



# Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action

By Fiona Terry

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Humanitarian groups have failed, Fiona Terry believes, to face up to the core paradox of their activity: humanitarian action aims to alleviate suffering, but by inadvertently sustaining conflict it potentially prolongs suffering. In *Condemned to Repeat?*, Terry examines the side-effects of intervention by aid organizations and points out the need to acknowledge the political consequences of the choice to give aid. The author makes the controversial claim that aid agencies act as though the initial decision to supply aid satisfies any need for ethical discussion and are often blind to the moral quandaries of aid. Terry focuses on four historically relevant cases: Rwandan camps in Zaire, Afghan camps in Pakistan, Salvadoran and Nicaraguan camps in Honduras, and Cambodian camps in Thailand.

Terry was the head of the French section of Medecins sans frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) when it withdrew from the Rwandan refugee camps in Zaire because aid intended for refugees actually strengthened those responsible for perpetrating genocide. This book contains documents from the former Rwandan army and government that were found in the refugee camps after they were attacked in late 1996. This material illustrates how combatants manipulate humanitarian action to their benefit. *Condemned to Repeat?* makes clear that the paradox of aid demands immediate attention by organizations and governments around the world. The author stresses that, if international agencies are to meet the needs of populations in crisis, their organizational behavior must adjust to the wider political and socioeconomic contexts in which aid occurs.

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## **Editorial Review**

### From Library Journal

The director of research and former head of the French section of Medicins sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders), Terry has written a compelling book about the failure of international humanitarian organizations to take into consideration a wider political context before providing aid. This shortsightedness, argues Terry, results in the paradox that humanitarian aid aimed at alleviating suffering instead sustains the oppressive action that caused it. In clear and concise analysis, she begins with the controversial claim that the aid agencies respond in knee-jerk fashion to any conflict without further investigating or even considering the ramifications of their aid. In four documented cases, Afghan camps in Pakistan, Salvadoran and Nicaraguan camps in Honduras, Cambodian camps in Thailand, and Rwandan camps in Zaire Terry details how aid given to help people often ends up in the coffers of the combatants. Terry backs up her claim with photocopies of documents that will be of special interest to scholars of the 1996 Rwanda massacres.

Recommended for all libraries. Glenn Masuchika, Rockwell Collins Information Ctr., Cedar Rapids, IA  
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### Review

"Terry has written a compelling book about the failure of international humanitarian organizations to take into consideration a wider political context before providing aid. . . . In clear and concise analysis, she begins with the controversial claim that the aid agencies respond in knee-jerk fashion to any conflict without further investigating or even considering the ramifications of their aid." *Library Journal*

"Noting that governments have various nonhumanitarian policies that are manifested in dealing with refugee flows, including allowing refugee camps to be used for military purposes, Terry concludes that aid agencies must necessarily contribute to these governmental maneuvers. . . . She concludes that the best aid agencies can do in the real world of governmental realpolitik is to try to minimize undesirable political impact that inheres in humanitarian assistance." *Choice*

"An insider's searching critique of the humanitarian aid system. . . . The result, Terry concludes, is a deep paradox at the heart of humanitarian action: The international community's good intentions have created structures of aid and protection that, when injected into disintegrating states without authoritative rule, often fuel violence rather than reduce suffering." G. John Ikenberry, *Foreign Affairs*

"The book makes a valuable contribution to the burgeoning literature on humanitarian action. The historical research is detailed, the arguments are cogent and precise, and Terry's findings are alarmingly relevant. . . . Although the book is an appeal to relief agencies to enter into emergency situations with more caution and greater awareness of the ramifications of their actions, the study would certainly serve as a valuable

pedagogical tool for graduate courses. It is also accessible to undergraduates and a general adult reading audience."?Eric A. Heinze, *Perspectives on Political Science*

"This is a provocative, analytical treatment of the inevitable dilemmas that arise when humanitarian action is undertaken in a militarized environment. Fiona Terry writes with the authority that comes from several years of working in emergency relief programs in different parts of the world. The book's main contribution is its identification, discussion, and analysis of the predictable negative consequences of humanitarian intervention."?David L. Cingranelli, *Perspectives on Politics*

"Fiona Terry's *Condemned to Repeat?* is a tough-minded and searching critique of the global aid industry. Aid agencies and humanitarian activists who do not think hard about Terry's critique may find themselves condemned to repeat the mistakes she identifies."?Michael Ignatieff, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

"There have been many books criticizing humanitarian action from the outside and many others praising it from the inside. Almost always, both the moral and operational dilemmas of relief work were terribly oversimplified. Fiona Terry has changed all that. Hers is the first book by an aid worker from the English-speaking world to anatomize the real paradoxes of humanitarian action. It is at once a superb and original work of historical research into the actual practice of contemporary humanitarianism, an arresting polemic about what the consequences of those practices are, and a fine piece of moral reasoning."?David Rieff

"Unlike others who have seen the underbelly of the aid business, Fiona Terry responds, not with cynicism or fatalism, but with morally sensitive, politically relevant, and intellectually lucid proposals about how to bring actual consequences closer to good intentions. *Condemned to Repeat?* is a passionate and independent challenge to humanitarian practice-as-usual that can enrich ethics classes and guide refugee camps. It is a book of extraordinary reach that contributes richly to both theory and practice."?Henry Shue, author of *Basic Rights*

#### About the Author

Fiona Terry has spent most of the last 20 years involved in humanitarian operations in different parts of the world, including northern Iraq, Somalia, the Great Lakes region of Africa, Liberia and Sudan. She was a research director for Médecins Sans Frontières in Paris from 2000 to 2003 working on North Korea, Sierra Leone and Angola, before spending three years with the ICRC in Myanmar. She holds a Ph.D. in international relations and political science from the Australian National University.

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