Humanitarian Intervention; A Curse or A Blessing?

Turad Senesie,
Peace and Development, PhD Student
Sierra Leone,

Introduction

Advancement of Humanitarian Intervention

One of the fruits of the cold war era has been the determination of people’s rights that has been popularized in the name of “Human Rights”. The concept of human rights gained international focus immediately after the cold war in which states started reflecting on human rights violations and the ultimate threat to international security. After the end of the Second World War and having in place the United Nations, it was hoped that the act of human rights violations would have been a thing of the past. These hopes were quickly misplaced when gross human rights violation were seen in Somalia, Bosnia and especially in Rwanda where in less than 100 days, the Hutus killed about a million Tutsis (Terry 2002:155). Humanitarian Intervention then gained prominence in the 90s with United States assuming the role of the World’s Sole Super Power, fighting against authoritarianism, thus spreading democracy all over the world. But humanitarian intervention has also been at the centre of controversies, instigating public discuss on “the right to protect”. The Principle of Sovereignty prohibits any state, organisation or association from intervening into the internal affairs of another state. Therefore the debates have concentrated on how sovereignty can be restricted, to give authority to the UN or states to enforce military intervention against states engaged in gross human rights violation. But is there any moral justification for the international community to intervene into the affairs of a sovereign state on the grounds of preventing human rights violations? And if so, to what extent can we say humanitarian intervention has saved lives or increased human sufferings? In answering these questions, this article intends to draw the arguments based on regional and states interventions around the globe.

Humanitarian Intervention

Humanitarian intervention as a concept is been viewed from different perspectives and as such has no clear cut definition. This is the confusion that has characterised the operations of humanitarian interventions over the years for which it is difficult to determine whether in its totality it has been a success or failure. It has been defined by various scholars and countries base on different perspectives:

Tonny Brem Knudsen defines humanitarian intervention as the dictatorial or coercive interference in the sphere of jurisdiction of a sovereign state motivated or legitimated by humanitarian concerns.

Bhikhu Parekh says that humanitarian intervention is an act of intervention into the internal affairs of another country with a view to ending the physical suffering caused by the disintegration or gross misuse of authority of the state, and helping to create conditions in which a viable structure of civil authority can emerge.

Adams Robert defines humanitarian intervention as a military intervention in a state without the approval of its authority, and with the purpose of preventing widespread suffering or death among the inhabitants.

According to Martha Finnemore, humanitarian intervention is a "military intervention with the goal of protecting the lives and welfare of foreign civilians".
This scholarly debate on the definition of humanitarian interventions over the years has continued to focus on the use of military interventions as a result of gross human rights violations instigated by dictatorial regims. However, I am of the strongest opinion that humanitarian intervention goes beyound that to include situations of natural desasters and other tragedies that befall a nation. Against this backdrop, I therefore defined humanitarian intervention as thus:

“Humanitarian intervention is the willingness of state(s) to make military options available to respond to either man made or natural disaster/tragedy, hence protecting lives of the citizens and non citizens of the affected country”.

Manmade disaster may take the form of state oppression in which the rights of the citizens are violated and the loss of lives continue to increase on a daily basis, while natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods etc demands military intervention by states especially where affected states lack capacity. In this regard, the question of sovereignty should be ignored in the interest of saving humanity. The value of life in one country must be equal to the value of lives in any other countries. As human beings we owe a responsibility to one another as we are all members of the global community. The tragedy befalling one nation should be the concern of all other nations.

**Humanitarian Intervention in perspectives**

Humanitarian Intervention as perceived is intended to end human suffering in countries faced by gross human right violations and calamities of natural nature. Such interventions have taken place in various countries by the UN, Regional Bodies like NATO, ECOWAS and States; United States, Britain and Tanzania. In determining whether humanitarian intervention is a curse or blessings to the world of nations, this section will compare and contrast the successes and failures of humanitarian intervention around the globe with respect to the intervention of international and regional bodies.

Before the fall of the Soviet Union, humanitarian intervention was almost impossible. This was so because during the cold war, the United States and the Soviet Union were two serious rivals fighting for supremacy. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, United Nations activities in terms of humanitarian intervention were rejuvenated. This coincided with the era when Bosnia and Somalia were on the verge of disintegration in 1992.

In 2008, the foreign policy failed state index ranked Somalia as number one followed by Zimbabwe and Sudan. Somalia was ruled by Said Barre since 1969 to 1991 when he was overthrown by Mohamed Farah Aideed who led the civil war of the United Somalia Congress (USC). The USC split later between two war lords Aideed and Ali Mahdi Mohammed and there was another outbreak of violence across the country. Terrible terrain led to Famine and this made matters worse. Starvation among the populace especially for women and children prompted the UN to intervene in 1992 to ensure food distribution across the country. Before the arrival of the UN, almost 350,000 people have died. A ceasefire between the warring factions was achieved and the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM I) was sanctioned in 1992 by the UN Security Council Resolution 751 with the mandate of monitoring ceasefire and escorts the distribution of humanitarian aid to distribution centres. Insufficent troops on the ground could not stop ceasefire violations and much of aid was stolen by the warring factions. UN security council resolution 775 authorized the deployment of more troops to restore order but never materialized. Sahnoun, head of UN Mission in Somalia who wanted a decentralized UN force in Somalia had several clashed with the then UN secretary general Boutros Boutros Ghali on troop deployment and he resigned. Situation in Somalia deteriorated further and United States came in to rescue the UN.

UNOSOM II was sanctioned in March 1993 by the UN Security Council Resolution 814 with a more robust mandate of peace reinforcement, using all possible means to ensure food distribution. By June 1993, Pakistani Soldiers came under attack as they were inspecting arms cache by the Aideed rebels.
The hunt for Aideed began and there was an all out war in Mogadishu that saw massive civilian and UN deaths. The situation became alarming when the Task Force Rangers in October 1993 was ambushed in Mogadishu resulting in the death of 18 US Rangers. US forces were withdrawn in 1994 living the limited UN forces that were also poorly equipped and ultimately the failure of the UN to secure peace in Somalia onto this present day.

In Bosnia, fighting over territorial boundaries between Muslims, Serbs and Croats continued in the 90s. By the end of 1991, about 200,000 people were killed and 2,000,000 internally displaced. The human catastrophe warranted UN intervention to restore hope for the people of Bosnia. On his way back home from Sarajevo airport after attending peace talks, the Deputy Prime Minister of Bosnian Herzegovina, Hakiji Turajlic was assassinated while onboard UN armored truck. The truck was stopped by Serb gunmen and the Prime Minister was shot. The failure of the UN to protect Truajlic angered the Muslims and there was increased demonstration against the UN. By the end of 1995, ethnic tension in Bosnia resulted in the death of over 7,000 men and children.

The Rwanda genocide is another case against the UN and this keep reminding members of the international community of the UN complacency that resulted in the death of about 1,000,000 Tutsis. The UN with a force of 1,500 forces abandoned the city and the extinction of the Tutsis was only saved by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) rebel whose revolution closed in and ousted the Hutu dominated regime. One would be right to say that the genocide didn’t come as a surprise. This is so because France was seen supporting the Hutu regime against the Tutsis. France believes that Tutsis who were in exile in Uganda, some of whom learned English were bent on destroying French influence over Rwanda. The UN could have even prevented the genocide by stopping France from supplying Arms and ammunitions to the Hutu led government. Here the UN failed in its totality.

Regional bodies in humanitarian interventions have similar report card to that of the United Nations. However, these regional bodies have successes that could only be claimed by proxy. The Sierra Leone and Liberian war in the West Africa Sub Region can be referred to as one of the most brutal civil wars witness in the 21st century. These two countries exhibited human callousness with a difference that resulted in the amputation of men, women and children. Humanitarian intervention in this region was a must and it started with the ECOWAS Military Observer Group (ECOMOG). By 1992, ECOMOG was deployed along the border between Sierra Leone and Liberia to monitor the flow of refugees and weapons.

In Sierra Leone for example President Kabba who was elected in 1996 and was overthrown by the combined forces of rebels and the Sierra Leone military in 1997. This was a blow to the regional body ECOWAS. The military wing ECOMOG was mandated to restore President Kabba in 1998. After the restoration, the number of ECOMOG forces increased to 10,000. Though there was an increased in strength, yet peace could not be achieved. Command structure and varying background of troops on the ground with unclear mandate coupled with indiscipline amongst soldiers were some of the major reasons for the failure of ECOMOG to secure peace and stability in Sierra Leone. The death of Sani Abacha in 1998 rendered ECOMOG powerless as the new Nigerian dispensation was not ready to commit financial resources to the operations in the region.

ECOMOG was then replaced by the UN humanitarian intervention force sanctioned by UN Resolution 1270. Soon after their arrival, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels abducted hundreds of UN forces. The UN there and then spent time negotiating the release of their troops rather than humanitarian activities that was to be carried out in order to bring peace to Sierra Leone.

The situation again degenerated and the British had to intervene to rescue UN forces. Their Primary responsibility was to give training and logistical support to the Sierra Leone Military while giving technical support to the UN. About 60km from Freetown the capital city, eleven British troops were
kidnapped by the rebels. The British were left with no option but to use force to dismantle the rebel base and free their soldiers. This action saw the individual state success while the regional body failed to complete the task. Before the British intervention, about 50,000 people were killed and another 200,000 homeless.

NATO’s intervention in Kosova where Milosevic refused to grant Kosovo autonomy is another humanitarian intervention on record. Hundreds of Kosovo Albanians lost their lives including women and children. NATO intervention in Kosovo was only successful with the intervention of the United States who provided extensive air support to troops fighting the war. The ultimate result was that hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives from air bombing and extensive damaged to infrastructure such as roads, bridges and so on. NATO forces refused to commit ground attack for fear of losing troops. Intervention of this nature was at the expense of citizen’s life.

However, successes achieved by the United States in providing support or teaming up with regional bodies in humanitarian interventions can be commended on its facial value. The United States humanitarian intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan needs to be critically examined and put in its actual context. The US invasion throughout history has been selective. Humanitarian Intervention in Iraq led by the US in 2003 was to complete the job started by George Bush senior when Iraq invaded Qwait in the 90s. More than 250,000 US troops were involved and the regime of Saddam was toppled. The invading forces later faced a battle against the Sunni and Shiite insurgencies. Since the intervention, Iraqi civilian casualty is estimated to be 600,000 and 2,255,000 internally displaced, 2.5m refugees in Syria and Jordan (Deborah White, 2010). Success is far from been achieved and Iraq continue to grapple with the problem of insurgencies onto this day.

The Invasion of Afghanistan after 911 by the US was on humanitarian grounds to dismantle Al-Qaeda and make the world a better place says the United States. Afghanistan’s case is no different to that of Iraq. The country is almost divided between Al-Qaeda and the government supported by the US forces. Hundreds of women are either been killed or not been allowed to participate in the democratic process in Afghanistan. Then the question again comes to mind, is humanitarian intervention a curse or blessing?

1.7 Conclusion

The UN humanitarian interventions from the 90s on to this present moment have abysmal records. In most of the interventions, troop’s deployment is delayed as a result of countries unwillingness to contribute troops to mission area. Frequent disagreement within the UN Security Council itself makes matters difficult in addition to resource contribution by countries to support mission. This has resulted in the deaths of increased number of civilians in countries of intervention with Sierra Leone as a classic example. Frequent disagreement within the UN administration as in the case of Somalia where the UN head of mission and the then Secretary general Boutros Ghali had disagreement over troop deployment resulted in the failure of the mission. Somalians onto this present moment continue to die and regional bodies and states refused to intervene in its totality because of the tainted record of the UN in Somalia.

Regional block intervention such as ECOWAS and NATO interventions are not much different from the UN intervention failure records. The most unique factors affecting the failure of these regional bodies is the inability of regions to acquire the right type of arms and ammunitions to support mission operations and indiscipline amongst soldiers. ECOMOG operations in Sierra Leone and Liberia was unsuccessful as a result of the fact that effective use of equipments where available was lacking and rebels saw a perfect match in fighting using jungle tactics. Indiscipline in sexual practices on the part of soldiers left an alarming number of fatherless children today in Liberia. Materialism in most of these regional interventions outweighs mission objectives. Repatriation of looted property in areas of
operation generate tension amongst soldiers, hence ignoring the fight to liberate and save civilians from human rights violations meted on them from combatants. Command structure is hampered since various regions have different commanders. Line of communication sometimes gets blurred before reaching the rank and file of troops on the ground. This has untold sufferings on those caught within combat zones.

States intervention has shown some successes though not to a very large extent. The British intervention in Sierra Leone though successful, but could be seen as a job too late. It is believe that an earlier intervention would have saved more lives and prevented total breakdown of law and order which ultimately led to the total destruction of infrastructure in the country. The success can be attributed to factors such as a single line of command structure and the use of appropriate equipments in responding to the needs of humanitarian intervention. To some scholars, the action of the British was not justifiable. To the Act Utilitarians, humanitarian intervention is justifiable if more lives are saved than lost. It could therefore be argued that the late intervention of the British troops into Sierra Leone caused the loss of more lives than what was saved with the late intervention of the British. Conversely, Tanzanian intervention in removing President Amin of Uganda saved more lives than could have been lost should Amin have remained in power. Such action is deemed justifiable according to the Utilitarians.

The successes of the United States have been limited in most cases as it comes in either support to regional bodies or the UN. In some instances domestic policies contradict mission objectives as it was in the case with the Somalia Intervention. The withdrawal of US forces is seen as a failure to the intent and purposes of humanitarian intervention. In Iraq, the US intervention lead to more deaths compared to those who lost their lives during President Sadam’s regime. The simple reason for this is that US intervention in Iraq was not known with certainty. This contradicts the beliefs of Rule Utilitarians which emphasizes a coordinated action guided by rules. Humanitarian intervention therefore must be coordinated and at the same time guided in responding to the needs of people. According to Robert E. Goodin, human wellbeing to an extent comes from coordinating the actions of agents concerned. The absence of this flouts the key principle of humanitarian intervention.

Though the United States have a record of humanitarian interventions in different parts of the globe, it is selective so as to fit the interest of the United States. This policy of interest in recent times has not serve the US well as it has failed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ordinary citizens continue to live with uncertainty in these two countries with insurgent activities still been experienced in the suburbs. But this on the contrary do not in its actual sense negate the essence or importance of humanitarian intervention. Hugo Grotius a proponent of the Natural Law theory argues that where tyranny inflict unbearable pain and suffering on his subjects, states have the right to humanitarian intervention in order to save the people from tyranny. Humanitarian intervention according to Grotius is a right and not a duty. If humanitarian intervention is a right and not a duty, do the people of Syria not deserve such rights? US interest in Syria is very questionable as the people of Syria continue to suffer in the hands of callous regime and opposition fighters. Interventions in this state continue to be at the diplomatic front with little protection for the lives of ordinary citizens.

Humanitarian interventions have but very little impact in alleviating the sufferings of people in war affected states. This could also be attributed to international convention governing the use of armed force in the international arena which is enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. Article 2(4) limits states from using threat or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state or in any manner inconsistency with the purpose of the United Nations. Though the article itself is not simplistic, it serves as an international instrument that limits states from intervening into domestic affairs of other states. This in itself has made humanitarian intervention a talk show at the international arena rather than responding to the immediate expectations of people in affected countries.
Humanitarian intervention therefore cannot be viewed as a blessing in its totality though there are some success stories. Such successes comparatively could best be described as shared successes with a very high cost in all regions where humanitarian intervention are recorded.

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