

Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid

Dr. Christian Bartolf

“Humanitarian principles define what humanitarian aid is: delivering life-saving assistance to those in need, without any adverse distinction. They distinguish humanitarian aid from other activities, for example those of political, religious, ideological or military nature. Adherence to the humanitarian principles facilitates access and acceptance, and helps humanitarian workers carry out their work.”¹

“The principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence are fundamental to humanitarian action.

Humanity means that human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found, with particular attention to the most vulnerable.

Neutrality means that humanitarian aid must not favour any side in an armed conflict or other dispute.

Impartiality means that humanitarian aid must be provided solely on the basis of need, without discrimination.

Independence means the autonomy of humanitarian objectives from political, economic, military or other objectives.”

“The overriding objectives of humanitarian action, as enshrined in the Consensus, are:

- Preserving life
- Preventing and alleviating suffering

Helping to maintain human dignity in the face of natural hazards and human-induced disasters.”²

Let us read the first three points of “The humanitarian challenge” of the “European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid”³:

“1. Humanitarian aid is a fundamental expression of the universal value of solidarity between people and a moral imperative.

2. Humanitarian crises include both man-made and natural disasters. Their impact is increasingly severe, linked to a number of factors, such as the changing nature of conflict, climate change, increasing competition for access to energy and natural resources, extreme poverty, poor governance and situations of fragility. The main victims are civilians, often the poorest and most vulnerable among them, mainly living in developing countries.

Humanitarian crises have led to large numbers of displaced people, both refugees and internally displaced persons.

3. Humanitarian actors today face a number of major challenges. There has been an increasing tendency for International Law, including International Humanitarian Law, Human Rights Law and Refugee Law, to be ignored or blatantly violated. The ‘humanitarian space’ that is needed to ensure access to vulnerable populations and the safety and security of humanitarian workers must be preserved as essential preconditions for the delivery of humanitarian aid [...]”

Humanitarian Aid dates back to the 19th century when during the beginning of the Crimean War in 1854 Florence Nightingale and her team of 38 nurses arrived at Barracks Hospital of Scutari where there were thousands of sick and wounded soldiers. Typhus, typhoid, cholera and dysentery were common in the army hospitals. Nightingale and her team established a kitchen, laundry and increased hygiene. At last, the General Hospital at Scutari was able to care for 6,000 patients. The great Gandhi - who himself had been a stretcher-bearer in an Indian Ambulance Corps during the Second Boer War - highlighted Florence Nightingale⁴:

“There was no preparation. And just as in the Boer War, so in the Crimean War, too, they committed blunders in the beginning and suffered a crushing defeat. Fifty years ago, the various facilities for nursing the wounded which are available today did not exist. People did not come out to render aid in large numbers as they do now. Surgery was not as efficacious then as it is today. There were in those days very few men who considered it an act of mercy and merit to succour the wounded. It was at such a time that this lady, Florence Nightingale, came upon the scene and did good work worthy of an angel descended from heaven. She was heart-stricken to learn of the sufferings of the soldiers. Born of a noble and rich family, she gave up her life of ease and comfort and set out to nurse the wounded and the ailing, followed by many other ladies. She left her home on October 21, 1854. [...]”

“[...] It is said that she did an amount of work which big and strong men were unable to do. She used to work nearly twenty hours, day and night. When the women working under her went to sleep, she, lamp in hand, went out alone at midnight to the patients' bedside, comforted them, and herself gave them whatever food and other things were necessary. She was not afraid of going even to the battle-front, and did not know what fear was. She feared only God. Knowing that one has to die some day or other, she readily bore whatever hardships were necessary in order to alleviate the sufferings of others.

This lady remained single all her life, which she spent in such good work. It is said that, when she died, thousands of soldiers wept bitterly like little children, as though they had lost their own mother.”

Henri Dunant, a Swiss businessman and social activist, who upon seeing the sheer destruction and inhumane abandonment of wounded soldiers from the Battle of Solferino in June 1859, began a relief response. Despite little to no experience as a medical physician, Dunant worked alongside local volunteers to assist the wounded soldiers from all warring parties, including Austrian, Italian and French casualties, in any way he could including the provision of food, water, and medical supplies. His graphic account of the immense suffering he witnessed, written in his book “A Memory of Solferino” (1862), became a foundational text to modern humanitarianism⁵: “The 1864 Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field, signed 150 years ago, was the founding text of contemporary international humanitarian law.”⁶

¹ “European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. Humanitarian Principles.”

[European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO)]
https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/who/humanitarian-principles_en

² “European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid.”

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by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO)]
https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/who/european-consensus_en

³ Joint Statement by the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission (2008/C 25/01; Official Journal of the European Union, 30 January 2008)

[European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations.

by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO)]

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1431445468547&uri=CELEX%3A42008X0130%2801%29>

⁴ Indian Opinion, 9 September 1905, in: The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, vol. 5, pp. 61 f.

https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/cwmg_volume_thumbview/NQ==#page/94/mode/2up

⁵ Hans Haug: Humanity for All. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Chapter III. The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. [Henry Dunant Institute], Berne, Stuttgart, Vienna: Haupt, 1993, p. 443

<https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-2116-03.pdf>

⁶ The 1864 Geneva Convention [International Committee of the Red Cross]

<https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/treaty/geneva-convention-1864.htm>