

Human Rights

Humanita

By Conor Foley

Those keen to 'do something' about global suffering in 2007 had to be reminded of the dictum: 'first of all: do no harm'

THE humanitarian news story of 2007 was the announcement that the number of refugees in the world increased for the first time in five years.

One of the arguments used in favour of "humanitarian interventions" is that conflicts, by uprooting large numbers of people, have a destabilising effect that extends beyond the borders of the state in which they take place. It is, therefore, in the self-interest of the countries of the rich world to intervene to help bring such conflicts to an end. The number of refugees peaked during the mid-1990s, which coincided with humanitarian crises such as Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and has largely been declining since that date.

Last year bucked that trend and it is not difficult to think of the reason. According to the UN high commissioner for refugees (UNCHR), the number of refugees rose by 14% to almost 10 million in 2006 and this was "mainly due to the crisis in Iraq". Around 1.2 million Iraqis sought refuge in neighbouring Jordan and Syria while a further 300,000 Iraqis fled to other countries abroad, which was a more than fivefold increase

over the year. Although there has been some small-scale return in recent months, the basic trend remains upward.

The other main groups of refugees, under UNHCR's mandate, are Afghans, Sudanese and Somalis. The number of Afghans

The humanitarian crisis of the year, though, is Somalia, which in many ways can be considered Africa's Iraq. Over a million people have been displaced from their homes. The ICRC describes the current situation there as 'desperate'

returning home has been falling year by year since its peak in 2002, just after the ousting of the Taliban. The end of the conflict in southern Sudan has seen a significant return there, but this has been balanced by many leaving the country due to the crisis in Darfur (do please support

the appeal for helicopters for the peacekeeping mission).

The humanitarian crisis of the year, though, is Somalia, which in many ways can be considered Africa's Iraq. The country was illegally invaded by Ethiopian troops, backed by the US military, last December and has been descending ever deeper into catastrophe since. Over a million people have been displaced from their homes and 60% of Mogadishu's population have fled from renewed fighting. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) describes the current situation there as "desperate" and fears are rising about another famine.

Eight journalists have been killed in Somalia this year. The transitional Somali government has repeatedly shut down media outlets. It has also harassed and obstructed humanitarian organisations trying to assist the displaced population, including detaining the head of the UN's world food programme (WFP) for five days in October, causing the suspension of food distributions to at least 75,000 people. Ethiopian troops have carried out mass summary executions and rapes of civilians in retaliation for recent attacks by rebel groups in the predominately Somali Ogaden region and burned down villages as part of a "scorched earth" campaign. Although UN officials have described the situa-

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Humanitarianism in crisis

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Getting no

By Cath Elliott

The suffering of women at the hands of men continued unabated in 2007, negating any progress towards equality

THE year has ended pretty much as it began: with violence against women in the headlines. In early 2007 a Suffolk man was charged with the murders of five young Ipswich women; in July we heard about the brutal killing of Banaz Mahmood, who was tortured and sexually assaulted before being murdered by men hired by her own family; and in the closing weeks of the year, as British forces handed back control of Bazra to the Iraqi authorities, evidence emerged of women being beheaded in the streets for the crime of simply being women.

In April, Doaa Khalil Aswad was dragged from a house in northern Iraq and stoned to death by a crowd of baying men. The 17-year-old Yezidi teenager, like Banaz Mahmood, had allegedly dishonoured her family by falling in love with the wrong man. While hundreds of men took part in her murder, others stood by and filmed it on their mobile phones. The horrific footage of her death was then posted on the internet. For what purpose? Perhaps to serve as a warning to other women who might be thinking of stepping out of line.

In November, while the UK government played host to a bunch of top officials from the odious Saudi

regime, a young Saudi rape victim was flogged with 200 lashes and six months in prison for a car with a man who was not a relative. It was an audacity to appeal against the sentence, given to her rapists. An international

Of course there has been some positive progress for women in other areas in 2007, but this becomes too meaningless when viewed beside an ever-growing number of those whose lives have been lost through gender-based violence.

to King Abdullah granting her a pardon. His spokesperson made clear, this was not what he wanted. He stated that the monarch disagreed with the verdict on the woman.

For 20 years women have been protesting in the streets of Vancouver, but in 2007

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Somalia this morning, partly for the same reasons that I do not think I would work in Iraq. External intervention in both countries has been massively dam-

aging and has made bad situations worse for the people concerned. The humanitarian impulse is based on people seeing images of suffering in far away places and think-

ing "something must be done". This was the year that we had to remind ourselves of the first humanitarian dictum "first of all: do no harm". COURTESY THE GUARDIAN