

Left behind to starve

A humanitarian disaster is engulfing Africa as cash is poured into war and its aftermath

There is surely no more obvious symptom of the corruption of western politics than the disproportion between the money available for sustaining life and the money available for terminating it. We could, I think, expect that, if they were asked to vote on the matter, most of the citizens of the rich world would demand that their governments spend as much on humanitarian aid as they spend on developing new means of killing people. But the military-industrial complex is a beast which becomes both fiercer and hungrier the more it is fed.

As the US prepares to spend some \$12bn a month on bombing the Iraqis, it has so far offered only \$65m to provide them with food, water, sanitation, shelter and treatment for the injuries they are likely to receive. A confidential UN contingency plan for Iraq, which was leaked in January, suggests that the war could expose around one million children to “risk of death from malnutrition”. It warns that “the collapse of essential services in Iraq could lead to a humanitarian emergency of proportions well beyond the capacity of UN agencies and other aid organisations”. Around 60% of the population is entirely dependent on the oil for food programme, administered by the Iraqi government. This scheme was suspended by the UN yesterday, leaving the Iraqis reliant on foreign aid. The money pledged so far is enough to sustain them for less than a fortnight.

It is hard to believe, however, that the US government will leave them to starve once it has captured their country. For the weeks or months during which Iraq dominates

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the news, the US will be obliged to defend them from the most immediate impacts of the institutional collapse its war will cause. Afterwards, like the people of Afghanistan, the Iraqis will be first forgotten by the media and then deserted by those who promised to support them.

But even before the first troops cross the border, the impending war has caused a global humanitarian crisis. As donor countries set aside their aid budgets to save both themselves and the US from embarrassment under the camera lights in Baghdad, they have all but ceased to provide money to other nations. The world, as a result, could soon be confronted by a humanitarian funding crisis graver than any since the end of the second world war.

Every year, in November, the UN agencies which deal with disasters launch what they call a “consolidated appeal” for each of the countries suffering a “complex emergency”. They expect to receive the money they request by May of the following year. The payments and promises they have extracted so far chart the collapse of international concern for the people of almost every nation except Iraq.

In Eritrea, for example, the drought is so severe that the water table has fallen by 10 metres. Most of the nation’s crops have failed and grain prices have doubled. Seventy per cent of its 3.3 million people are now classified as vulnerable to famine. The UN has asked the rich countries for \$163m to help them. It has received \$4m, or 2.5% of the money it requested.

Burundi, where almost one-sixth of the inhabitants have been forced out of their homes by conflict and natural disasters, and which is now officially listed as the third poorest nation on earth, has received 3% of its UN request. Liberia, where rebels have rendered much of the western part of the country uninhabitable, forcing some 500,000 people out of their homes, has been given 1.2%; Sierra Leone, where lassa fever is now rampaging through the refugee camps, has received 1%; and Guinea, which has recently taken 82,000 refugees from Cote d’Ivoire, 0.4%. Somalia, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo have each received less than 6%.

Much of the money for these invisible countries has come from donor nations with relatively small economies, such as Sweden, Norway, Canada and Ireland. “The state of Africa,” Tony Blair told his party conference in October 2001, “is a scar on the conscience of the world, but if the world focused on it, we could heal it.” Well, let it now be a scar on the conscience of Tony Blair.

As a result of this unprecedented failure by the rich nations to cough up, the people of the forgotten countries will, very soon, begin to starve to death. The UN has warned that “a break in supplies” to Eritrea “is now inevitable”. The World Food Programme has started feeding fewer people there, but will run out of food within two months. In

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Burundi it can, it says, continue feeding people “for another four weeks”. Beans will run out in Liberia this month; cereals in May. One hundred thousand refugees in Guinea could find themselves without food by August. Yet neither of the two governments which are about to launch a “humanitarian war” appear to be concerned by the impending humanitarian catastrophes in the world’s poorest nations.

The aid crisis is now so serious that it is restricting disaster relief even in nations which are considered by the major powers to be geopolitically important. The UN agencies have so far received just 2.9% of their request for Palestine, and 8.4% of the money they need in Afghanistan.

The latter figure is, in light of the repeated promises made by the nations prosecuting the war there, extraordinary. “To the Afghan people we make this commitment,” Blair pledged during the same speech in October 2001. “The conflict will not be the end. We will not walk away, as the outside world has done so many times before.” Three months later, the UN estimated that Afghanistan would need at least \$10bn for reconstruction over the following five years. The US, which had just spent \$4.5bn on bombing the country, offered \$300m for the first year and refused to make any commitment for subsequent years. This year, George Bush “forgot” to produce an aid budget for Afghanistan, until he was forced to provide another \$300m by Congress.

The Afghan government, which has an annual budget of just \$460m - or around half of what the US still spends every month on chasing the remnants of al-Qaida through the mountains - is effectively bankrupt. At the beginning of this month the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, flew to Washington to beg George Bush for more money. He was given \$50m, \$35m of which the US insists is spent on the construction of a five-star hotel in Kabul. Karzai, in other words, has discovered what the people of Iraq will soon find out: generosity dries up when you are yesterday’s news.

If, somehow, you are still suffering from the delusion that this war is to be fought for the sake of the Iraqi people, I would invite you to consider the record of the prosecuting nations. We may believe that George Bush and Tony Blair have the interests of foreigners at heart only when they spend more on feeding them than they spend on killing them. #