



War, intervention and development

The Sierra Leone Sanctions Debate

Robin White:

In 1997 sanctions were imposed on Sierra Leone by the United Nations and the International community as part of a deliberate and determined effort to move from power the AFRC junta, which had toppled president Tejan Kabbah's democratically elected government. What was unusual about the sanctions was that they were backed up by a UK ban on humanitarian aid, and specifically food aid in the form of rice. Rice is very much loved by Sierra Leoneans, both rich and poor. I'm Robin White and throughout the Sierra Leone war I was editing the BBC World Service's daily current affairs program Focus on Africa. I remember the controversy over the sanction at the time. I'm joined now by two people who took active parts in the sanctions debate in 1997. Peter Penfold, who as British High Commissioner, took refuge in Conakry Guinea, with the elected government of Sierra Leone, and was one of the most important people in the decision to include rice in the sanctions. And Margie Buchanan-Smith, who was the emergency and policy head of the British NGO Action Aid, and was one of the most outspoken opponents of food sanctions of the time. Before we go into the specifics of the sanctions in Sierra Leone, I'd like to start by asking both of you what your opinion is of sanctions in general. Are they effective? And in what circumstances are they justified? Let's start with you Peter Penfold ...

Peter Penfold:

I think it's very difficult to look at all the various conflict that we've seen certainly since the second World war and try and identify where sanctions specifically have actually achieved what they set out to do. But that's not to say I think that sanctions should not be used. I think targeted sanctions for a specific or a limited purpose can be a useful part of a process in trying to achieve what you're trying to achieve.

Robin White:

Margie Buchanan-Smith?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

I think my concern around sanctions is to apply the sanctions in such a way that its actually the political, ruling leaders that your actually affecting and that your really inflicting damage on them, and I think the concerns that I've always had around sanctions is whether they're in fact hurting the poorest people in the country who may not have even elected those leaders, and how can you make sure that those people actually have access to the basic needs; basic food, whatever it is that they need to survive, and implementing any sanctions on a regime, its protecting those people that is important, and that it's a question of actually trying to make sanctions as tight, or as many people say now; going for *smart sanctions* that will really affect the people that you are trying to have an impact on.

Robin White:

What about in a country where most people agreed that there should be sanctions? I'm thinking of South Africa. Most people ... most black South Africans wanted sanctions.

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

Absolutely. But again its how can you make sure that people who are in real need are not being adversely affected, and I'm really talking here about lives being threatened; where you've got people who are simply struggling to survive and to meet their basic needs. I think that's where there have to be some exemptions to the sanctions to make sure that those people are not being adversely affected.

Robin White:

Lets turn to Sierra Leone specifically now, which is what were here to talk about, where the main point of contention is over the inclusion in sanctions of humanitarian aid, and rice in particular. In 2003 the Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian dialogue, a respected organization based in Geneva, issued a report which was highly critical of Sierra Leone sanctions. This is what they said:

Henry Dunant Quotation:

Based on the reasonable assumption that civilian lives that may otherwise have been saved were lost unnecessarily, this period stands as one of the most shameful episodes regarding international humanitarian intervention action in modern times. Those encouraging the policy may well have been in breach of the Geneva conventions through attempts to block humanitarian assistance from reaching a civilian population.

Robin White:

Peter Penfold, one of the most shameful episodes in humanitarian action? True, or not?

Peter Penfold:

No, I would not agree with that at all. I mean first of all I think we have to be specifically clear that the sanctions as such that were imposed by the United Nations and endorsed by the UK were specifically related to three issues. One was the sanction against arms and ammunitions, the second was against petroleum and petroleum products, and the third was a travel ban. Where the humanitarian aid came in was an aid policy decision taken by the British government that they would cease all British aid to Sierra Leone until such time as the constitution and the elected government was restored. And that decision included the funding that was going to NGO's, and NGO's that were providing humanitarian assistance.

Robin White:

Did you yourself back that from the very beginning?

Peter Penfold:

Yes I did. The other point about the Henry Dunant point that I would certainly argue was that I think first of all probably as we'll discuss it was very difficult to have a precise picture of what was going on. But I would argue very strongly that far many more lives were being lost because of the continuing presence of the Junta and the activities of the junta and the RUF than the fact that humanitarian aid was not going into the country.

Robin White: (To Margie Buchanan-Smith)

You wouldn't agree with that?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

What I wouldn't agree with is that humanitarian aid should be withheld as part of this withholding of all aid because that actually contravenes basic humanitarian principles. Basic humanitarian principles; which state that all humanitarian aid should be provided on the basis of impartiality. In other words regardless of race, creed, and also regardless of any political standpoint.

Robin White:

How hard did you fight the British government at the time?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

Well, in our view we thought we fought the British government pretty hard.

Robin White:

But you lost.

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

Well we didn't manage to reverse that particular policy decision at that time, but we did notice a softening of that position later on, and we would like to think that it did have an

impact upon the British Government's policy, and in particular the Department for International Development's policy, on humanitarian aid ...

Robin White:

Did you have angry arguments with them?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

Yes, I think it would be fair to say that we did have some angry arguments with them, yeah.

Robin White:

Storming out?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

No, we didn't storm out. No, we carried on talking. But we held very different points of view. We met with DFID officials, we had, yeah, we had some very lively discussions and we also presented our evidence to the International Development's select committee in the House of Commons.

Robin White:

Most people in Sierra Leone, as far as we can tell, disagreed with you. Here's Davidson Kuyateh, a leading Civil Rights activist at the time:

Davidson Kuyateh – insert:

What Benefit actually would there be with humanitarian aid, and besides, who would have guaranteed that with humanitarian aid in this country the junta was not going to use it to their benefit. We didn't believe with that situation the ordinary man would have had access to the food that he or she would need, so for us we thought that humanitarian aid of whatever kind would have added to the misery that was prevalent at the time.

Robin White: (To Margie Buchanan Smith)

Would you like to comment on that?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

I think that ... I mean how can we ever know that the majority of Sierra Leoneans thought that humanitarian aid shouldn't be provided? We were getting feedback from some local communities that actually they did feel that relief aid should continue to be provided. I think we completely understood the concerns that humanitarian aid might be abused and might be siphoned off, and certainly we did not want humanitarian aid to be used in that way. So we did not want the military junta using humanitarian aid for their own political or military purposes.

Robin White:

Wouldn't they have inevitably have done that?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

Well no, you see that is where we felt it was possible to provide humanitarian aid in ways that would reach the people that really needed it. And indeed is you look around many different countries in Africa; that's the challenge that's facing humanitarian agencies all over the place, whether it's south Sudan, whether it's Liberia, or whether it's been Somalia. And its not to say that were always 100% successful, but actually if you start to say our fear of that aid being abused means that we simply cant provide it at all, then we've actually given up before were even started.

Robin White:

Yes but how much stealing by the military junta would have been successful? If they had just stolen half of it would that have been acceptable?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

I don't think that would have been successful. I think that would have been ... that in itself would have been far too much.

Robin White:

What proportion of theft would have been acceptable?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

I don't think I would look at it in that way, I think the way I would look at it is, in what way can we provide humanitarian aid in a way that it's most likely to reach the people who most needed it. And to give you an example of that, because just prior to this whole period that were talking about, aid agencies had had their fingers burned in Liberia where there had been tremendous looting of aid vehicles, relief aid, etc, and in response to that agencies had realized that what they needed to do was, in a sense, go for a minimal approach to providing humanitarian assistance. So for instance rather than providing food aid, in bulk, which is inevitably a valuable resource, you'd go for wet feeding centers, where you can be sure you know who is actually receiving the food. I'm not saying that would have been possible across all of Sierra Leone, but I'm saying by using strategies like that you can minimize the likelihood of the food, or whatever the relief resources are, being siphoned off, and you can maximize the likelihood that it gets to the people who need it?

Robin White:

Peter?

Peter Penfold:

Well I would say that we felt at the time that Action Aid or any other NGO's could not guarantee that the aid, if they delivered it, would get to those people who needed it, if indeed they needed it in the first place.

Robin White:

Are you suggesting that they didn't need it? That people were eating enough?

Peter Penfold:

We didn't take this decision lightly at all, I mean certainly it's not a question we were going to starve people to death for the sake of some political gain. We were monitoring the situation very, very closely. As you know, I was in Conakry at the time. When we first when there, every evening we had a meeting in the hotel where I was staying with all the UN agencies, all the NGO's, all the diplomatic missions used to meet to monitor what was going on. Throughout the day while I was there, I would be in telephone contact with a number of people inside Sierra Leone. I would be talking to them quite regularly. And we would be in contact with all the people who were coming out of Sierra Leone; throughout the ten months we were there, people were continuing to come out. We were also in touch with other government around the world who were also monitoring it. So although ... and I'm not saying we had an exact picture ... I feel that certainly we had a better picture sitting in Conakry than any one else did, on how serious the situation was.

Robin White:

What kind of government did you perceive this to be? Brutal, hopeless, what?

Peter Penfold:

Well, initially we didn't perceive it as government at all. And of course that's exactly what the Sierra Leonean people said. They refused to acknowledge the junta as their government, as people will recall. It was an amazing time of civil society coming together, and they just refused to acknowledge the junta; the students refused to go to school, and as we all know education is one of the most important things to anybody.

Robin White:

But were they impotent, or brutal or both?

Peter Penfold:

They were both. They were certainly incompetent. It was a joke of course; every time they tried to form a government they would name people as ministers and immediately we'd see those people appearing in Conakry, they had the fear of death ... not wanting to be called a minister in the junta. And they were also very brutal. There were endless examples of stories were being told of the rebels going around hacking peoples arms and legs off and killing them. But importantly we were also monitoring very closely how serious the humanitarian situation was. And we even had a team come out in September that year; a European union team who collated all the available evidence that we had. And our conclusion was that in general that there was no humanitarian crisis taking place in Sierra Leone. There was nobody dying of hunger in Sierra Leone. Yes there was some evidence of malnutrition amongst some of the young children in Freetown, yes there was evidence of measles, but generally there was not a humanitarian crisis which would not justify us having a different decision over whether we should start NGOs providing humanitarian aid.

Robin White:

Margie did anybody die in Sierra Leone because of the food sanctions?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

Our view was that the humanitarian situation was deteriorating after the coup. I mean we're talking about one of the poorest countries in the world here. And of course the effect of an economic embargo is to make it much more difficult for food supplies to be transported around the country. And whilst I agree with Peter that it was difficult to have really detailed reports of what was happening, at the same time there was information coming out of Sierra Leone at that time, which showed malnutrition rates increasing. In the northern districts malnutrition rates had increased to around 15% by the end of 1997. We had reports coming back from our local staff of people reducing their intake of food to say one meal a day, which is immediately a sign of distress, and there was a report that came out from actually UN security assessment, and I quote here; 'there were numerous corroborated reports of a significant increase in deaths due to malnutrition.'

Robin White:

But do you know of any one person who died?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

I'm not going to quote to you one or two people who died because I don't think that's what we're talking about here. We're talking about an overall deterioration in the situation. And I think it's widely accepted that there were inevitably ... there were inevitably an increase in mortality, which accompanies an increase in malnutrition.

Robin White:

Could you have ignored the ban and just gone ahead and sent food aid in, willy-nilly, somehow?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

Well I think the point is that if you had resources in-country you could carry on distributing those resources, I mean with great care, to make sure that you minimize the chances of them being looted that you reach the people who needed the relief, but I think that what really concerned us was the UK government's decision to withhold humanitarian aid, which as I was mentioning earlier went against humanitarian principles which indeed the UK government is signed up to in the Geneva conventions. And the other thing that really concerned us was that the Department For International Development had only shortly before published what they call their *Ten Principles of Humanitarianism*, and one of them was to provide humanitarian aid on an impartial basis. And again, I can quote here; 'our help will seek to relieve civilian suffering without discrimination on political or other grounds – with priority given to the most urgent cases of distress.' And we felt that this was a clear example of where aid was being on political grounds, and that was in direct contradiction with humanitarian principles.

Robin White:

I wonder if there is some sense of self interest in this because you were receiving funding from the British Government, and you know, its your job, you have to get on with it; you don't have a job unless you're distributing aid.

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

I would refute that for a couple of reasons. This was an argument that was thrown around at the time.

Robin White:

Ah really, they accused you of that? People did?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

Well it was when people were saying, is this really about Action Aid or is this about the people of Sierra Leone? Then we actually refuted that very easily, because we still did have some resources. So it was not that we were 100% dependent on aid form the Department For International Development, but we were concerned with the point of principle here that humanitarian aid is supposed to be given unconditionally; that's what's in the Geneva Conventions, that's what's in International Humanitarian Law, and in this case, it was not happening, and that's what we were concerned about, and we were also concerned about it in the case of Sierra Leone, but as ... was this a precedent? Was this something that we were going to see from now on, and we felt that it had to be fought on those grounds, and we knew that we had the backing of a lot of other UK NGOs in taking this stance.

Robin White:

Peter you were breaking the Geneva Convention, that's the charge.

Peter Penfold:

No I think we're losing the wider picture here. As I say all the available information we had was that there was not a humanitarian crisis. But more importantly, as I said right at the beginning, the worst humanitarian problem was the continuing existence of the junta, and all the junta was doing to the people: The human rights abuses, the atrocities, and people were certainly dying, people were suffering; not from a lack of food or humanitarian supplies but from the very evil and brutal regime that was continuing. And it was not just us who was saying this, I mean an important part of making all our decisions, was to be guided by what the Sierra Leone people themselves were saying. And certainly all the Sierra Leone people that I was in touch with, as I say, and I was sort of speaking to them regularly, every day on the telephone, I had endless streams of people coming out of Sierra Leone; they were very clear in their mind, and they didn't want to see the international community doing anything to prolong the life of that junta one extra day.

Robin White:

Yes Peter, but is it totally up to the Sierra Leonean people if there's is an overall principle in the Geneva Convention, that people should not be deprived of food aid?

Peter Penfold:

I think it's a more important principle involved that people have a right to live in a peaceful and humane way without an evil regime bludgeoning them in the way that they were. And this clearly was the view of the people, and I mean, I cite one example that happened to me which, as you may know, during the sanctions regime they did manage to get a ship ... a tanker managed to get in providing some fuel, now up until then there had been no fuel in the country, so therefore the people, particularly in Freetown, had been without electricity, they had been without vehicles running around; a pretty miserable existence added to their already miserable existence. You would have thought that when that tanker came in and suddenly for the first time for weeks, if not for months they suddenly had electricity, they would have been overjoyed. Not at all; my phone never stopped ringing that day from people in Freetown saying 'what the hell is going on? You assured us you would impose the

sanctions regime that would stop this fuel, why didn't you stop this? Why did you allow that tanker to get in? Don't you realize this will just prolong the life of the junta?!

Robin White:

If people had started dying, and there were pictures in the world's press and on television of people dying of starvation, would you have changed your mind?

Peter Penfold:

Certainly yes, I think there would have been a strong ground for that consideration. The policy is such anyway, as it was announced, never said *No humanitarian aid at any cost*. What we said was that we did not feel it was justified to provide funding for humanitarian aid; a) because it was not needed at that time but if the situation changed then we said that in our statements of the time, we would then look at it. But then we would also need to look at it in the context of whether it could be guaranteed that that humanitarian assistance would get to the people who needed it. And I come back to the point that I raised earlier; I don't think that the NGOs could have guaranteed that. Bear in mind that all the expatriate staff were no longer in the countries, so it was very difficult to monitor what was going on, and clearly a lot of this humanitarian aid ... particularly the food, would have sort of been hijacked by the soldiers and the rebels. I had a discussion with some NGO's about this about what is ... the point that you were just making just now Robin ... about what is the acceptable limit of how much you allow to be taken off. And already the NGO's at that time were saying they'd had to raise their level of their level of acceptance from what used to be something like a 12% fallout, and they were prepared to go up to 30%, 35% or 40%. The other aspect specifically I want to say about rice, because rice is, as you say is the food that Sierra Leoneans like, but in the context that we were in at that time rice became more than just a food substance; it became the currency. There were no banks; all the banks had closed down, and therefore bags of rice was just like bags of dollars, so in fact to have brought bags of rice in was just like bringing in sack loads of dollars in, which would also have helped keep the junta in power.

Robin White:

Margie, as it became clear that people were not dying, at least in large numbers, did you start changing your mind?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

Well we didn't but I think the reason is that as we know from so many different humanitarian crises, particularly on the African continent, but also around the world; it's notoriously difficult to establish exactly how many people are dying in any of these crises, unless you get very large refugee movements, or population movements, where you get large numbers of people living in one place, and that's when it becomes, sadly, it becomes newsworthy, and those are the pictures that get splashed across newspapers and TV screens ...

Robin White:

But as I recall people were not dying in large numbers.

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

We don't know, I really would say that we don't know. I would say that it wasn't a massive refugee crisis on the scale that we've seen ...

Robin White:

If they had been dying in large numbers the junta would have made political capital out of it, wouldn't they? ... And they couldn't find anybody to put into pictures for the outside world to see.

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

Well again I'd come back to actually what's happening in humanitarian crises like the one we had in Sierra Leone in '97 where actually where malnutrition rates are going up, that is something that is possible to monitor on a fairly regular basis, and the information showed the malnutrition rates were going up. And it's within those situations that increased mortality

is often a hidden trend, where people are not moving and are ... and therefore it is not sort of evidently happening on a large scale, then you don't have those shocking pictures that we associate with so many refugee situations. As I say there's now a number of studies from a number of different countries in Africa, including interestingly enough Sudan in the early '90s where similarly there was a break on humanitarian aid and a withholding of humanitarian aid, and actually studies have shown that as a result of malnutrition rates going up there was an increased hidden mortality in villages and rural areas where people were living; they were not leaving there villages but they were staying in their villages, and malnutrition and mortality was going up. So, for those reasons we took the increased malnutrition rates quite seriously, and we felt that humanitarian aid was being withheld for all the wrong reasons.

Robin White:

Peter?

Peter Penfold:

All the decisions that were made about this were directed to the situation in Sierra Leone at that time, I mean I'm not necessarily saying that would make the same sort of decisions in a different conflict situation, but I think, as I said, there was no evidence at all, and subsequently has there never been any evidence that there was mass starvation, mass numbers of people dying, as a result of this decision. If that had been the case, it would have come to light by now; that bodies would have been found and so on. So I think that the decision we made at the time, based on the information we had at the time, has proved to be more or less accurate. There was no mass starvation, no mass killings. And importantly, I'll come back to this point; the Sierra Leone people themselves were fully supportive of this decision at that time. They were concerned to see the end of this junta. They felt that they were prepared to suffer and lead a miserable life, if it were just hasten the removal of this junta and bring back the democratically elected government for which they had also made great sacrifices, bringing them into power in 1996.

Robin White:

Some people we spoke to in Sierra Leone said that a combination of dialogue with the junta and food aid as a weapon might have brought the junta to its heel?

Peter Penfold:

Certainly the policy was a combination of sanctions and dialogue, which was to bring the junta to agree to stand down and allow the restoration of the government; that was the official policy; of course the ECOWAS policy added onto that the use of force.

Robin White:

But there wasn't much talking going on between you and the junta was there?

Peter Penfold:

There was a lot of talk going on between the Junta and ECOWAS, I mean don't ... it was decided at the time. The United Nations and the international community decided to put their full support and weight behind the efforts of the ECOWAS foreign affairs committee: The Committee of Five. So there was dialogue going on all the time between the junta and those foreign ministers and those in the ECOWAS governments, which we were supporting and which I used to attend some of those meetings as an observer, so there was dialogue but it wasn't direct dialogue, because it wasn't considered appropriate. Effectively we were looking still at that time of looking at it as an African problem with an African solution, led by ECOWAS and the OAU.

Robin White:

They were desperate to be loved this junta; they kept calling us at the BBC for instance. They were desperate to be loved and understood.

Peter Penfold:

Not least by their own people, because their own people didn't even love them either, so yes, certainly they were desperate to be loved.

Robin White:

Was there anything loveable about them?

Peter Penfold:

Only when they stood down finally. No. I don't think there was anything loveable. Before I went to Conakry I spent a week negotiating with Jonny Paul Koroma, and those who committed the coup, and in fact, as a result of those weeks of discussions, Jonny Paul Koroma had agreed to stand down. The sad fact was that of course had had opened to back door to the RUF rebels to come in. And when the RUF discovered that Jonny Paul Koroma and the soldiers were about the stand down, the RUF stopped them from doing that. So there was an acceptance I think from the army in the early days that they could have stood down, but the RUF rebels put a stop to that and carried on their atrocities.

Robin White:

It was all over very quickly in fact wasn't it, there were only there for ten months?

Peter Penfold:

Well, it wasn't! Ten months is a very long time I think if you're living in Freetown or Sierra Leone at that time. I mean I found it in fact remarkable more the other way; that for ten months, both the Sierra Leone people, by far the vast majority of them, and the international community, remained united. And it was an important plank of the policy to ensure that they did remain united. I mean, not even people like Gaddafi or Castro came out in support of the Junta. I think there was therefore a clear message being sent to the junta that they had to stand down, and part of the reasoning why the international community stayed so solidly together was that they were realizing that the junta was totally incapable of governing the country and providing any form of assistance to the people. That therefore is related to the whole question of assistance going in. The junta could have undoubtedly played it to their effect; that is say, for example, shiploads of humanitarian assistance was coming in they would have played it that this was thanks to their efforts and so on. And would have allowed for them to create the impression that they were governing the country properly.

Robin White:

So what was the crucial thing in bringing down this regime? Was it sanctions, was it ECOMOG, was it diplomacy, what was it?

Peter Penfold:

I think it was a combination of various things; it was a combination of the continuing dialogue it was a combination of ... partly the sanctions. But undoubtedly it was also the force as well. As we found out on many, many occasions they were not going to stand down voluntarily, certainly not the RUF, were not going to allow the junta to stand down and it required, also, the force as well. The force was provided by ECOMOG, and in particular the Nigerian forces. But that had also to be backed up by the strong international community, the position, and it had to be clearly backed up by the views of the Sierra Leonean people. So you had all the right ingredients to ensure that it took place, and these were very specific ingredients to the Sierra Leone situation, and I come back to this point again: I'm not saying to resolve the problem in Northern Uganda now, or in Ethiopia or in Congo you can just use the blueprint of Sierra Leone, but there was one clear message that we were sending out, and which we hoped that would be sending a message for the whole of Africa: I mean when we were in Conakry it was not just a question of restoring the legitimate government of Sierra Leone, we were trying to send a message for the whole of Africa that this would be the last military coup in Africa; that if any other bunch of soldiers suddenly decided one morning to get up and overthrow the legitimate government, they would get the same reaction, hopefully from their own people, and from the international community. And when we did actually restore president Kabbah's government in March of '98, those of us who had been involved felt we'd done something as a contribution to the future peace and democracy of Africa.

Robin White:

Have you?

Peter Penfold:

I think we had for a while; sadly the next coup that came along was just in neighboring Ivory Coast, and I'm afraid there we slid back again. Because then we went back into the old system of coming to this bunch of soldiers and saying, "Oh you naughty boys, you shouldn't have done that, now when are you going to have your democratic elections?" And I think as a result of that, particularly in Ivory Coast's case we've seen that country plunge from one crisis to the other.

Robin White:

Margie I know this is a slight exaggeration but what Peter seems to be saying is if it was left to you and you'd put in food aid and things, the junta might be still there today. That you'd be responsible for keeping alive a ruthless military regime.

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

Well I think that is quite a large exaggeration because actually I think the things that Peter is saying about the international pressure on the junta and the fact it was pretty much universally condemned, I think are all really important points and we at no point taking issue with any of that ...

Robin White:

But you might have prolonged this junta's life.

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

No. That's where I disagree, because in providing humanitarian assistance, in a very targeted way, and minimal humanitarian assistance, we weren't talking about enormous shiploads of humanitarian assistance pouring in, and allowing that to be grabbed by the military; what we were talking about was looking at projects on a case by case basis, and, I mean, we completely understood that whichever donor, whether it was the UK government, or any other donor, they would want to be reassured that that assistance was going to get to those most in need, but we felt that at least projects should have been looked at on a case by case basis; who were the people in need? How were we most ensuring that we were going to reach them? And if that had been the position that was taken then I don't think you could possibly claim that humanitarian assistance would have shored up the regime.

Robin White:

But don't aid agencies also have a duty to think in wider terms? You need to think not just about providing food for the hungry but you also need to think in terms of peace, democracy and these kinds of issues?

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

Absolutely, and in that sense I think one of the real areas of progress in humanitarian work is I think that most agencies working in a place like Sierra Leone are actually investing much more in their own kind of political analysis, so that whatever they are doing they are doing that with a much stronger and more sophisticated textual analysis. But I would still come back to the point that if you come back to the Geneva Conventions, and the principles of humanitarianism, then do what you do in a politically informed way, but provide that aid impartially, and do not withhold it for political reasons.

Robin White:

But what about the argument that the best way to reduce people suffering in Sierra Leone was to just get rid of this regime as quickly as possible and by any means.

Margie Buchanan-Smith:

Again I come back to the principles of humanitarianism because as soon as you start entering into those kinds of calculations, I mean they are very tricky calculations to make, and its sort of like how many lives do we sacrifice in order to get a better solution in the long term ... But I'd just like to make one other point around humanitarian principles; one of the reasons why humanitarian agencies talk so much about these principles of impartiality and humanity is because the best way of them gaining access to the people in need is to be saying to whoever it is waging the war we are not interested in trying to influence the course of this war; our commitment to you is that we are working on the basis of impartiality and were just trying to reach the people who need that assistance. It may sound very simplistic, but it's actually a critical point in terms of gaining access to people in need in the middle of a war, and I think that once agencies stop working to those principles, then their chances of reaching people in need are ... I mean you might as well just forget it, there just not going to be able to do it.

Robin White:

Peter the last word from you.

Peter Penfold:

When you talk about sort of Geneva conventions, the important thing about the Geneva Convention is the protection of people's human rights and to prevent human atrocities. We had a situation in Sierra Leone where people were being brutally murdered, their arms and legs were being hacked off, the women were being raped, the children were being kidnapped, their homes were being destroyed, the city was being destroyed, the government's infrastructure had collapsed, there was no police, there was no law and order; these were the things that had to be corrected. People were not complaining that they didn't have enough to eat they were complaining about all those awful things, and we had to have a commitment to ensure that that was removed and that the democratic government was backed. There was no people dying of mass hunger and so we didn't want to do anything which could in any way contribute towards keeping the suffering of that people going on any longer than it did.

Robin White:

There we are. Two views, nobody's changed their view, but thank you very much indeed for joining me in this program. Margie Buchanan-Smith. Peter Penfold Thank you very much indeed.