

## Views from the Field

*Hugo Slim*

**H**ugo Slim is currently a Chief Scholar at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. He holds a MA in Theology from Oxford University and a PhD in Humanitarian Ethics from Oxford Brookes University. Before joining the Centre, he was Reader in International Humanitarianism at Oxford Brookes University (1994-2003) where he led the Masters Programme in Development Practice. Between 1983 and 1994, he worked for Save the Children UK and the United Nations in Morocco, Sudan, Ethiopia and the Palestinian Territories. He has published widely on various aspects of humanitarian action in war and is an International Adviser to the British Red Cross, a Patron of Merlin and an Academic Adviser to the Aegis Trust for the Prevention of Genocide. Dr. Slim visited the Fletcher School in February and delivered a talk entitled “Religiously Killing Civilians,” in which he engaged students and faculty in a discussion about faith, religious extremism, and the death of the “civilian” category. PRAXIS had an opportunity to interview Dr. Slim about developments in the humanitarian field of interest to our readers.

**The UN recently decided that the violence in Darfur did not meet the standard of genocide and the United States disagrees. What implication does this debate over labels have for the humanitarian aid community and what should be done? What are your thoughts on that?**

My first thought is that I am really glad to see international discussion of these things because if I think back, even ten years before Rwanda there really was not a real effort internationally and certainly not at very high levels like the Security Council to even engage in labels or get really serious about international law and talk about either crimes against humanity, grave breaches to the Geneva Conventions, or genocide.

So, I really welcome the fact that at such a high political level there is a really important discussion now about the nature and extent of the violence that is taking place in a place like Darfur. This means we are not able to do the much worse thing, which would be to push it under the carpet or cover it with a blanket term like “ancient tribal hatreds” which used to happen in Bosnia for example. I would much rather get in a discussion over labels than use a blanket term to hide the problem or to distance it or marginalize it. I think having said that, though, the trouble with the discussion of labels and particularly with lawyers is that it can become abstract, overly precise and a massive diversion. For example, it is very worrying to see the Sudanese foreign minister’s response who obviously heard in

advance that the violence in Darfur was not going to be called genocide and so was able to come out with all diplomatic guns blazing to say “look, you see, the UN international legal authorities have said that we are not doing genocide.” The trouble is, of course, that he was then able to dodge the question about what the commission did say, which was that extensive crimes against humanity have probably been committed. So, the trouble is you can play labels off each other. That is why I think it is important to focus on descriptions of the violence, its orchestration, implementation and effects.

**Do you think that this happened because of Rwanda?**

Yes, I have no doubt. I have no doubt that there is a new political consciousness around the United Nations, around governments, around a much more highly mobilized and activist civil society that has pushed the agenda up to focus on Africa in the last 10 years as well. The whole question of civilian suffering has really risen up the agenda at the United Nations and in the public mind since Rwanda and Bosnia. And I think the whole international community realized after Rwanda that they could not go on describing people’s suffering in war in patronizing and emotive terms that dismissed it as “what people in Africa always do” or “this is what the Balkans have been like for hundreds of years.” Instead, after recognizing the brutal intent behind the violence in Rwanda and elsewhere, politicians now tend to specify in moral and legal terms the nature of violence and suffering in war. Again, if I think back to 20 years ago, we didn’t use the term “civilian” much when talking about wars and famines. We just talked about disease, death and “beneficiaries”. Euphemistic terms can be deeply de-politicizing, whether you are talking about beneficiaries or affected populations. This is the language of bureaucracy. It is not a politicized language of pain, violence and intent. I think it is good that we have rediscovered a more politicized, legal and unambiguous moral language to talk about types of violence, types of suffering, types of responsibility. Yes, I think you can talk about a post-Rwanda consciousness at all levels of international politics. The other thing to add on that is the other reason that we can talk about these things in more precise, legal, political terms is that the Cold War is over. In the old days, if you wanted to have a discussion about a war in the United Nations you could not talk easily of victims, atrocities and intent because most states around the table were supporting one side or another.

**Do you think that once there is this greater use of labeling that will actually provide more impetus for action or allow the military to intervene?**

This is the tragedy, of course—that knowing what is going on does not necessarily lead to stopping it. I think better descriptions can apply pressure in qualitative ways but even if it is legally and morally clear what is happening and what needs to stop happening, it is often politically extremely problematic to stop it. That is where I criticize a lot of NGO activists who scream and shout about Darfur in a “something must be done” rhetoric demanding euphemisms like “robust action.” We know that at the end of the day if we are really going to stop those kinds of atrocities, we need military invasion. And we also know that military invasion particularly by a Western force, an American force, in Darfur would just be a political

nightmare and it could set in train a much wider regional war that could last 10-15 years. So the political solutions are not going to be easy even though the labels have become clearer. I think there is tendency to think that just because the labels are clearer, the politics have become clearer. But I have great sympathy for the U.S. government and the British government and others who cannot actually intervene in this robust way. Another point I just want to make is that while part of the international community has taken up these labels in earnest, a large part has not. I think there are important political powers, whether the Arab League, China or the Organization of Islamic countries who are not interested in sharing and using these precise descriptions of atrocity in war. By contrast, the renewed African Union has become a lot stronger on this—particularly in Darfur, which they are addressing as aggressively as they can. But a lot of other political powers are not using this kind of political language. They are not interested. I think that is a real problem. It is a challenge that they have to address or one which their citizens need to make them address.

**This sort of ties in to our next question because you were talking about the African Union. What is the stance that you would take or the line you would take between universalist verses relativist conceptions of human rights, because this case brings up that tension. Also, based on that answer, what does it mean for enforcing human rights internationally? Who decides the magnitude of human rights violations and against whose standards are they measured?**

It is a really important and difficult question. It is my instinct to say two things. First of all, the way the global human rights project is structured internationally today generally is very Western dominated. The architecture and style is very Western in the way that it emanates from New York, Geneva, London, etc. But the other thing I want to say is that I am really much more of a universalist. The fact is that you can have a project that is Western managed and pontificated, but the people who actually shed blood for their rights, or the rights of others, and have done so over the last 100 years or more are actually oppressed people not western experts. It is poor people who tend to suffer when they stand up and struggle for their rights. They are usually people in Africa, Asia, or Latin America—not the west. Millions of people have died for human rights. In Arab countries, in Eastern Europe and throughout Latin America. So, I suppose I want to say that their commitment and their sacrifice for human rights in affect proves that they are universal. Yet, I do think that one can be relativist on some rights. One can discuss and shape rights on some the things, like the finer points of gender rights and economic rights where there is room for difference without violating basic rights. And some western ideas of rights are perhaps misguided. For example, some western ideas of women's rights have overlooked a woman's right to motherhood and the joy of motherhood and instead have become obsessed with women's rights to work. Western women's rights tend to deny motherhood and to treat child bearing and child raising as a logistical problem rather than a massive emotional and spiritual part of life.

And so I think there are a certain core values that people struggle and die for all around the world, which proves they are universal. The fact that they are talked about as "rights" today is a legacy of the Enlightenment. But these values were al-

ways called something and people were always dying for them and trying to stand up for them. But, there is some negotiation to be had at the margins of these rights. In this country now you have the questions like “Gay Marriage.” Is gay marriage a right, a human right? President Bush doesn’t want to say that it is nor do the Ayatollahs in Iran, the Pope in Rome or many Anglicans in Africa. So there is negotiation around the core. But that does not mean that there are no universal rights.

**In one of your articles you said that intervention or aid should be provided in proportion to the violation of rights. Who determines what the crime is or what the magnitude of the human rights violation is within an NGO or within a military intervention? How does the magnitude of human rights violations get determined? I think you were saying that humanitarian organizations or military intervention should act in proportion to need, but how does that need get determined?**

Yes, I see, so how to quantify?

**Yes, exactly, when situations are so different.**

Yes, very good point. Of course the tsunami raises it big time perhaps.

It’s interesting because the destruction of the tsunami has obviously been massive and widespread in terms of destruction of human life, and destruction overall. The final death toll has been more than 200,000, which is terrible. I remember working as an aid worker after the Bangladesh cyclone in 1991, which I think killed 150,000 but which did not receive anything like the aid the tsunami has received. So there are these massive discrepancies between disasters and they are hard to account for. It is obvious when you look at humanitarian budgets that money follows a political geography of some kind and not a moral geography based on need. The money doesn’t follow needs simply. The tsunami is a massive example of seemingly disproportionate giving or expenditure when compared to other crises. But I don’t know how we can really quantify and cost need equally across the globe. I think there is room for greater fairness. It would be good if something could come out of this tsunami and it will be interesting to see what former President Clinton does in his new role. How will he make sense of the fact there has been so much money given? And is he politically able to get creative and spread that money over time and space so as to meet other current and future needs more fairly around the world? But, I am not answering your question...

**Do you think that there is something that the aid community can do to mobilize support for some of the lesser known issues or things that garner less attention but are great in magnitude as well?**

This is really an old and perennial problem on how you engage people with all problems of the world fairly and equally at the same time. It may well be impossible. Because there is no doubt that there are some things that people identify with more in some disasters than others.

The challenge is to help people build relationships with people they don’t know and who are suffering in a war for example. How one then maintains and informs that relationship over the long term is the challenge. This seems to happen in

some places and in some moments, but it doesn't seem to happen all over the world and in every moment. I suppose that is why one would have a global government to try to fairly and rationally share resources. But the UN is not in the position to do that as an organization of member states with so many different interests and positions and more likely to engage in certain emergencies over others.

But we try and make this fairness happen at country level. A country like the USA with a large tax base (or a potentially large tax base) tries to meet needs fairly. You would have thought that a government with all the money the US has could distribute it fairly according to need but you still have problems of poverty and you still have gaps. So it would be at the global level.

**Finally, relating to some of your writings on neutrality and the general humanitarian principles, can you talk a little about how they may have shifted since Iraq and Afghanistan? With the increasing coordination of humanitarian efforts with military intervention, what challenges do humanitarian aid workers face now and what can they do about it?**

My view, probably an unpopular one to take, is that these are not new challenges—they are just quite big versions of typical challenges. Because humanitarians always are deeply challenged by difficult tripartite relationships between their own agencies, the people fighting the war and the civilian populations they are trying to reach. This is always a highly politicized and constricting triangle and the idea that we have suddenly just discovered politicization in the last few years when our governments, the British and the Americans, are the belligerents is extraordinarily un-historical. Even if you look at the situation in Northern Uganda—indeed anywhere where there is an insurgency or counter insurgency operation—you get people trying to manipulate civilian populations and aid resources in their own war interests. The military-humanitarian situation in Northern Uganda is as politicized or militarized as anything in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Ugandan government has put people into protected villages where it does not protect them very well when they are in them and it makes sure that humanitarian agencies are bound to work within this strategy which is the counter-insurgency strategy of the Ugandan government. So military-humanitarian dilemmas are routine not exceptional and always have been.

**So you don't think there is a shift where the humanitarian agent is no longer seen as separate from the belligerent?**

No, because I think it often happens. I think if you are the LRA in Northern Uganda, you have no doubt that the humanitarians are on the side of the Ugandan government because they are working within their counter-insurgency strategy and supporting the Ugandan military approach. Very seldom is there a defined and easy "humanitarian space" that people dream of and have conferences about. So I don't think there is any great new challenge today. I think it is the old challenge but with the British and American agencies now facing up to the fact that their governments are now openly belligerents again. It is not a great new crisis and maybe British and American agencies need to find ways to step back a bit and empower others more.