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# *Review Essay*

## The Complexity of Humanitarian Neutrality in a Political World

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**Jan Egeland.** *A Billion Lives: An Eyewitness Report from the Frontlines of Humanity.* New York: Simon and Schuster. 272 pages. \$27 (hardcover), ISBN: 1416560963.

### **Humanitarianism and Conflict Resolution: Two Ships Passing?**

What do humanitarians and conflict resolution experts have in common? A lot more than one might think.

When I was first asked to write a review of Jan Egeland's memoirs *A Billion Lives: Eyewitness Report from the Frontlines of Humanity*, I worried about how applicable the insights of a former United Nations Undersecretary General for Humanitarian Affairs would be to a readership of negotiation scholars. Egeland's book is a nonchronological and largely uncritical exploration of several of his major professional accomplishments to date. I suspect that he never intended for his book to make a major theoretical contribution to the field of conflict resolution *or* humanitarian assistance, although academics and practitioners alike may find his first-hand descriptions of his career so far to be tremendously instructive.

The tension between conflict resolution and humanitarian assistance should not be overstated. Both professions ultimately seek to reduce the loss of life associated with violent conflict. That said, humanitarians and conflict resolution practitioners approach their jobs with a fundamentally different set of methods. At the risk of grossly oversimplifying both professions, conflict resolution experts concern themselves primarily with finding

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ways to end a conflict, whereas those engaged in humanitarian assistance efforts focus on saving the lives of civilians and other “protected” individuals during an ongoing conflict. The conflict resolution literature generally focuses on the various strategies for bringing together conflicting parties and promoting sustainable resolutions to their problems. The humanitarian literature, on the other hand, often focuses on institutional strategies for maintaining neutrality in the midst of a conflict, how to advocate for the rights of civilians and other protected parties, how to predict the next humanitarian crisis, and, of course, how to effectively provide the basic components for survival (such as food, water, and shelter) in some of the world’s least hospitable regions.

In practice, however, the two disciplines can, and often do, operate in parallel, and some efforts have been made to broaden the lens through which both professions evaluate their work. In the early 1990s, international aid practitioners coined the term “human security” to replace what they saw as an outdated concept of “national security.” With the end of the Cold War came the idea that human rights and global development could become the new currency of international politics, and it suddenly no longer seemed appropriate to measure security purely in terms of national sovereignty. Instead, the hope was that security might actually be measured in terms of individuals’ ability to live their lives with dignity (United Nations Development Program 1994). This expanded human notion of security challenged conflict resolution practitioners to expand their definition of success beyond promoting the “absence of violent conflict, [to encompass also] human rights, good governance, access to education and health care, and ensuring that each individual has opportunities and choices to fulfil [sic] his or her own potential” (Annan 2000). In short, a human security framework challenges the conflict resolution practitioner to consider issues that traditionally fell under the ambit of the humanitarian profession (and vice versa).

## **A Lifetime of Action to Protect Human Security**

To scholars of conflict resolution and humanitarian assistance inspired by this more human-centric notion of what true security entails, Egeland’s book offers a fascinating study of the interconnectedness of the two disciplines. Indeed, the idea that humanitarian assistance and conflict resolution ultimately belong to the same overarching discipline is perhaps less eye-opening to anyone who has ever worked in the field, where practitioners frequently (and often inadvertently) explore methodologies from other disciplines to meet the many challenges they face as part of their daily routines. Egeland’s memoir vividly illustrates the reality that, in the twenty-first century, saving the world has become a truly multidisciplinary endeavor.

Egeland starts the book by painting a stark picture of how dangerous the task of humanitarianism has become. He describes a tense stand-off in

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the Ivory Coast, where local leaders spewed hate over the radio and encouraged local thugs to target U.N. peacekeepers and humanitarians, as well as the infamous set of events following the 2003 bombing of the U.N. compound in Baghdad, which tragically killed Sergio Vieira De Mello, the U.N. Special Envoy to Iraq and former U.N. Humanitarian Relief Coordinator, and ultimately resulted in the U.N. withdrawal from Iraq. Egeland laments the fact that the U.N. symbol or the Red Cross logo no longer shield an aid worker from being attacked by combatants in contemporary conflicts. He makes a strong ethical plea for maintaining that humanitarian space and introduces what may be the book's unifying theme: his dogged determination to speak truth to power, no matter how uncomfortable that may seem in the moment.

Egeland spends forty pages describing his early efforts to facilitate a peaceful resolution to the longstanding conflict in Colombia. He first visited Colombia as a volunteer in 1975 and later used his knowledge of the country after being appointed peace advisor and later U.N. Special Envoy to Colombia. His descriptions of the sputtering and ultimately unsuccessful Colombian peace process make good reading, but they provide few insights into what might have been done differently to encourage the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia) and ELN (National Liberation Army) rebel groups, as well as the right-wing paramilitary groups, to engage in a genuine peace process. His account does, however, offer some insights into his style of engaging with individuals labeled as terrorists, such as the reclusive and ruthless leadership of the FARC. Egeland's approach was marked by a brave willingness to meet them on their turf, according to their conditions, to deliver the uncomfortable reality check that their demands would have had no chance of success with the political elite in Bogota, and to insist that their violence against civilians was unacceptable and illegitimate and must end. His many short-term successes as a peace broker in Colombia indicated that this approach was not nearly as naïve as many hardliners might say it is.

Egeland's book turns next to the Darfur region of Sudan. He visited Darfur four times during his tenure as the U.N. Secretary of Humanitarian Affairs, and each visit presented him with a new slate of disappointments and frustrations. He seems to have been as frustrated with the relaxed attitude of the U.N. Security Council to his increasingly exasperated field reports as he was angered by the Sudanese authorities' demonstration of bad faith in this terrible conflict. Unfortunately, his call for a more decisive international coalition to find a political solution to the Darfur conflict falls short of giving specific recommendations about how to achieve this goal. For example, does the situation in Darfur warrant reexamining the entire governance structure of the U.N.? Or can a workable solution be found within the current decision-making structure? More fundamentally, is it still

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realistic in the post-9/11 world to expect that humanitarian concerns will trump geopolitical alliances?

I wish Egeland had elaborated on the humanitarian impact of the International Criminal Court (ICC) on the Darfur conflict, either in this context or later in the book, when he discusses the conflict in northern Uganda. The ICC's indictments of key actors in the Sudanese government and in Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army — most recently of Sudanese President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir — are certainly unprecedented in the history of humanitarian conflict and international criminal law, and have frustrated many diplomats and conflict resolution experts hoping to find a negotiated solution to these crises. At the same time, the ICC's indictments certainly support Egeland's own analysis of who is to blame for genocide or crimes against humanity in Darfur and northern Uganda, and are consistent with his policy of "speaking truth to power." I wish Egeland had chosen to share his own thoughts on the peace versus justice debate, perhaps using a human security framework to disentangle the seemingly endless discussion over whether promoting peace trumps the importance of achieving justice in a typical humanitarian crisis.

Egeland also discusses the disastrous tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean in late 2004. With some reservations, he is fairly upbeat about the U.N.'s response to this sudden disaster. In addition to vividly illustrating why it is so important for the international aid community to always encourage local ownership and capacity building even in the midst of a crisis response, Egeland also offers the negotiation scholar a fascinating example of how one can work with a "difficult" coalition partner. In the initial days following the disaster, the news media erroneously reported that Egeland called the United States' initial response to the tsunami disaster "stingy." This remark set off a furor that threatened to stymie the desperately needed relief effort. Egeland's ability to side-step stinging personal attacks and insults, and focus instead on the underlying interests of the major players in this situation offers a brilliant example of how hard — and how effective — truly disciplined interest-based negotiating can be.

Egeland also discusses what might be the most closely scrutinized conflict in the contemporary conflict resolution literature. In his role as the U.N. Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs, he oversaw complex negotiations to bring urgently needed relief to isolated and vulnerable Lebanese civilians during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah militants in northern Lebanon. His accounts illustrate just how hard it is for a humanitarian relief operation to maintain neutrality in the midst of a conflict. From a conflict resolution perspective, an even more interesting chapter describes his experience helping initiate the track-two diplomatic effort to bring Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization to a negotiated agreement during the early 1990s. Egeland played a key "insider" role on the small team of Norwegian diplomats who helped organize these

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extraordinarily risky contacts between sworn enemies, and no study of this historical conflict resolution initiative would today be complete without reading Egeland's insider account.

Egeland concludes his book with two African examples of his work as U.N. Humanitarian Coordinator, first in Zimbabwe and next in northern Uganda. While both of these stories are interesting in their own right — and fascinating to anyone familiar with the contexts of these two countries — Egeland again skirts past some of the more interesting questions regarding humanitarian assistance as a whole. For example, at what point does humanitarian assistance become a band-aid that actually causes more harm in the long term than it does good in the short term, simply by barely diffusing social tensions that might otherwise force greater accountability from Africa's dictatorships and oligarchies? Indeed, does a human security lens suggest a different ethical metric by which to judge the overall purpose and effectiveness of humanitarian interventions? And, with reference to the case of northern Uganda, can (or should) someone such as Egeland transition seamlessly from the role of a humanitarian coordinator to that of a conflict mediator? Although Egeland provides us with his own rich first-hand account of what he did, what his motivations were, and how he attempted to succeed with his mission, he leaves these theoretical questions for scholars and academics to tackle.

### **Tasks Left Undone: U.N. Reform**

Egeland ends the book with an optimistic plea to streamline the United Nations and to increase constructive coordination and dialogue among that organization's many member states and subdivisions. He offers his own efforts to streamline the U.N.'s humanitarian response efforts as an example of how to do so (with mixed success), but he leaves open the bigger question of how to do so for the U.N. as a whole. This, I think, is the question to which conflict resolution experts — specifically, dispute systems designers — should devote themselves during the coming years, especially given the realigning geopolitical landscape. Egeland's hope, namely, that the international community can finally live up to its promise of caring for and protecting the world's most vulnerable billion people, may be the fruit of such a noble effort.

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