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## **Humanitarian Organisations as a target for violence**

Humanitarian work has become vulnerable. Organisations like the Red Cross, Doctors without Borders and many others mourn for colleagues who were killed during their missions. In Afghanistan, Iraq or Chechnya humanitarian workers have become targets of violence. What will be the consequences of this development? The withdrawal of helpers and the end of humanitarian missions helping million of people?

Aid organisations act in the direct vicinity of victims and needy people, and thus in the midst of conflicts. Their only protection are the emblems which stand for neutral help, such as the sign of the Red Cross. If such internationally acknowledged emblems are not respected the helpers must withdraw from the area of emergency and leave behind helpless people, abandoned to their destiny.

It is not only the war in Iraq that has created many victims. Around the world there are 150 areas of war and conflict. Many of the 21.4 million people which the Red Cross cared for in 2003 live in countries whose conflicts are no longer or have never been in the centre of media attention. The safety of aid organisations depends on acceptance, in Azerbaijan, Eritrea, Sudan and Congo as well as in Baghdad or the Gaza Strip.

The foundation for such respect is the neutrality and impartiality of help. "Humanitarian Area" is the name for the neutral ground on which aid organisations act in wars and conflicts. Life-threatening working conditions lead to the shrinking of such areas. The division of the world in allied countries and "rogue states", also accelerated by the "war against terror", has not even left the major international humanitarian organisations untouched.

"People associate us with the Western world, which is refused in some parts of the world", said Jakob Kellenberger, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The attacks on the United Nations and the Red Cross in Baghdad as well as the assassination of members of Doctors without Borders give sad evidence of this development. The emblems of aid organisations such as the Red Cross lose their power for protection due to the association with western politics and consequently become targets for violence.

The instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid by politics and powerful rulers is another reason for the reduction of this essential independence. States try to gain control of humanitarian aid.

Food deliveries become tools of conflict management and medical care becomes propaganda. Aid organisations become playing balls of power politics.

The humanitarian disaster in the Darfur region in Sudan, where two million people are threatened by starvation, might become the latest example of such unscrupulousness. Most of the humanitarian workers are waiting in front of shut country borders, media reports say that aid deliveries are sabotaged by the government. The few helpers also have to worry for their safety since fighting flares up regularly.

Another aspect that has changed is the nature of conflicts. Instead of national armies, who fought in earlier wars, now there are guerrillas, militias and child soldiers combating, who know little of the rules of war, the Geneva Conventions or international law. They represent very difficult and often incalculable discussion partners. On the other hand some warriors consider humanitarian organisations “soft targets”, whose expulsion can be used as a means to create pressure.

Shootings and attacks force humanitarian organisations to reconsider their safety strategies. The employment of military or armed protection is unthinkable for most of them, so is giving in and leaving the victims to their fate. Hundreds of colleagues have returned in the field after traumatic experiences because they know that the foolishness of a few extremists must not destroy the life-saving work of humanitarian organisations helping millions of people.