The U.S. Government, Humanitarian Assistance, and the New World Order: A Call for a New Approach

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The appropriate focal point for this paper initially proved elusive to the writer, despite fourteen years experience in the international humanitarian assistance field. A tendency to detail the specific programmatic reforms somewhat obviously required of the humanitarian assistance efforts of the U.S. government, and by extension those of the United Nations, obscured more fundamental issues. There is no question that those basic reforms—increased funding and delivery capacity for disaster relief, emergency food and refugee assistance efforts—are urgently required. Scrutiny and investigation have only deepened existing convictions.

But what is needed is both deeper and broader. What is required is a new approach in our bilateral program and in the U.S. role in the international humanitarian assistance system. We need new commitments to the principles and idealism for which America has long been known. New oversight authorities are urgently required to assure adherence to those principles. Ultimately, what is necessary is more than bureaucratic and financial reordering; it is a moral and political reassessment of our humanitarian stance in the world that is required.

The U.S. government has played politics with our humanitarian assistance programs too often; our actions, along with those of our adversaries and others, have contributed too often to the uprooting and suffering of civilian populations in zones of conflict.

This paper argues that for a number of reasons, including the self-interests of the United States, our government should launch a thorough overhaul of our various humanitarian assistance agencies and mechanisms in concert with a series of steps to strengthen multilateral capacities. To fail to do so will leave an unacceptably large number of innocent people cold and hungry, stranded in remote camps, susceptible to preventable disease and avoidable famine. There can be no stability, and certainly no justice, in any kind of new world order if immense human tragedies such as are now seen in Sudan, Somalia, Liberia, and elsewhere are tolerated.

It is well within our means to reduce the current and potential vulnerability threatening millions of people. It is thus our moral obligation—an obligation we cannot meet adequately under the present system, hindered as it is by conflicting mandates and lack of accountability as well as chronic underfunding.

The author is deeply indebted to a number of individuals from various humanitarian assistance agencies, both official and private, U.S. and international, for invaluable help on this project. Several congressional professional staff members who have long worked to improve the efficiency and indeed the rationale of humanitarian assistance—and foreign aid in general—have equally contributed. To all, there is much gratitude.

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War, the emergence of a new world order (however ill-defined to date), and the unrelenting suffering of millions of people around the globe affected by natural or man-made disasters converge to mandate a comprehensive restructuring of the U.S. government's humanitarian assistance efforts. Those efforts, primarily consisting of the international disaster relief and emergency food aid programs of the Agency for International Development (AID) and the overseas emergency refugee assistance role of the State Department, are of considerable importance in defining the profile of the United States in the world community. They are also, due to their size and to the capacity of the United States to leverage vast additional bilateral and international relief action, vital to the very survival of millions of vulnerable people.

It is equally critical to seize current opportunities to vastly strengthen the humanitarian assistance capacity of the United Nations.

The problems in the humanitarian assistance arena are multiple, the required changes are numerous. But three basic necessitated changes frame the discussion.

First, greater accountability for adhering to humanitarian principles has to be assured. A high level, "blue ribbon" commission comprised of executive and legislative branch representatives as well as members of religious institutions, private relief and development agencies, and the news media should be impaneled to survey U.S. government humanitarian assistance policies and programs. Both the Administration and the Congress have demonstrated limited capacity to grapple with the critical issues facing U.S. and multilateral humanitarianism; a powerful, highly visible, commission is required to jump-start the process of renewal and revitalization. The panel, through a series of public hearings and commissioned studies, should outline the fundamental reforms and restructuring required of bilateral programs. The commission should offer a legislative package designed to assure greater congressional scrutiny, oversight, and responsibility for such efforts. Further, the commission should provide a detailed outline of a U.S.-supported initiative at the United Nations to strengthen the mandates and the structures of the multilateral humanitarian assistance agencies.

Once the commission adjourns, a permanent board, broadly representative of the humanitarian community and designed to represent "the American people" (as distinct from "the system" or "insiders"), should be organized to monitor compliance with the principles established by the blue ribbon group and subsequently mandated by the Congress. The board's primary tasks would be to assure a more balanced and apolitical response to future international humanitarian emergencies and to establish the criteria for more consistent levels of response. Such accountability and consistency are now lacking and cannot be
assured in a system closed to outside scrutiny. Humanitarianism is too important to the American people and to this country's role in the world to be left to the political manipulation of succeeding administrations.

The commission and the board should be appointed jointly by the President and the congressional leadership with assistance from the humanitarian community. Their roles would be advisory—to the executive and legislative branches of government, but also to the public. The involvement of the press and nongovernmental organizations in their work is essential to open a system far too closed for far too long.

Second, the administrative structure and the funding basis for humanitarian assistance have to be greatly strengthened, the legislative foundations consolidated. Responsibility needs to be more clearly established, better coordination assured, and the funding criteria need to be more rational than at present. The current system is both chaotic and arbitrary in addition to being inadequate; budget requests and allocations have little relationship to expenditures routinely realized.

Third, the United States needs to galvanize and champion efforts to make the United Nations humanitarian agencies more responsive and reliable. The mandates of UN relief agencies are weak, incomplete, and outmoded; responsibility for action is fragmented. Funding levels of critical UN agencies such as the High Commissioner for Refugees are so low as to be crippling; the demonstrated capacities of such agencies, at least partially in turn, are too often so poor as to undermine prospects for political or financial support from donors.

A Chaotic System

U.S. government international humanitarian assistance has a long and proud history, dating from a relief effort for victims of an 1812 Venezuelan earthquake. If measured by numbers—dollars spent, the frequency, locale, and type of disasters responded to, the tally of people assisted—certainly the U.S. effort is the largest sustained bilateral program in the world. If measured by effectiveness, clearly it is the best—frequently when compared to international programs, almost always when compared to other bilateral efforts.

But something has gone very wrong. The end of the Cold War, the politicization of humanitarianism, the mounting budget deficit, and the changing nature of humanitarian crises have left the program crippled and outdated. The distinct lag in formulating a new and relevant foreign policy for the United States in general has direct and dire consequences for the management of emergency situations affecting tens of millions of people. As the patronage of the United States or the Soviet Union is stripped away, the crumbling of a series of regimes propped up by Cold War rivalries is predictable, with the consequent addition of new humanitarian emergencies on top of chronic ones being probable. The horror of Somalia could well be replayed in Zaire and elsewhere, further increasing the urgency of a timely addressing of the problems of the bilateral and multilateral humanitarian regimes.

The position of the United States in the world dictates that we will shoulder a large portion of the burden of responding to such predictable crises. The question is, shall we respond efficiently, adequately, and humanely or on an ad hoc and chaotic footing at a much
higher cost—in dollars and in human suffering? The failure to anticipate crises, or position ourselves to address them, will only ensure their maturing into genuine catastrophes.

A related concern is that the end of the Cold War will lessen the political imperative to respond to some emergencies at all. The attention of the world seems riveted to Eastern Europe, the stability of and exodus from Soviet Union. Will donors pay adequate attention to the plight of refugees and the displaced in Third World nations no longer considered central to geo-political concerns? The current response to Somalia's tortured and prolonged suffering offers a sobering pause when contemplating the question.

With a new era at hand, the United States is poorly equipped to administer its humanitarian obligations or to offer credible leadership to the global community on this front. And UN relief agencies require even more radical restructuring and strengthening than U.S. counterparts. Neither entity has a program adequate for the tasks faced.

The proof of this dire assessment is before us. In Sudan, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Mozambique, Liberia, and Angola in recent years, we have seen a collective international failure in mounting an adequate and timely response to human emergencies.

In Liberia, more than half the country's population faced the prospect of starvation during 1990, but not a single bilateral or multilateral humanitarian entity demonstrated impressive mobilization or leadership on behalf of those in need. The faltering U.S. and international re-

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1 See “Repatriation under Conflict,” by Barry N. Stein and Fred C. Cuny, in The World Refugee Survey 1991, published by the U.S. Committee for Refugees, for example. Stein and Cuny cite five recent major refugee repatriation situations and maintain that only in one—Namibia—did the UN oversee an orderly and organized repatriation. In Mozambique, Afghanistan, El Salvador, and Ethiopia, however, the authors maintain that refugees were forced (or in some cases chose, as in El Salvador) to take their fate in their own hands and returned spontaneously and unassisted, often into very dangerous areas.

response in West Africa illustrates larger limitations, not simply complications associated with Liberia. The survival of several hundred thousand Liberian refugees pouring across the border was assured only by the benevolence of Guinean villagers, not the official relief agencies. Despite a one hundred and sixty year special relationship between the United States and Liberia, our government repeatedly expressed concern about exceeding “our fair share” of the relief burden. The emergency food aid allocations that the United States furnished for Liberia necessitated a near-total drawdown of food resources allocated for such needs worldwide at the beginning of the fiscal year, leaving diminished reserves to respond meaningfully elsewhere. UN agencies proved no more effective at mounting an early and capable relief effort than the United States, neither convincingly demonstrating capacity to deal with the situation. The response for Liberian civil war victims was far from unique, however.

The United States has too often shown a willingness to abandon humanitarian principles as well as several million people in Cambodia and Vietnam in an attempt to settle old political grudges. The U.S. response to the desperate displaced persons and refugees of Southeast Asia is nominal and symbolic, tempered by the Administration's reluctance to antagonize Peking on this as on other fronts (the Chinese aren’t challenged even on the provision of arms to the Khmer Rouge). There is little attempt to maintain any consistency of policy, but, instead, a constant changing of the criteria for humanitarian cooperation within the context of an overall policy at odds with reality and our self-interests.

If the system worked as it should, we would not continually bear witness to the shattering horror of populations numbering in the tens (or hundreds) of thousands dying in squalid camps from exposure, disease, and hunger while awaiting basic relief. But we do.

The summer of 1991 found 16.7 million refugees in the world and an internally displaced
persons population numbering considerably more than 20 million. The Sudan is the site of an enveloping famine that has already claimed many lives and that threatens an astounding 9 million people. Liberia has seen improvement in the dire conditions gripping Monrovia and other cities, but more than half the population of the country remains uprooted. Survival for hundreds of thousands rests on a fragile international food aid supply line. Afghanistan displaced during 1990. Burma has generated new refugees and displaced populations. Neither the United States nor the UN has funds, staff, or technical resources adequate to meet the needs in these situations or in the additional disasters certain to strike.

Literally millions of individuals in such situations are severely malnourished, susceptible to disease and famine. Some are assisted, some are neglected, but few receive adequate care by any objective measurement. Most are poorly housed, few are offered education or employment. Hope for any kind of normal life is extremely limited for all.

It simply can no longer be argued that the mechanisms in place to protect and assist victims of disaster, war, and upheaval are adequate. International relief agencies operate as if the frequently demonstrated nature of humanitarian crises—displacement by internal conflict, chronic drought, ethnic animosity—is an aberration. Neither policies nor organizational structures reflect that harsh reality. Twenty years after the great Sahelian famine and all that has befallen Africa since, AID has no effective mechanism to deal with the impact of continuing human and economic disaster in the Sub-Sahara. A generation after the internally displaced became the single largest segment of the world's population affected by disaster, the UN has no adequate system to reach them.

Nor can a U.S. government obligation and interest in strengthening the relief mechanisms and improving the plight of the victims be denied. The obligation stems from the humanitarian traditions of the American people, the interest from our stake in a benign, stable world now that the Cold War has ended. Presumably, a country that could marshal substantial resources for a 45-year struggle against the tyranny of communist repression has the resident moral wherewithal to prevent innocent children from needlessly starving to death in remote refugee camps.

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Humanitarian Assistance
The Nature of the Problem

How have we arrived at this state? A number of factors have contributed.

Today's humanitarian crises are the crises of the displaced fleeing internal strife, while the international mechanisms established after the Second World War are geared to providing legal protection for those left stranded by the Nazis or Stalin's army. Increasingly, people are subject to chronic disaster situations that do not lend themselves to the short-term earthquake or cyclone relief that agencies were set up to provide. In the future, those fleeing environmental disasters such as desertification and the destruction of forests and water sheds will join those ranks, but there is little evidence of preparation by relief or development agencies to meet these needs.

A certain degree of "disaster fatigue" has beset donors as the number and complexity of disasters increase. There is a subtle tendency to blame the victims for their plight.

The structure and budget of the programs are inadequate. U.S. response to food emergencies is so slow as to defy use of the term "emergency" (and the United States is frequently the first donor to deliver commodities). Relief agencies make little effort on research or documentation, which allows needless errors to be made; few lessons are learned or applied. Little consistency exists in the type of relief provided or indeed on decisions concerning whether it is provided by either the United States or UN agencies.

The guiding policies for U.S. relief programs retain a 1950s containment-of-communism orientation, particularly in the refugee arena. There is a neo-colonial cast to many relief operations as military and civilian SWAT teams descend on disaster sites with little regard for bolstering local management of the disaster response.

Questions, sometimes dubious ones, of national sovereignty block the international system from responding to dire humanitarian crises. We lack a sense of global citizenship and responsibility. The very definition of humanitarianism has been corrupted, opening the way to gross political distortions in the provision of aid. Considerations, frequently dubious or simply wrong-headed, of narrow foreign policy goals of the U.S. government distort response beyond rational comprehension as witnessed in Nicaragua, Sudan, Ethiopia, Grenada, and Angola in recent years. There is no minimal threshold that guarantees a response; there is no formula for providing a basic or consistent level of assistance to victims in different regions of the world. Frequently, the nature of a U.S. response to a humanitarian emergency is determined more by media attention (or lack of coverage) to the situation than demonstrated human need. Or the response is guided by State Department assessments of short-term political

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3 A partial, though not definitive, indication of the growing frequency and mounting severity of disasters as well as the toll claimed is reflected in the annual reports of the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (AID).

4 In 1988, disaster assistance was withheld for hurricane victims in Nicaragua due to U.S. differences with the Sandinista government; in the Sudan in 1988, the U.S. down-played the severity of the famine wrecking the southern regions of the country and the Khartoum government's role in that famine. In the early phases of the Ethiopian famine of 1984/85, the United States seemed more interested in punishing the Mengistu government than in assisting the starving, while after the American invasion of Grenada, the disaster relief account was basically robbed of several million dollars for dubious political projects. In Angola, an endless series of excuses served to block the provision of relief assistance to starving civilians residing behind the Luanda government's line of control in a civil war being fought by proxy by the United States and the Soviet Union. For a further discussion of "humanizing aid" and the political distortions of U.S. relief assistance during the 1980s, see "The Forgotten Human Agenda," by Larry Minear, in the winter 1988-89 edition of Foreign Policy.
opportunities or requirements.

An outmoded distinction between refugees and displaced persons hampers relief operations as agencies dispute jurisdictions--and evade responsibility. Neither the United States nor the UN has very effective mechanisms to avert incipient disasters (to reach disaster victims where they are!) or to assist the repatriation of refugees. No agency has a clear mandate to assist local populations affected by the inflow of refugees--as the desperately poor Guinean villagers discovered last year when overrun by Liberians fleeing the carnage at home.

U.S. contributions to international refugee assistance agencies declined both in terms of amounts and as proportions of the annual contributions received during the last half of the 1980s. A recent GAO study further finds that "no standard formula is used to determine the amounts contributed. These amounts are determined by the availability of funds, the nature and urgency of the needs, U.S. foreign policy interests in a particular situation, economic conditions in asylum countries, and responses of other donors."

From 1985 to 1989, as U.S. funding for critical overseas aid and protection programs stagnated, the global population of refugees grew from 10 million to 15 million. Consequently, U.S. expenditures per capita for assisting refugees in emergency situations declined from $20 to $13. Dissatisfied with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' performance in the Ethiopian famine of 1984/85, the United States pressed for an expansion of UNHCR's mandate and responsibilities, then proceeded to lower financial support as the agency faced an expanded workload. By 1989, UNHCR had a $100 million shortfall--in part due to a declining share of U.S. support for its budget.

Current administrative structures not only allow but invite inadequate and uneven responses to various humanitarian emergencies. The propensity of the State Department and the Agency for International Development, mirrored at the United Nations, to create ad hoc task forces to manage virtually every major new crisis testifies to the inadequacy of present structures. Existing agencies simply do not have the proper mandates, authorities, staff resources, or other means at their disposal. The allocation of people to work on humanitarian crises is not proportional to the work mandated by circumstances. The State Department's refugee bureau (primarily a funding agency) depends upon an in-house staff of one professional for direct emergency operation involvement. The Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) responded to 42 new disaster situations affecting some 127.5 million people in FY 1989 with a small staff and the same core budget afforded the program in 1964. (FY 1990 saw an even higher number of new disaster declarations, but only a small increase in program budget for OFDA.) The UN vacillates on maintaining an emergency operations agency for the Sub-Saharan, though currently that office is again functioning.

The meandering mandate of U.S. government humanitarian agencies and their susceptibility to the trends in various administrations' political ideologies are revealed by

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examining OFDA's latest budgetary presentation to Congress. The document has a three-page preamble indicating the primary objective of the program to be "promoting democracy." There is, however, little mention of humanitarian principles or motivations. The most devout supporters of democracy must be puzzled by such misplaced rhetoric.

The lack of capacity and the absence of suitable policy guidelines and oversight lead to an inconsistent reliance on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for the delivery of assistance. Those same NGOs are subject to dangerous political exposure in the field as official agencies fight to claim or evade jurisdiction and balance various factors--political factors well beyond the expertise and ability of NGOs to influence. The experience of private American relief agencies in Angola during the past two years as the State Department manipulated emergency food allocations to help influence a settlement of that country's ongoing civil war is illustrative of the danger. (It was a difficult proposition for the American NGOs providing emergency assistance in Angola to retain credibility as the U.S.-provided food being distributed by those NGOs was subjected to cut-offs by Washington. If the NGOs were not deemed to be reliable providers of assistance, then the Angolans had limited rationale to countenance their presence.)

It is desirable and commendable rather than perverse, of course, for the United States to contribute to conflict resolution efforts, such as in Angola. What is important, however, is not to make relief assistance contingent upon progress in those efforts or to force a political role upon NGOs trying to get food and medicine to those in need.

**American Humanitarian Traditions Undermined**

A clear disconnect between the humanitarian impulses and traditions of the American people and the execution of relief efforts by U.S. government agencies has emerged. The forceful insistence of the public that the executive branch move without further regard to political factors in the Ethiopian tragedy of 1984 demonstrates the support for a generous response to those in need. (It was only after the public saw film footage of the horror underway in northern Ethiopia in October 1984 that congressional forces long concerned about an adequate U.S. response to the evolving famine prevailed. As late as August of that year, the Administration's Office of Management and Budget was lobbying hard in opposition to famine supplemental appropriation initiatives. Eventually, the Congress provided $800 million in supplemental funds for famine relief over Administration objections. The public concurrently contributed almost $200 million to private American relief agencies.)

More recently, the American and international public proved itself to be more sensitive to the precarious plight of several million Kurds caught in the vice in northern Iraq than did the Administration. Knowingly or intuitively, the public also forced a change in policy that better achieved American long-term interests in the region. The public's reaction to tragedies in Ethiopia and in Iraq are demonstrations of expected American reactions to preventable suffering. Further, evidence is provided that citizen support for vigorous, healthy, efficient, apolitical U.S. humanitarian assistance is stronger than the support

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6 Also knowingly or not, the public may well have affected the interpretation of international law. Clearly, traditional understanding and respect for national sovereignty were set aside in the attempt to get relief to the Kurds inside Iraq--regardless of the position of the Baghdad government. Whether or not new rules are going to be codified at the UN is not clear, but it is certain that a new de facto insistence on the primacy of humanitarian concerns over sovereignty can be enforced by the international community--at least in selected circumstances if the more powerful governments so elect.
demonstrated for these efforts by the executive branch during the past ten years.7

The American public usually responds well on humanitarian issues when it understands them, which often it does not, of course. Thus, there is a need for overt political leadership on these issues. Our President should see some of these situations as of sufficient priority to personally and visibly encourage a response. (So, too, should the UN General Assembly more routinely act on major humanitarian issues, such as in Sudan. What more important issues does the General Assembly have to address than the potential loss of millions of people to needless famine?) But it is vital to avoid a popularity contest approach to humanitarian assistance—we cannot carry out relief programs guided by the Gallup poll. Again, the need exists for establishing criteria for response and for an oversight mechanism to guarantee adherence to standards.

What can additionally be argued is that a genuinely superior American humanitarian assistance program—and U.S. leadership at invigorating multilateral programs—could contribute significantly to the long missing public support for the broader foreign assistance program. The late Rep. Mickey Leland once said, "While it is unarguable that providing humanitarian assistance promotes the interests of the United States, it is equally unarguable that aid delivered in a nonpolitical manner makes the greatest contribution to our national credibility." As the obvious comparative advantages of U.S. bilateral development aid programs generally recede, a vigorous humanitarian assistance effort could instill public support and pride and perhaps give the United States an area where our international development efforts are still recognized as the world’s best. It is hard to think of any negatives for being identified with the most generous, most efficient, most apolitical humanitarian assistance programs in the world. Such a role is both within our grasp and our budget.

It was in reference to Ethiopia that President Reagan reaffirmed, "A hungry child knows no politics." And the lesson of violating that premise has been vigorously learned and applied—to Ethiopia.

The public’s commitment to genuine and apolitical humanitarian assistance, honored in so many situations over so many years, was betrayed by the arbitrary withholding of relief to hurricane victims in Nicaragua and civil war victims in Angola. In glaring contrast, the Reagan Administration rushed a $50 million supplemental appropriation request through Congress for assistance after a minor earthquake affecting relatively few individuals struck in El Salvador in 1986 while spurning concurrent Congressional and humanitarian community interest in expanding relief efforts for several million Africans still reeling from massive famine. The reckless and relentless pursuit of such policies has done grave harm to the humanitarian reputation of the United States. Such policies are far more cynical than is the much more true-spirited humanitarian

7 What Americans Think: Views on Development and U.S.-Third World Relations, A Public Opinion Project of InterAction and the Overseas Development Council, edited by Christine E. Contee, 1987, indicates tremendous support for international humanitarianism. Nearly 90 percent of those interviewed support assistance to “the poor and hungry.” 78 percent believe the United States should set an example by helping poor nations, and 75 percent believe such assistance would help the United States in the long run. The poll further indicated that majority support for humanitarian programs had remained steady for nearly three decades.
view of most of the American people.

Many criticisms can be made of the U.S. response to various emergency situations. Politics, budget constraints, outmoded bureaucratic structures have made serious problems inevitable. But most troubling is what we don't do. The ability of humanitarian assistance agencies to wall themselves away from troublesome disasters out of the public eye is by far a bigger problem than the efficiency of relief operations seriously mounted.\textsuperscript{8} Burnt with congressional and public anger to the slow and overly political response to Ethiopia in 1984, the Reagan and Bush Administrations have proven themselves determined during the past five years to be responsive and responsible in regard to that country's ongoing series of emergencies. It was in reference to Ethiopia that President Reagan associated himself and the U.S. government with the notion that "a hungry child knows no politics." And the lesson of violating that premise, bitterly learned, has been vigorously applied--to Ethiopia.

The tragedy of the Sudan famine in 1988--and the regrettable stance of the United States during the early, critical phases of that largely avoidable catastrophe--indicates, however, that the lessons of Ethiopia have been applied and absorbed only selectively. The same conclusion is reached when examining the humanitarian programs of the United States in Angola. Applying political criteria to determine whether hungry children should receive American food simply cannot be justified--and of course never is tolerated when the public comprehends that such calculations are being made. What moral or political justification could there ever be to doubly penalize the victims of a conflict (a conflict in which they seldom have a role or voice) by withholding relief assistance?

But uneven and disproportionate U.S. response to genuine humanitarian crises is inevitable in a system as closed, limited, and diffused as ours. The tolerance of failure is too high, even though failure means people will not survive. Understaffed, underfunded agencies subject to political manipulation are inevitably going to avoid some of the more complex, politically charged emergencies. Such a reality argues both for opening the system to wider public and congressional scrutiny and to strengthening multilateral humanitarian assistance mechanisms. It also argues for pinpointing the responsibility for the conduct of humanitarian assistance within the U.S. government and at the UN. The responsibility has to rest, in each case, with a senior official subject to recall if avoidable tragedies such as the Sudan famine of 1988 are allowed to evolve.\textsuperscript{9}

\textbf{Congressional Assertion}

The Congress has shown little sustained capacity to deal with the issues seriously threatening humanitarian principles and programs, only short-term interest on a case-by-case basis. The insistence of a firebrand like Mickey Leland that this country simply do what needs to be done to help the helpless wherever they are is infrequently echoed in the Capitol. Congress has allowed humanitarian principles to be corrupted and the programs to atrophy from lack of oversight and chronic underfunding. It has allowed itself to be constantly manipulated in the pursuit of political goals at the expense of humanitarian mandates. There is little exposure to the reality faced by millions of people in bleak relief camps.

\textsuperscript{8} OFDA in fact normally has little competition in terms of either speed or efficiency of relief assistance provided. That office's problems stem from budgetary constraints and interference in its tasks by the State Department.

\textsuperscript{9} The ultimate responsibility for the Sudan tragedy clearly rests with Sudanese entities. The shame of the international relief authorities was the pusillanimity of their reactions to policies and actions endangering innocent people.
and little seeming comprehension of the support
for apolitical humanitarian aid expressed by the
American public. Congressional reaction to the
recent concentration of international relief
responsibility on the U.S. military by the
Administration--in Bangladesh, in northern
Iraq--despite the various implications of such a
policy, has been hard to detect. Congress needs
to educate itself on what is at stake and position
itself to better monitor programs of vast
importance to this country's role in the world.

The Multilateral Agencies in the 1990s

The declining support in recent years for
the international mechanisms we helped create
has sapped the strength of UN relief agencies
just as they are overwhelmed by the frequency
and magnitude of emergencies. The financial
commitment of the U.S. government to
international humanitarian assistance programs
is grossly inadequate for the needs faced. The
reduced rate of U.S. contributions to the UN
High Commissioner for Refugees, an example
replicated by the U.K., Japan, and Germany,
forced that agency in 1990 to make painful cuts
of 15 percent or more in sanitation, nutrition,
health, water supply, and education programs
even as refugee numbers were increasing.
Delayed and inadequate responses to appeals
for assistance disrupted initiatives such as
emergency feeding or promising repatriation
opportunities. The results of such funding cuts
have dire and direct impact on the well-being of
hundreds of thousands of people already living
on the margin of existence—not simply on
administrative procedures for UN bureaucracies.

Today we see not so surprising evidence
that events are overwhelming the UN.10 Its
agencies are being called upon to fill roles for
which they are ill-prepared. The atrophy of the
years leaves the potential of UN agencies to
efficiently manage the response to human
emergencies a delayed goal. (Eight major UN
agencies have various responsibilities for
managing humanitarian emergencies, but the
lack of efficiency of all is attested to by the
constant creation of ad hoc entities.) Neither the
world nor its refugees and displaced can wait on
the UN's internal problems and political conflicts
to resolve themselves. If the United States
expects the UN to shoulder new responsibilities,
then the Congress and the Administration need
to forge a consensus on what we want the UN
to do and then provide leadership to strengthen
the institution to make such a role realistic.
Central to such strengthening would be the
creation of a permanent UN undersecretary for
humanitarian affairs, the clarification of
mandates, the consolidation of bureaucracies.

Fundamental Conclusion

The fundamental conclusion to be
reached is that neither the bilateral
humanitarian assistance programs of the United
States nor the international mechanisms
supported by the U.S. are adequate in authority,
scope, budget, technical/personnel resources,
policy guidance, accountability, or moral
grounding to cope with either current or
predictable needs. The reforms required to
make them so are questions of political will and
leadership and recommitment to humanitarian
principles and traditions. The world is not
perfect and will not be made that way by the
changes in humanitarian assistance programs
suggested in this paper. But huge steps at
acceptable costs can be made to reduce the
likelihood that innocent children in southern

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10 For a detailed discussion, see Responding to
Emergencies: The Role of the UN in Emergencies and Ad
Hoc Operations, by Krister Eduards, Gunmar Rosen,
and Robert Rossborough, a study commissioned by the
Nordic UN project (Report No. 14:1990), released
October 1990. Also, a July 1991 paper prepared by
Jacques Cuenod, consultant to the UN's director
general for international economic cooperation,
addresses coordination among the various UN agencies
dealing with refugees, the displaced and returnees.
Sudan or Angola or elsewhere starve while responsible agencies argue over jurisdiction, calculate budget reserves, or wait for political and public pressure before responding.

Mickey Leland once said, "While it is unarguable that providing humanitarian assistance promotes the interests of the United States, it is equally unarguable that aid delivered in a nonpolitical manner makes the greatest contribution to our national credibility."

The premise of this paper is not that the United States should unilaterally fund all aspects of every humanitarian crisis facing the world, but that we ought to assert leadership that will help guarantee adequate and continuing global response. We can use a relatively modest (though considerably increased) investment to leverage a tremendous international outpouring and mobilization by moral persuasion. That point was proven in the Persian Gulf war and its aftermath in the north of Iraq. Our humanitarian assistance ultimately can--and should--be judged more by its character than its scale. But it is difficult to demonstrate much character or secure much leverage at current levels of funding. Moral leadership is not achieved by short-changing relief operation budgets.

The basis for the United States to establish more vigorous bilateral humanitarian assistance programs and lead a strong effort at the UN to do the same is not primarily to promote our political and national self-interests around the world. It is because it is the right, generous, American thing to do. But such a stance is in our interests. Chaos, instability, and widespread suffering hardly contribute to world development, but instead interrupt economic and political progress.

The end of the Cold War, American domination in the Persian Gulf war, and a generally strengthened United Nations provide enormous opportunity as well as responsibility for the United States. The seeming end of conflict in Angola and Ethiopia, quite possibly realized in Cambodia as well, expands the prospects. It is hard to imagine where we have more opportunity to do more good at so little cost and risk in such a new world order than in exerting the leadership required to make humanitarian assistance more effective, legitimizing renewed American global moral leadership in the process.

There is little competition for American leadership in this arena. No other government is in position to contribute so significantly to constructing the framework of operating principles and executing agencies required. By providing the moral and practical leadership, we can trigger sufficient financial support from the other donor governments to assure a considerably higher level of success than now realized. The question is one of determination that no more will we allow innocent children to starve.

Humanitarian Assistance
ELEMENTS OF A NEW APPROACH

The conclusions delivered in this paper mandate a major enhancing of the U.S. government’s role in providing and guaranteeing adequate bilateral and international humanitarian assistance. The changes implicit from those conclusions vary in nature, but all stem from a conviction that a new approach based on strong moral commitments and an expanded view of the national self-interest is urgently required. New mechanisms to open up the system and provide greater levels of congressional and public oversight are essential. Rational levels of funding are mandatory as are bureaucratic consolidations and the assignment of political and administrative responsibility in both Washington and at the UN. Mandates and definitions have to be revised. A resolve to do what is required to treat people with dignity and generosity is essential.

Central to the required reforms and enhancements of the U.S. system are the establishment of accountability and the guarantee of fewer political responses to human emergency situations. The manipulation of our response to these emergencies must be strictly delimited; the prospects for abuse must be narrowed. Then the structure and financing of programs must be reordered. Several specific measures are required to achieve these goals.

At the United Nations, the United States needs to take advantage of the higher esteem for the UN that now exists and the imminent selection of a new secretary general to help reshape multilateral humanitarian assistance agencies. It may well be that the end of the Cold War will enable the UN at long last to be what many of its founders desired it to be–a transnational organization with greater authority than its individual member states. But there can be no assumption that the UN is a separate entity capable of imposing order by itself. The UN is the sum of its member nations, the United States being by far the largest contributor among those members.

The 1990s ought to be the decade when the multilateral humanitarian system matures, at last achieving its proper mandate and capacity. We should move now to accomplish this goal. The United States has the capacity to contribute significantly to that process.

Establishing an independent, high level commission to survey the humanitarian assistance programs of the U.S. government and to strengthen U.S. leadership internationally on the humanitarian front is critical, as articulated above. The creation of this blue ribbon group is essential for revitalizing the system and establishing a new framework of U.S. humanitarianism. It is the single most important step to be undertaken and should begin immediately. The task of the commission is nothing less than charting a new course for American humanitarianism, to provide definition and credibility to “a new world order.”

What specific tasks might dominate the work of the commission?

Bilateral Programs

- Articulating the creed that would bind U.S. government adherence to a fair and consistent definition of humanitarian assistance that by its nature excludes exceptions to the notion that “a hungry child knows no politics.” Either we believe in this principle or we do not.
• Establishing the mandate of a permanent oversight board to monitor the humanitarian assistance programs of the U.S. government. Other countries—Norway and Canada are good examples—have developed a partnership between government and private humanitarian concerns with great success. Thought should be given to tasking the oversight board with drafting the charter of a nonpolitical foundation that would fund relief activities and provide political insulation to NGOs carrying out humanitarian assistance programs.

• Drafting legislation that consolidates the Congress's oversight of humanitarian assistance programs, asserts that humanitarian programs are a major focus of U.S. international development efforts as well as foreign policy, and underscores the apolitical nature of such efforts.

• Determining the appropriate executive branch placement of clear authority and unavoidable responsibility for coordinating humanitarian assistance programs. There are arguments for such placement at either AID or the State Department. The essential task is pinpointing accountability.

• Concurrently determining the appropriate bureaucratic consolidation and functioning of humanitarian assistance operations.

• Specifying the appropriate funding levels and mechanisms for humanitarian assistance programs. Consideration could be given to a "no-year" Presidential fund that would guarantee that the United States could respond to large-scale emergencies without waiting on supplemental funding or raids on development assistance accounts.

• Considering options for mechanisms within the disaster and refugee assistance programs to better deal with the internally displaced, the victims of long-term disaster situations, and with rehabilitation and reconstruction requirements.

• Outlining NGO-managed programs to provide life support services to those most vulnerable to recurring disaster. By providing greater access to the NGO life-support services, we can also provide the NGOs greater capacity to monitor the disaster status of target groups and create an infrastructure that can be quickly strengthened in an emergency. It may make sense to provide block grants of food aid to NGOs or NGO consortia on a regional basis in areas chronically food-insecure.

International Programs

• Producing a detailed plan of action for an initiative to strengthen the United Nations humanitarian assistance agencies to deliver on their proper mandates. The plan ought to address achieving efficiency by bureaucratic consolidation.

• Advocating the creation of a UN permanent undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs post. Such a measure is probably required to guarantee better coordination of relief activities, to develop new mandates and authorities, and to monitor the consolidation and reorganization of agencies and operations.

• Sanctioning a U.S. assertion at the UN that at some point in extreme situations diplomatic conventions no longer apply and that in the clash between human rights and the sovereign rights of governments, human rights prevail.
Ultimately, it must be asserted that sovereignty entails inescapable responsibility for the welfare of people. A system is needed that codifies an international interest in the people in such cases and legalizes an appropriate international protective response. Various international “cross border” relief operations of recent years provide implicit if tentative recognition of humanitarian concerns prevailing over sovereignty—at least when it is the powerful who assert such prevalence. The United States should join efforts to define a permanent standard and a consistent set of criteria for such operations.11

- Exploring a modification of the artificial distinction between refugees and displaced persons and options for increasing the capacity of UNHCR to assist refugees seeking repatriation.

- Providing guidance on the appropriate U.S. funding levels for UN humanitarian assistance programs. Such assistance for refugees should be increased to $25 per capita per year.

- Encouraging U.S. cooperation with the UN and regional political entities to structure international and regional accords dealing with the provision of relief assistance in civil conflict situations—the framework for “safe passage” agreements.

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It is predictable that arguments will be raised that the measures outlined in this paper are not really necessary or in any case not affordable given our budgetary pressures. That they are needed can be verified by examining the condition of the countless Africans facing potential starvation this year...or by pondering the present fate of Liberia’s children. And in a foreign aid account totalling $15.3 billion, certainly the few hundred million dollars required to restructure this program into something every American can be proud of can be found. Humanitarian assistance is cheaper than many other forms of development. But disasters are taking such a toll on developmental progress that it can be argued we are undermining other investments by defaulting on the humanitarian assistance front. If we default on our moral responsibility and fail to seize the present opportunity, it is due to the lack of political leadership, not budgetary constraints.

Finally, in response to questions of “our fair share” in meeting the humanitarian requirements of the displaced, the hungry, the forgotten, let us resolve to exceed our fair share when necessary rather than allow an inadequate response to take the lives of more children. Responding to disasters is not our exclusive responsibility, but it may be our unique opportunity to lead efforts to create a system that no longer allows so many to needlessly languish or to die.

The American people are better citizens of the world than the legacy of the last ten years of humanitarianism under assault would lead one to believe.