

ACCORD

Plenary Talk Oct. 25, 2016

Rupen Das, DMin

I was asked to share my perspective on the Syrian conflict and the humanitarian crisis and where I see it going.

But before I do that I want to share a little bit about myself so that you would know the context from which I speak. We set up the relief responses for the Baptists in Lebanon and inside Syria in 2011 when the conflict first started by partnering with the Nazarenes, the Church of God, the Presbyterians (known as the National Evangelical Church), besides the Baptists. We were one of the first five agencies that responded. Now a colleague of mine and I coordinate and build capacity of the Baptist churches across Europe, Turkey and Ukraine to respond to the refugees and IDPs. My background in relief is with WV and then with a number of NGOs, bilateral and multilateral donors and agencies. The challenge for me in this crisis was setting up relief responses through local churches in line with international standards and codes of conduct, without compromising the identity and calling of the church.

I want to thank agencies like Food for the Hungry and World Renew, and specifically Pete Howard and Ken Little, who were involved with us in the Syrian response from the very early days, and allowed us to approach the crisis creatively.

There are times in history when because of the horrors of the events, the international community is forced to take stock. In recent history, the Biafran crisis of the late 1960s was one such time, out of which MSF was formed and a new way of responding to humanitarian crises began to take shape. The Rwandan genocide was another such time. Our collective failure resulted in the Red Cross Code of Conduct and the Sphere Standards.

With the Syrian crisis, I sense we are approaching another such time, when we will need to ask ourselves - is there another way of doing things. However, we are not there yet, and probably won't be for another few years, because the brutality of this conflict has not seeped into our consciousness yet.

I want to share four observations on the present crisis and where it is going and then I'll conclude with a couple of comments.

1. Present reality

The Syrian crisis and its overflow into Iraq and the surrounding countries is THE defining humanitarian crisis in the world today. It will enter the vocabulary of humanitarian workers on par with the Biafran crisis, the Ethiopian famine, the Rwandan genocide, Cambodia, the Balkan conflicts, Sierra Leon, Liberia, and many others. Since the Rwandan and the Balkan crises, this is the largest displacement of people with 4.7 million known refugees, and at least 13.5 million inside Syria needing humanitarian aid – many of them having been internally displaced. At least 400,000

have been killed, 1/3rd of them civilians. Eastern Aleppo today is being compared with Sarajevo, as the place where the international community lost all credibility and its moral conscience as a result.

It is not just about the numbers. The stories of the refugees and the IDPs are horrifying at the best. Last month in an informal settlement in Adana in Turkey I met refugee children with burn scars and shrapnel wounds from bombings and rocket attacks. In Lebanon I heard stories of children witnessing family members and friends being killed. A whole generation of children have no access to education, and most of them are on the streets begging or working so that the family would have enough to live on. We've seen this before in Cambodia and Rwanda, where a whole generation is a lost - this time it is the children who lose out, not just the lost opportunities, but tens of thousands have been traumatized by the war.

The crisis is no longer limited to the neighboring hosting countries, the camps and the settlements. The refugee influx into Europe is stretching the social fabric of countries in Europe with the rise in xenophobia and racism, fear of terrorism, and questions about what does it mean to European, German, Dutch, or Swede. The possibilities of extreme right wing xenophobic politics influencing governments are growing

The human impact of this conflict will be felt for generations.

2. Complexity of the Syrian Crisis

This is not just another war. The Syrian crisis is one of the most complex politically. Logistically, it is one of the most challenging to implement.

- BBC in a recent report based on interviews with numerous experts stated that the conflict could last at least another ten years. This is in line with all the research on civil wars since WWII. The research shows that if a civil war is not resolved within the first two years, they will then drag on. The data indicates that half of all civil wars lasted at least for 15 years or more, while others averaged about 7 years. The Lebanese civil war lasted for 15 years. We are now only into the 5th year of the Syrian conflict.

There is no political will to end this conflict, as all the parties are deeply entrenched in their positions. The complexity of having the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Iran and the Shiites, Turkey, the Kurds, Europe, and now China involved – each with their own agenda, does not allow for much common ground. Each of these countries or groups are either directly engaged in combat or are funding and arming proxy militias. At last count, there are at least a 1,000 militias operating inside Syria.

The challenge for humanitarian agencies is to figure out how to fund the humanitarian response over this length of time and deal with donor fatigue, when so many other emergencies get the media headlines and political priorities of donor agencies. Our existing mechanism of project funding – some of which can be multi-year – meaning 2-3 years, does not even begin to address the challenges. The UN agencies repeatedly show that they are significantly underfunded – which then translates into fewer beneficiaries and less aid to those who receive assistance.

We are now seeing the impact of that. There are increasing number of cases of chronic malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies – which we all know has a significant long-term impact on children and their well-being. More and more mothers are reporting that they are unable to breastfeed because of the stress and trauma they experience.

- The second issue on complexity is understanding the dynamics of this conflict. Early in the crisis I had written an analysis which stated that the conflict was being fought in three theatres.
 - There is the military conflict – which we all know about and follow with varying degrees of understanding.
 - The second theatre where the conflict is being fought is in the media. Early in the crisis, groups of opposition members were being trained in Turkey by western governments to become journalists who would provide an alternate version of the conflict to what was being provided by the regime.

This conflict is intense and yet subtle, with manipulations of stories, images, and half-truths. Language and words are critical. When do civilians who are killed become a war crime, and when is it collateral damage? Somewhere in the legal jargon of trying to differentiate between the two and justify our actions, we have lost our humanity.

One of the reasons journalists are being denied access to the war zones is so that each party would have the freedom to portray reality as they would like it to be. The objective is to sway public opinion and political decisions. It takes tremendous wisdom and discernment to know what is behind the stories and images and what the truth is.

- The third theatre the conflict is being fought in is the humanitarian sector. Agencies in government controlled areas have to have approval from the regime and are then restricted in what they can do and where they can go. Those operating in rebel controlled areas either have to negotiate access with the rebels under very strict restrictions, or have to hand over the humanitarian supplies to the rebels to distribute.

The regime will often deny aid agencies to operate in rebel held areas to force people to move into government controlled areas, so that the government would be perceived as the protector of its citizens. All the large rebel groups have humanitarian departments that run bakeries, ensure supplies of food, cooking gas and other basic essentials. They want to be perceived as being able to govern.

It is extremely hard to be neutral in this conflict and to use “do no harm” principles. If we abide by the Red Cross Code of Conduct and believe that the humanitarian imperative comes first, does that override the fact that by doing so I will need to affirm the legitimacy of a rebel group or of the regime?

I remember once speaking with a USAID official and he asked if we could access the least serviced areas inside Syria – which are the rebel controlled areas. And at the same

time he emphasized that we were not to have any contact with deemed terrorist organizations. I wanted to laugh at the absurdity of the request, but had the wisdom not to.

We made a decision in the first year of the conflict that we would not align ourselves with any of the parties in the conflict. The loophole we found was that local churches inside Syria did not have to get government approval to provide humanitarian aid. So we set up an underground operation of getting funds into Syria, training people, doing assessments, and ensuring accountability for funds and supplies. In the very early days it was only us and Oxfam who could operate like this. Today there are still only a handful of agencies that have maintained their neutrality.

But this has huge risks. The same standards for procurement, accounting and audit, and verification of data for assessments and monitoring cannot be maintained. Evaluation is rarely possible. Our traditional models of funding and project design are not relevant in such highly insecure environments with populations that are mobile. This is not to mention issue of protection of staff and partners, and trying to implement the People in Aid Code.

3. The Role of International Humanitarian Law and the Rules of War

Since the 2003 Iraq war, international humanitarian law and the rules of war have almost ceased to be a consideration by combatants in the region. With the Syrian conflict, simple issues of humanitarian access, humanitarian space, protection of humanitarian workers, of civilians and non-combatants, protection of places of religious worship and hospitals, the issue of conditionality of aid and so much more are ignored by all parties in the conflict. Having observed this first hand, in 2009 I wrote about humanitarian space in unconventional or asymmetric warfare. The rules of war – the Geneva Conventions – were drafted to mitigate the human impact in wars fought between nation states. All the conflicts today are either between non-state actors, or between a government and a non-state actor. As a result, it is very easy to justify that the rules of war do apply to these conflicts. So we justify torture, summary executions, forcible eviction of civilians from their homes, using civilians as human shields, starvation and rape as weapons of war.

Some of you may have noted that last week the ICRC tried to contact ISIS in Mosul in Mosul to ensure protection of civilians, but failed.

Steven Pinker in his book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* says that the times have improved and that fewer people are dying from conflicts today than they have previously. However, in the conflicts that are still ongoing, the brutality has not diminished and the way we fight the wars has taken a step back.

4. The Religious Dimension of this conflict

As humanitarians we do not like to speak about religion because we treat people on the basis of need and not because of race, ethnicity or religion. Yet this crisis has a religious dimension that few previous emergencies have had. Our reading of history is a secular one and we interpret

geopolitics on the basis of power and greed, and do not understand the deep undercurrents of religion in the Syrian crisis. Regardless of what some analysts say, one major dimension of the conflict is the Sunni-Shia struggle dating back to 680 AD and the battle of Karbala. Many of you may have noted that the senior most Saudi cleric a few months ago proclaimed that the Shias and the Iranians were not Muslims and should be allowed to go on the Hajj.

In 2012 there was an editorial in Al Monitor which explored the motivations for the Russians wanting to get involved in Syria before they were involved militarily. Besides having a warm water port, a strategic ally, a footprint in the Middle East, and a chance to test new weapon systems, it said that the Russia of today sees itself as the protector of the Orthodox Church worldwide and predicted greater military involvement in Syria to protect the interests of the Orthodox Church. Other analysts have noted the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on both the government's internal and foreign policies. Aleppo had the largest concentration of Greek and Armenian Orthodox Christians in the Middle East. Is it any surprise that we are seeing what we are today? Their reasoning is that the world cannot be allowed to see Islam conquer one of the major homes of Orthodox Christianity.

We all are aware of the anti-Muslim sentiments across Europe, Australia, and here in North America. These are specifically targeted at refugees and migrants, most of whom are Muslims.

Religion is an integral part of life in the Middle East. Everybody has their religion printed on their ID cards. Politics and elections take place on the basis of religion and not issues. It is not enough to say that we operate on humanitarian principles and do not take religion into consideration when assessing need. The very foundations of society in the Middle East are based on the fact that each tribe takes care of their own. Ibn Khaldun in the 14th century wrote about the way tribes survive in the desert is by taking care of their own. They are really not concerned with other tribes. This attitude is still very prevalent in the Middle East today.

In our humanitarian aid program, we cannot be blind to the religious dimensions. Christians helping Muslims has a huge impact, when it is assumed that Christians will only help Christian. On the flip side, a question that many Arab Christians are asking is if the Christian humanitarian agencies are also concerned about Christians in need – or are the agencies going overboard to help Muslims, and Yezidis to make a point that they are not being biased. Not an easy question, nor are there easy answers.

Some concluding comments:

- A. This conflict has no sign of ending soon. There is no political will in the short term to end this crisis. As humanitarian agencies we will need to ask what is our commitment to this crisis and how will we fund our response
- B. We need to find our voice again and as a humanitarian community speak about issues of protection and holding our governments and their allies at least, to the rules of war and international humanitarian law. Till now we have been completely silent.

- C. The refugee crisis in Europe has been temporarily contained because the Balkans route has been blocked other than to people smugglers. This has resulted in a backlog of refugees in Turkey and Greece. Turkey hosts 2.7 million Syrian refugees, and Greece over 60,000. The ACT Alliance reported that in Serbia, the number of refugees in just this past month increased from 4,000 to 5,000. Turkey has said that if the EU does not release the promised funds and give Turks visa free travel to Europe, they will open their borders with Greece and Bulgaria and let the refugees proceed towards Europe - creating a crisis again in the transit Eastern European countries, who are against the refugees. There are increasing number of refugees now starting in Egypt and trying to reach Italy, with more drowning in the Mediterranean. Yet there are so few humanitarian agencies responding.

Yet there are rays of hope in the midst of what seems a very discouraging scenario. For the first time in a long while, we are seeing local churches in a conflict as major humanitarian actors. Churches in Europe are speaking about being prophetic in the face of racism and xenophobia and demonstrating what the Kingdom of God looks like, that it is a place of compassion. We are seeing churches in Europe and the Middle East being transformed as a result. Finally, we are seeing increasing cooperation between Christian and Islamic NGOs and community organizations in Europe and the Middle East in helping the refugees – showing, that just maybe we can live in peace.