KILLING FOR OUR BELIEFS

Culpable Nonviolence

The moral ambiguity of pacifism

BY ERNIE REGEHR

The toughest thing about nonviolence is meeting its victims — like the ones I visited recently in southern Sudan.

As our small international assessment team's single-engine plane wove and shuddered its final descent to the grass airstrip, we could already see people from the internally displaced persons (IDP) camp that was our destination making their way to the edge of the strip. The unkempt grass that thrashed and tangled in the landing gear brought us to a quick stop, the engine was cut, the door opened, and we stepped down the few steps, confronted above all else with utter quiet. There was no wind, and especially there were no voices, even though scores of people had by now moved onto the grass strip. There was none of the excited chatter or murmuring that you would expect from such an assembled crowd come to see the far from usual arrival of foreign visitors. They stood tall and motionless, some without clothes, all bones and angular, shielding the sun with their hands. The quiet scene of long grass and thatched huts in the distance gave the scene a romantic flare, but the silence of those assembled owed to one simple reality — an energy-sapping hunger so thorough and debilitating as to extinguish all casual conversation and certainly all excitement.

The world knows them as IDPs; they know themselves as abandoned by the world, friends and enemies alike. In flight from their burned homes and bombed villages in Western Upper Nile, they had crossed the swamps of the Nile delta to neighbouring Bahr El Gazal, where they were now ignored and trying to survive on nutritionless water lilies and a few fish from the swamps.

So there we now also stood silent, in our Tilley Endurables and sturdy shoes, water bottles holstered and ready at our belts. Slowly, one of the elders detached himself from the onlookers and welcomed us with a slight bow and then handshakes. We explained that we would find it useful, for our subsequent reporting back to the United Nations food relief program, and more broadly to churches and NGOs in the international community, to take a tour of the camp and observe the conditions first-hand. A surprising number of those we spoke to on our tour were university-educated — they had been forced to flee Juba or one of the other larger urban centres and return to their home region where life was supposed to be safer away from the main action of Sudan's decades-long war. Most often they asked, "Why isn't the Christian West helping us?" Were they, the southern Sudanese, not Christians too? In this particular IDP camp they happened to be mostly Presbyterians. The Nuer of Upper Nile province were the focus of Presbyterian

missions, and they now found themselves exiled among the Anglican or Catholic Dinka of Bahr El Gazal. How could the world abandon them so? We must go home and immediately, some told us, urge the United States, or the UN, or whoever could or would, to send in military forces to protect those who have been denied all protection.

In fact, southern Sudan is the textbook on the kinds of extraordinary, extreme circumstances that are widely regarded as warranting military intervention to protect people in great peril. The Canadian-sponsored International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) sets the intervention bar very high. In its 2001 report, entitled *The Responsibility to Protect*, the ICISS says that intervention is to be contemplated only in circumstances of irreparable harm to people in the form of "large scale loss of life, actual or apprehended," or "large scale 'ethnic cleansing,'" including "forced expulsions" — conditions that apply to very few cases, but that have existed in Sudan for most of the past two decades. Two million people are dead, after all, and several millions more are displaced.

Furthermore, the right kind of UN-sanctioned military intervention in Sudan would probably work in the sense that it would bring enormous relief to southern Sudanese, with minimal risk to the interveners or little risk of escalating the fighting. Government of Sudan bombing of civilians and the forced expulsion of people from their homes are two prominent features of the war in the south. The bombing, the purpose of which is to terrorize the civilian population, is carried out by high- but slow-flying turboprop aircraft, delivering crude bombs, sometimes simple drums of gasoline with a lighted wick, airborne molotov cocktails kicked out of the tailgate. Declaring and enforcing a southern no-fly-zone, with UN relief flights the only exception, would stop the bombing. A very few high-speed fighter/patrol aircraft could handle the enforcement. An immediate source of danger and terror to civilians in the south would be eliminated and the numbers of displaced radically reduced — in other words, the humanitarian payoff would be huge and immediate.

When the Sudanese IDPs asked why the churches were not calling for immediate military intervention to stop the bombing and expulsions, one articulate young man, discovering that I was a Mennonite, pressed the point even harder. Mennonites, he argued, have a reputation for compassion and peacemaking, and if they really were for putting people first, wouldn't they be leading the call for just such relief? Military intervention to protect those who are utterly without protection would surely be a supreme act of compassion, he challenged. I explained that our refusal to call for military protection was not evidence of callous indifference, but was part of a principled commitment to nonviolence. He wasn't impressed. How, he asked (as I knew he would as soon as I had uttered my stock answer), is the principle of nonviolence honoured by the international community's refusal to lift a single finger against ceaseless, egregious violence directed at unarmed and unprotected people in southern Sudan?

The failure of the international community to bring protection to the vulnerable of Sudan makes them, in their own eyes and experience, victims of inaction — and for them, whether that inaction is the product of indifference or of a principled commitment against military intervention amounts to the same thing.

That day in the Bahr El Gazal IDP camp, further questioning was ducked when we came upon a scene of unusual activity and commotion. It was the ever-expanding field designated as the graveyard, with small crosses made of twigs and sticks marking the mounded graves. At the edge of a row of graves there was more digging — constant digging, we learned, to accommodate the arrivals. We approached and then held back when we saw three new shallow holes being excavated. Waiting alongside were three wrapped corpses surrounded by family survivors wailing in animated mourning.

We should not have been shocked; we could all do the math. If war in Sudan has claimed more than two million lives since 1983, that comes to about 100,000 per year, and that's 2,000 per week and 300 a day. In other words, scenes like the one we now saw were being repeated over and over again each and every day around the country. After September 11, 2001, the New York *Times* ran personal accounts of the victims, at least momentarily rescuing all those who had died from anonymity, putting a face on the statistic, giving public acknowledgment to loss. For the victims of Sudan to be similarly acknowledged it would take 300 photos and brief biographies each and every day for the next twenty years. And that would do it only if the killing stopped today — which it won't.

It is obvious that the world never should have let the Sudan conflict come to this. Perverse priorities see the "developed" world spend many times more on military prowess than on conflict prevention. A principled commitment to nonviolence needs to focus above all on changing political and thus spending priorities away from perfecting the means of destruction to building social and economic conditions conducive to sustainable peace.

The most effective, realistic nonmilitary alternative to armed conflict and military intervention is prevention. And prevention of war or armed conflict involves two elements. In the first instance, it requires attention to the economic, political, social and environmental conditions that are at the root of the conflict. That in turn requires a capacity for early warning and, more important, early action to respond to conflicts when they are still political and social conflicts, not yet turned violent, and more amenable to peaceful resolution. In other words, it means building conditions conducive to sustainable peace through equitable economic development, democracy, human rights and environmental protection, and enhancing the institutions for the early detection and peaceful resolution of conflict.

Another and more immediately relevant element of war and violence prevention is disarmament: limiting the capacity for organized violence and the militarization of political conflict. That means especially preventing the flow of arms into regions of political tension and developing security arrangements that are based on mutual interests, common and human security, regional cooperation and nonaggression, rather than on competitive power balances.

If the world gets its priorities straight and takes effective preventive action, it never *needs* to come down to a choice between abandoning people in peril and military intervention, but that is not to say that it never does. The circumstances of present-day Sudan could have been avoided, but they weren't, and for those who live the consequences of that failure it is not persuasive to focus on what might have been.

The devil's choice, the choice between military action and abandonment, is reproduced with tragic consistency. Deeply rooted and untenable social and economic inequities are denied or ignored until, finally, the aggrieved are persuaded they have no option but to strike back or out, aided by ready access to an abundant global supply of small arms. Local authorities, in turn, respond with ever harsher suppression of dissent, also aided by an array of arms provided by industrial states whose main concern is their own strategic interests abroad and job creation at home. Then, as the crises escalate and finally come to international attention, the options for effective action have dramatically narrowed. Prevention by then has failed. Civilian humanitarian responses are rendered risky, if not impossible, by virtue of the state of war. The only option that presents itself to the international community is military intervention.

And the international community, for all its accumulated military capacity, very rarely actually uses this capacity for humanitarian ends — and even more rarely uses it successfully for that purpose. The international community collectively shows no eagerness for military engagement, and the list of places where people have lived their lives in the persistent peril of endless war, in what they experience as abandonment — Sudan, Angola, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Burundi — goes on and on. Rwanda is unique only in its extremes of both vulnerability and abandonment. In those cases where special interests do lead to intervention, like Kosovo or Afghanistan or Iraq, the protection of civilians forms the rhetorical rationale only sometimes and the real objective almost never. Much of that military intervention produces still more destruction, political change that is not sustainable, and a further worsening of social and economic conditions without addressing the true sources of conflict — and so the war cycle continues. In Iraq, where the US has long nurtured a keen sense of its vital interests, Washington has persisted in war even though the international community was engaged in a credible, even if flawed, alternative, and even although the prewar humanitarian and human rights crises did not rise anywhere near the level that has existed in Sudan for decades.

It has been the compelling mission of the Historic Peace Churches of the Christian tradition, along with the many others committed to principled nonviolence, to try to break into that war cycle and to refuse to add to the violence. But both humility and realism require us to recognize that even these exemplary actions can produce victims — and in Sudan they are produced in large numbers. To eschew the defence of our own interests through war and violence is clearly noble. To refuse to support the resort to protective force when the victims of that refusal are not ourselves but the desperately vulnerable is, at a minimum, an ambiguous virtue.

If the refusal to use force costs lives, it really becomes culpable nonviolence. In that sense, because the decision to refuse the use of force has victims, it needs to be justified just as does the decision to resort to force. Perhaps we need a theological doctrine of just pacifism. The test of nonviolence is violence prevention, not merely violence avoidance. That means not only avoiding our own participation in violence, but also preventing violence that is perpetrated by others against vulnerable people. The dead and displaced of southern Sudan are first and foremost victims of the failure to prevent war, and to regard them as also being victims of a principled commitment to nonviolence is no doubt overly dramatic and unfair. But neither is it fair to the vulnerable of southern Sudan to laud the innocence and virtue of those who would refuse all military intervention on their behalf without other credible means of coming to their protection.

(In the case of Sudan it must at least be acknowledged that, while the war and displacement of people continues, the international community has done much to bring relief food to many of the victims. And for the first time in decades, there is now genuine hope that peace negotiations will soon achieve a credible cease-fire and transitional government.)

In the international world of conflict diplomacy, both action and inaction must be subjected to political, legal and moral accountability. Domestically, a police officer who refuses to take available action to prevent a murder is derelict in his or her duty. So too was the international community derelict when it refused military assistance to the peacekeeping forces in Rwanda on the eve of the genocide there. It is a devil's choice, however, because it is not a simple choice between nonintervention that abandons people to perilous circumstances and military intervention that liberates them. The choice for military intervention, even for explicitly humanitarian purposes, runs the risk and the likelihood that peril will be expanded rather than alleviated.

For states, conceptually if not always practically, a distinction is emerging between the resort to war and the resort to force. The report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty addressed and reframed the issue of military intervention for humanitarian purposes. Instead of its being a question of when the international community has the *right* to intervene in the affairs of a sovereign state, the ICISS identified the question as being when the international community has the *duty* to intervene in the affairs of a sovereign state to protect people in peril. And one of the report's most helpful conclusions is that central to that duty to intervene is the obligation to use means that are in fact designed to protect.

Protection operations that carry out bombing raids from 20,000 feet, risking civilian casualties and the creation of huge streams of refugees to "soften up" the environment so that intervening forces will face the least possible risk, are the equivalent of domestic police, finding a dangerously abusive situation in an urban home, setting up a block away to lob grenades into the home and neighbourhood to eliminate all resistance before entering to help those in peril. Protection operations have as their primary objective the reduction of risk to civilians, not to the intervening forces. As the commission put it, this means placing limits on the way in which force is used: "The operation is not a war to defeat a state but an operation to protect populations in that state from being harassed, persecuted or killed."

Mainstream churches that have traditionally relied on the doctrine of "just war" to discern whether the resort to force is accepted in certain circumstances have come to much the same position — the route to that position was the response to nuclear weapons and the nuclear-use doctrines articulated by the Reagan Administration in the United States in the 1980s. These churches, in effect, became nuclear pacifists. They concluded that the just war criteria of proportionality and of not targeting civilians could never be met with nuclear weapons. Hence nuclear weapons, Canadian church leaders told Prime Minister Trudeau in 1982, could never be understood as serving God's will. Their production, possession or use, under any circumstances, was unacceptable.

Similar conclusions are being drawn about the conduct of modern war. Modern war inevitably visits extraordinary destruction on civilians; indeed, in most modern wars civilian casualties are much higher than military casualties. Even in those wars in which state-of-the-art precision-guided munitions are used, they are frequently used to disable civilian infrastructure (electric power generating stations, water treatment facilities, transportation hubs and the like). As a result, mainstream and pacifist churches are converging in the understanding that war, by definition, is in violation of essential just war criteria. Hence the idea of the just use of restrained force — relying in international contexts on the model of domestic policing.

The central question is the safety and well-being of those in peril. In the killing fields of southern Sudan, and of the three dozen other wars around the world, people are still being forced to flee their homes and communities. Each day, as best they can, they stop to bury and mourn their dead, and many of those who survive in the midst of that peril experience their lives as utterly abandoned by the human community. For the rest of us, and for those of us who claim the Gospel of Peace, the measure of obedience is less our success in avoiding participation in violence than our engagement in preventing violence against the most vulnerable.

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