are typified by a chronic poverty, insecurity, ill-health, population displacement and horrendous human rights violations and deficit. With over four million refugees, Afghanistan still has one of the world's biggest refugee caseloads and remains one of the most seriously mined countries in the world. It also has some of the worst human development indicators, ranking 170 out of 174 in UNDP's 1995 Human Development Index. However, despite this, it seems that proportionality, by extension impartiality, of humanitarian response has been subordinated to political calculations of the donor states. An example of this can be seen in refugee related aid expenditures. Concerning the 2.6 million Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan, donors' expenditure per refugee in terms of welfare, repatriation and reintegration was USD 10 in 1997, USD 3 in 1998 and USD 13 in 1999 (Atmar, et al 2000). These figures are dwarfed by expenditure in former Yugoslavia and Kosovo.

13. Between 1992-1999, the United Nations Annual Consolidated Appeals for assistance to Afghanistan received on average only 48% of its needs (Atmar et al 2000). Whilst the appeal for the current drought, which affects the life of half of the population of Afghanistan, three to four millions of them severely, remains abysmally under-funded. The UN Mine Action programme is one of the most successful in the world, yet in 2000 it was cut by half because of donor fatigue to provide funding. Around 300 Afghans lose their lives and limbs each month as a result of mine incidents.

14. In 1998, DFID, then one of the key donors to Afghanistan, asserted in a written answer to a parliamentary question that '*The humanitarian situation inside Afghanistan— in terms of basic needs — is under reasonable control at the present time*' (cited in Macrae, et al 2000). Questioning the credibility of such a claim was a WHO report in the same year, indicating that maternal mortality rates had more than doubled since 1990 to 170 per 10,000 live births (Wiles et al 1999). In addition, donors have explicitly tied their assistance to progress on Taliban's policies and practice, issues of terrorism, drugs and peace. In 1999, a meeting of the Afghanistan Support Group of the donor countries in Stockholm concluded that '*the Taliban's continued harbouring of international terrorists was negatively affecting the provision of assistance*' (cited in Macrae, et al 2000). Donors may have legitimate foreign policy concerns, the point is however that the core purpose of humanitarian action is and should be to save lives and when donors try to shape humanitarian assistance to achieve other objectives, this flies in the face of the humanitarian principles and is likely to result in the loss of lives. Blaming abusive authorities for the consequences may be justifiable but it is not a good reason for abdicating humanitarian responsibility at a time when most donor states claim to uphold human rights as key principle of their foreign policy.

Third, punitive humanitarian conditionalities are only punishing the victims.

15. Whatever underlying principle, purpose or form that the punitive humanitarian conditionalities have assumed in Afghanistan, the net effect and overall impact is one of negative consequences for the rights of the Afghans, notably the right to humanitarian assistance. There is little to show if conditionalities have made any significant change in terms of enhancing rights.

16. In response to the discriminatory policies and practice of the Taliban and the dilemmas that they pose as a pariah state since 1996, some key donors and aid agencies have resorted to imposition of punitive conditionalities. These are often referred to as security, relief/development, life-saving/life sustaining, capacity building and gender equality conditionalities.

17. Security conditionality: in the aftermath of the US air strikes on the alleged terrorist camps inside Afghanistan in August 1998, the US and UK governments identified threats to their citizens. Consequently, they asked UN not to send back to Afghanistan their nationals working as UN employees and UK ruled that any NGO sending any expatriate to Afghanistan would be automatically disqualified for DFID funding. This restriction still holds. Similarly, ECHO stopped its humanitarian assistance to the country that year. Recent independent studies have all pointed to humanitarian consequences of the restriction as a result of disruption in humanitarian operations and withholding of funding. Many NGOs with large life-saving operations were forced to forgo DFID funding. There is however a substantial body of opinion within the assistance community that the restriction has been motivated more by a wider isolationist policy of US and UK rather than genuine concerns over security. Aid actors believe that security can be best handled in the field rather than New York and London. Furthermore, the security restrictions were never imposed in the pre-Taliban era when security risks were by contrast much worse. It may be worth noting that such conditionality does not apply anywhere else even though more aid worker lives have been lost in, for example, Burundi and Angola. Two and a half years on nothing has actually happened to any UK or US national who, despite the security policy, continue to work in the country, but the programmes that DFID do still fund have suffered greatly from their policy.

18. Gender equality conditionality: As a result of Taliban draconian restrictions on women's work, education, movement and dress, probably in no other country have gender and wider issues of women's rights sparked so much debate and international reaction as in Afghanistan. The sad reality however is that it has impacted negatively on the ability of the international assistance community to help enhance the basic rights of Afghan women, children and families. Immense pressure was mounted on donors and aid agencies from domestic constituencies, interest groups like Feminist Majority and Human Rights Special Rapporteurs alike advocating that humanitarian assistance to the country should be reduced to only life-saving spheres.

19. Given the lack of other policy instruments, humanitarian assistance has thus become the primary, if not the only, tool to fight gender 'discrimination' in the country. As a result massive politicisation in the form of ill-informed conditionalities by donors and aid agencies has ensued. For example, WFP, the largest food aid provider, made its food aid beyond life-saving spheres conditional upon Taliban's change of policy and practice to respond favourably to UN appeals on basic rights for women. *'With strict programme conditions, set from Rome, on gender equality at both the project participation level as well as beneficiary level various (food aid) programmes have been curtailed or restricted because of the inability to fulfil Rome's conditions.* (Wiles, et al 1999). The losers were of course Afghan women and their families.

20. To meet donors' conditions and their own ideological convictions, some humanitarians have also begun to work on changing the deep-rooted and long-held practices related to gender that pre-date Taliban, despite their short-term and project-based frames for humanitarian action.. Many perceive such ambitions at best naïve and at worst as an attempt

for ethical colonization. The new interventionist humanitarianism not only deprived many of badly needed assistance but also intensified tensions between Taliban and the assistance actors and between the latter and the Afghan recipients.

21. Development, life-sustaining & capacity building conditionality: Donors have continued to withhold development assistance to Afghanistan on the basis of Taliban illegitimacy and their discriminatory policies and the continuation of conflict. In practice, this conditionality has forced a shift of focus away from state to community structures, from long-term development to short-term palliative assistance, from engagement for capacity building of the state welfare functions to confrontational disengagement. Many donors including UK and US have ruled that all forms of capacity building of state welfare institutions should be avoided for its associated issues of legitimacy and resource transfer. This conditionality was further expanded by politically motivated life-saving and life-sustaining distinction despite the fact that in Afghanistan such a distinction has never been meaningful in terms of aid programming.

22. While donors' political concern vis-à-vis engagement with an illegitimate authority is understandable to many, what is of concern is that such a policy restricts the capacity of the international assistance community to adequately meet even the short-term goals of life saving. This flies in the face of received wisdom that given the length of the conflict which has ensured a progressive degradation of human and physical infrastructure and intensified institutional crisis, humanitarian needs cannot be adequately met by short-term, localised, project-specific and relief focussed interventions (Leader 2000). By common consent, the assistance community may be able to save the lives of Afghan children, of whom one out four dies before the age of five and 85,000 die each year from diarrhea, if they were able to receive unconditional humanitarian resources and allowed to work with the public health authorities in a principled manner. What is needed is an acceptance from donors that it is possible to negotiate for principled goals with 'unprincipled people', or those who have different principles and work with the state structures in Taliban controlled areas in a principled way. However, despite this reality, many donors in the current foreign policy context find it hard to admit it. (Leader 2000)

23. It is not surprising to see why the above conditionalities have not produced the changes the donors have wished for, given a myriad of factors, notably the fact that the warring parties rely on war economy and do not need to seek conventional legitimacy. However, what is surprising to see is that some key donors continue to cling to conditionalities against the prevailing understanding that conditionalities do not work and that they have humanitarian consequences.

Fourth, key to a change in the current sad state of affairs is establishing systemic accountability.

24. As a concluding remark, it seems that from any perspective, the global governance system will prove to be ethically unjustifiable and practically impotent in dealing with Afghanistan crisis, if it does not itself uphold ethical accountability.

25. Foreign policy must be held accountable in terms of its strategic assessment, response, and consequences of its political actions or inaction, not only with regard to domestic constituencies but also towards the Afghan public as legitimate members of the global family. It should account for the consequences of not using its political and economic muscles to address the foreign dimensions of the conflict in Afghanistan; it should be answerable for the consequences of undermining the efforts of UN and the international community at large. While the Afghan public does understand and sympathise with the concerns of the international community, it has no control over what causes and sustains such concerns. Afghans can legitimately expect the world community not to act irresponsibly in a

way that will add to the miseries of the already oppressed nation. Strategic withdrawal, containment policy and a one-sided arms embargo are only a few examples of irresponsible actions.

26. Despite pressure from the foreign policy, international human rights machinery must become more accountable so that it can act with one-standard in protection and promotion of human rights of Afghans. Putting an end to the climate of impunity so that the warring parties account for their inhumane abuses would prove more effective strategically than aid conditionalities.

27. Finally, unaccountability is a systemic feature of the aid system, where donors get away with the humanitarian consequences of politicisation and conditionality. While some decisions have further exacerbated humanitarian situations, it is not a common practice that donors account for such decisions officially. Humanitarian agencies do not account for their unprincipled actions either, as long as they are fulfilling donors' conditions and meeting their narrow institutional interests. One cannot help thinking of the growing need for establishment of an aid ombudsperson and an aid court to listen to Afghans' untold stories about how the current humanitarianism fails them.

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