

Kosovo : drawing lessons from a disaster

François Grünewald and **Véronique de Geoffroy**, Groupe URD, *RRN Newsletter*, November 1999

The earthquakes in Turkey and Taiwan and the crisis in East Timor should not distract from evaluating how the latest Balkan crisis has been managed. Two issues stand out: the weakness of the international aid community's early warning system, which was prepared neither for the flight nor rapid return of the Kosovars, and the changes taking place in the humanitarian landscape. Indeed new actors, notably the army and the business community (sometimes acting in symbiosis) are filling in the gaps in relief and reconstruction left by the traditional aid providers. This raises ethical questions and creates new practical problems in the already complex institutional equations at field level.

The military option and its 'no NATO casualties' approach is itself a major subject that cannot be treated here. But the post-mortem of the international response to Kosovo raises other questions. For example, the confusion of roles between civilian and military actors. This is brought about by the desire of NATO member states to legitimise their action in the eye of public opinion. Their armies need images of a 'clean', technological war and of positive action: what better than the provision of humanitarian assistance to populations in need. The argument used has been that of the superior logistical capacity of the military which therefore was better placed to respond. An evaluation of this must consider questions of principles as much as of operational effectiveness and efficiency.

The Impact on Albania

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In this type of operation, coordination between actors is essential. But when the intervention of civil and military, national and international actors is driven, in reality, by a predominantly bilateral approach there are bound to be contradictions. An intervention that on the surface is multilateral but that in fact promotes national interests through the massive deployment of national army units (visibility of national action; a hoped for return on-investment through business contracts) undermines the nature and 'united nations' response.

UNHCR character itself of a has been strongly criticised for its weak management at the beginning of the crisis. Rut establishing a 'French camp' here, an 'American camp' there and a 'German' one further up the road renders all coordination impossible. It also generated an at times absurd competition of which the Albanian countryside still shows traces. UNHCR could legitimately throw the ball back to the major donors thus:

why did you not respond to our urgent appeal of December 1998 which would have allowed for better preparation in case of an emergency?

In Albania, over 60 per cent of refugees were hosted by Albanian families, yet many camps were constructed by the military or by expensive private business companies in anticipation of a larger influx that never took place. And what further bad luck for the camp constructors when the Kosovar refugees returned more quickly than anticipated! Between April and June 1999 the real humanitarian priorities could better have been addressed by supporting the Kosovars and their Albanian host families rather than by the construction of camps. But this would have required a more complex and refined response, less visible and less 'media-friendly', which would have been difficult to conceive.

Such an approach would demand creativity and flexibility rather than heavy transport facilities and grand logistics.

As with the multi-donor Rwanda evaluation of 1996, it is once again necessary to question critically the proclaimed logistical efficiency of the army. What is its real cost? For every soldier that digs a latrine, for example, the number of additional personnel to uphold the chain of command and provide security is considerable. Contrary to the actions of NGOs, which have learned to work with limited resources, military logistics consumes resources with great appetite. In addition, humanitarian aid agencies have operated with much greater financial transparency for some years now, but when will we be told the cost of the allied shelter operation — essential information for any evaluation? This is not a cynical question given that there are increasing humanitarian needs to diminishing resources.

There is also the aberration of international NGOs pushing aside local NGOs, only to be pushed aside themselves by the so-called international military contingents. In Albania, the international community's rush to the refugees resulted in little consultation with local actors who were keen to collaborate and who had started to mobilise before the failure of the Rambouillet talks. In such a fragile society, where free association is still very much in its infancy after decades of authoritarian rule by Herver Hoxja, there was a major opportunity to build capacity in civil society; a missed opportunity. In addition, most humanitarian agencies very quickly left Albania for Kosovo; the NGOs, too, still have a lot to learn.

Added Tragedy in Kosovo

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The need to accelerate preparedness for the autumn and winter in Kosovo was apparent last April (1999). Months later the international community is still far from providing its target of adequate winter shelter, and the Kosovan intervention is marred by similar difficulties to those experienced in Albania. First of all, non-fulfilled promises of aid have delayed the dynamics of reconstruction. Many returnees reported in September that if international actors had been forthcoming in their promises they would already have rebuilt their winter shelter — relying on the extraordinary inventiveness that has aided their survival since 1989. Under present circumstances the first autumn rain has found them taking cover under plastic sheeting. Here, too, the carving up of Kosovo into a 'German' 'French', 'Italian', 'American' and 'British' zone has facilitated the creation of 'bilateral zones of concentration' which visibly affect the deployment of the military, of NGOs, of private enterprise and of bilateral donor field representatives. Under such a set up, maintaining coherent international action and a spirit of 'multilateralism' — so vital for a divided and bruised Kosovo — has proved a lost cause from the beginning.

The structure set up by the UN is itself badly affected by lack of internal coherence between its 'four pillars' (emergency aid, civil administration, justice and elections, and reconstruction), and by the competition between UN agencies and different departments of the European Commission. In addition, the emergency agencies, many of which are aware of the importance of positioning themselves in the rehabilitation market, wonder whether it is most opportune to seek funding from ECHO or from the European Reconstruction agency. Surprisingly, the latter has established itself in Saloniki, in Greece, and not in or near Kosovo (a strange gift to the Greeks from the European taxpayers). One cannot but wonder whether its programmes will be affected by the same distortions and prejudices that have so often characterised the UN's technical assistance programmes for Ethiopia and the former Soviet republics.

The armies, on their side, have learned the lessons from Bosnia (we are told). Presumably this also refers to the practice of private profit enterprises which have positioned themselves for a share of the reconstruction pie through the placement of reservist troops, often without appropriate experience for this type of context, in various administrations including the UN and EC. Are we moving toward a totally distorted game of 'getting marketshare' wherein national economic interests take precedence over the real reconstruction needs of a country? The spirit of true humanitarianism feels very distant.



Groupe URD- La Fontaine des Marins- 26 170 Plaisians- France

Tel : 00 33 (0)4 75 28 29 35

<http://www.urd.org>

In Summary

Waging a war without NATO casualties because bombs are dropped from high altitude, undefeated troops because the enemy is targeted through monitors, and by the picture of a soldier distributing humanitarian aid or of a brigade rebuilding houses, make better marketing images for the military than any other action. But is this what taxpayers are asked to maintain an army for? Or is it that Western armies are lost in a world without classical wars and clashes of ideology, looking for a new justification for their existence and new training grounds safely removed from the dangers of the front?

On the other hand we should not naively be against the military. The evaluation of the response to Hurricane Mitch in Central America demonstrated the crucial role that military experts and civil defence units played in providing relief at the moment of most acute emergency. Similarly, police people have shown their usefulness in the creation of new justice and law and order institutions in other countries and regions. From the Balkans to East Timor, maintaining law and order and providing security and protection for civilian populations are fundamental services that are way out of the competency of humanitarian agencies. It is there that the military have a role to play.

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NGOs feel threatened by these developments. So too do other humanitarian actors like the Red Cross and UNHCR. These organisations too are setting out to evaluate the international management of the Kosovo crisis. They too are concerned about the eroding effect these national games, with armies and private business companies, have had on one of the positive attributes of humanity: non-politically motivated help to those in need. Responses to Afghanistan, East Timor, Sierra Leone and Kosovo have been selective and unequal. Should we, confronted by these geo-strategic and economic considerations, dismiss our ethical imperatives — those that are the long-term guarantors of the purpose and acceptability of humanitarian action. Henry Dunant, founder of the Red Cross, certainly turns in his grave.

