

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Peter Byrd Martin
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover NH

April 26th 1991

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Let Them Eat Ego! The Reflections of a Kurdish Relief Volunteer

Dear Peter,

Somewhere in our communications about my fellowship to the various '---stans' of Central Asia, I noticed a parenthetical reference to "...and Kurdistan?"

Well, passing through Turkey on my way to Tashkent at the height of the Great Kurdish Refugee Crisis And Relief Effort in mid-April, I decided to interpret that little parenthesis as an invitation to investigate just what the heck was going on down on the border, and to see if I could make myself useful in so doing.

There were some initial problems.

Being somewhat known in Turkey, many of the 600-odd foreign correspondents and local journalists, Turkish and foreign government agencies involved in the occasion naturally assumed that I was on the scene as a 'hack', a label I was loath to embrace.

No, I told the NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), I was not in the region to work as a writer, but rather, as a volunteer. There were enough journo's around without me, I said, maybe too many: all were covering in grim detail the tragic story of the two million Iraqi Kurds who had been uprooted in the wake of the aborted uprising against Saddam Hussein in the aftermath of the Gulf War cease-fire. But now, the Kurds were being pursued not by Saddam's miraculously restored army, but by the legions of television and print journalists who descend on disasters like flies to a corpse. The hack pack, I felt, was only adding to the chaos and confusion of the moment, taking up all the hotel space, hogging all the phone lines, driving up the price of land transportation, and even displacing aid workers on the flights arranged through the US military.

No, I was not one of their number: I was a man with a fellowship in his hand, freed from the financial constraints to file, and there out of a sense of duty and obligation to do something concrete than simply to observe and record events.

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Thomas Goltz is an ICWA fellow studying the Turkic-speaking Republics of Central Asia, with an emphasis on Soviet Central Asia

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I was there to volunteer, to participate directly, offering myself to the various NGOs as an interpreter, interfacer and fixer, and for free.

And so I was admitted into the inner sanctum of the relief effort--the nightly NGO round-table meetings at the Turistik Oteli. Chaired by the UNHCR along with a liaison team from the American Embassy and occasional representation from the Turkish Red Crescent, the aim of the meetings was to coordinate efforts and to bring some order into chaos. I attended the meetings because I thought I could help.

I was wrong.

For after endless sessions listening to endless assessments and assessments of those assessments, my attitude changed. The NGOs, although clearly not responsible for the disaster, seemed to have managed to turn a human tragedy into a relief circus travesty, souring relations between otherwise friendly governments and institutions and generally conducting themselves on an individual and organizational basis as prima-donnas of mercy, the only ones who can bring remedy and relief to an evil world.

And although I risk the charge of having acted disingenuously (words like 'undercover' and 'spy' come to mind), I have decided to violate my vow of silence and write about the debacle, blowing the whistle on some of the most ego-bloated, self-serving organizations I have ever had anything to do with--the multi-acronymic relief societies who appear to have transformed philanthropy into a profession, and one designed as much to gather good cocktail party stories as to actually help people in need.

I am told that I am not the first to discover this, that in Ethiopia and the Sudan, Afghanistan and Armenia as well as the sundry other human disasters that have visited the planet over the past decade, the NGOs, as the old missionary cliché has it, "came to do good and did well".

There are, thank God, exceptions.

The oft-maligned and very gung-ho (Read: chaos-inducing) Medicines Sans Frontiers might step on a few toes here and there, but at least they get out in the field and are willing to take a dive on principle in order to further practice. On the far end of the organizational field is CARE, who seemed to have an edge on the rest of the NGOs mainly because they took time to deal with Turkish bureaucracy and take local sensibilities into account. Their tent at the abysmal camp of Isikveren (a favorite dateline for journos in the area) was one of the first erected, and one of the first to actually be dispatching food and supplies. The United Kingdom-based Oxfam, too, seemed to be a hands-on operation, more interested in getting their water pipes in place and prevent the spread of sanitation-related diseases than in confronting the host government over petty issues.

Others, sadly, had no business being in the disaster area at all.

The Catholic Relief Society, for example, sent in a three person team to assess and assess and assess some more, their major contribution to the relief effort being the suggestion at one of the UNHCR meetings that sub-committees be formed so as to be able to meet some more.

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I should know, for I was initially traveling with the CRS as their translator/interfacier, but left in disgust. I could print one of their situation reports which they left on my computer, but I think it would be in bad taste and a waste of space; so would a transcript of a one hour long-distance conversation I inadvertently sat in on, wherein the two parties seemed more concerned about "damage control" and inter-agency turf-protecting than in getting concrete relief to the people who needed it.

There were others, too, who hit my black list, especially those who had made the a priori decision that the Turkish government was the real enemy and perpetrator of the crisis. These groups, who spurned all advice and background information, were capable of churning out or on-passing the most pernicious rumors imaginable, all involving the idea that Turks were purposely allowing the refugees to die because they were Kurds, and Turks, by definition, hate Kurds.

Subtler versions of this essential NGO attitude toward the host government were expressed in more oblique ways: that the Turks had set up a special, luxury camp for the small number of ethnic Turks included in the massive wave of refugees; that they had closed the Diyarbakir airport to all new supplies; that they were holding up delivery or demanding the right to dispatch blankets and medicines and food where they saw fit, and not where the NGOs wanted to send it.

Short shrift was given to the idea that the Turkish Government, through its Red Crescent Society, might have had some sort of master-plan. The Red Crescent's reluctance to dispatch an endless stream of blankets to a certain camp, or to suggest that a certain mobile hospital unit go to area X as opposed to Y (where there already were three) was interpreted not only as unwarranted interference in the NGOs God-given right to send material and manpower where they pleased, but as a sinister means for the Turks to make off with aid targeted for the Kurds.

The most vindictive outfit I encountered was World Vision, who appeared to be the source of much of the anti-Turkish propaganda all too quickly sucked up by the other NGOs and the hack-pack in need of a new twist on the story.

One evening at an NGO meeting, chaired by the UNHCR--which seems to have made an art out of dithering over details rather than cracking heads and putting the NGOs in line--I brought up the subject of drugs needed by the Ministry of Health, and the fact that so few of the NGOs had even bothered to contact the largest, single organization in the crisis, with over 400 doctors and nurses in the field.

The response was acid.

Why, demanded a man named Ric of World Vision, should any of the NGOs have anything to do with a pack of thieves? The Ministry of Health, he announced, had absconded with thousands of doses medicine sent by the World Health Organization, and all NGOs should eschew contact with the Ministry and the host government until an accounting was made of the missing medicines.

Later, I learned that for all the howling and grand-standing, World Vision had decided that their contribution to the Kurdish cause would be in the range of \$50,000. They probably spent twice that in their assessment.

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Meanwhile, the theme of the Turks stealing international aid was quickly embraced by my audit-conscious Catholics, who found in it a perfect excuse not to follow through with their promise to the Ministry of Health to supply urgently needed medicines. Days before, we had conducted a series of interviews with the local authorities, in which Jay Murphy, the Jerusalem-based director of the CRS Middle East division, had specifically asked what the CSR could do to aid the Turks. Buy local drugs, now, came the response, and if you don't trust us, put a man on the truck to confirm delivery.

But Murphy was not moved, at least not until the Dutch chapter of Medicines Sans Frontiers, at my urging, announced that they would donate the drugs from their own depots. The Catholics--chagrined, embarrassed and upstaged--then discretely asked the MSF to take \$25,000 to buy supplies and give them to the Turks, but on the explicit understanding that the real source of the donation be made known. MSF refused, saying they were too busy with the business of saving refugee lives than to do CRS's shopping while the CRS went about its hectic day of more assessing and sub-committee forming.

Last seen, the CRS leader was giving a street-side interview to John Kifner of the New York Times. I could barely constrain myself from interrupting and telling Kifner not to waste his time.

After listening to so much assessment and seeing so little action, I, too, decided that a trip down to the disaster in order to make an assessment of my own.

Engaging the volunteer services of Mehmet Efe, an old friend and driver and Turkish-to-Kurdish translator I first met during the last crush of Kurdish refugees in 1988, we set out for the frontier town of Silopi, a dumpy, automobile and truck repair center straggling along the "Silk Road," or main highway running through the Tigris basin into Iraq.

Before the invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent embargo against Iraq, Silopi had been quite a lively place, with some 4,000 vehicles passing through the nearby Habur border gate daily. But during the course of the embargo and war, it had become a ghost town. Now, with the arrival of Americans and British forces using Silopi as a major aid and military staging area into Iraq, the level of activity had once more reached fever pitch, only with Huey helicopters replacing automobile traffic, and Chinook choppers acting as semi-trailer trucks in the sky.

Our specific destination was the Muslim pilgrimage staging center just outside of town that the Turkish government had converted into a sprawling tent city for the refugees. On the day of our visit, the encampment housed 11,682 individuals, but the numbers were growing by 2,000 refugees a day as truck-loads of new victims arrived from the mountains, to be registered, medically ministered, and then, eventually, to be on-shipped into the "safe haven" zones then being erected by the allies inside Iraq.

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It was this refugee center that certain NGOs and foreign journalists were suggesting had been set up by the Turkish government as a luxury camp for the so-called Turcomans, or ethnic Turks of Northern Iraq, to the exclusion of the Kurds. Situated in a large, flat enclosure, the rows of tents stood to one side of a main road, with an open toilet area of shallow ditches on the other; ambulatory kitchens and a 200 bed hospital had been erected in the center's large parking lot, which also served as the main distribution point for food and other material aid. If it wasn't a picnic camp-ground, it was like the Istanbul Hilton compared with the al fresco camps in the mountains.

But a quick survey of who had checked into the "Silopi Hilton" gave the lie to the rumor that this was a camp for ethnic Turks and not Kurds, and served to underline the fact that most of the NGOs and foreign journalists couldn't tell a Turk from a Turcoman from a Kurd even if everyone wore ethnic name tags: the camp was filled with people dressed in typical Kurdish garb and arguing in Kurdish as they fought over boxes of Reeses Peanut Butter Cups and Snickers bars, or explained their ailments to Turkish doctors and nurses through local Kurdish interpreters.

And the refugees certainly weren't hungry.

As I strolled through the lanes of the tent city, I noticed a small army of kids and young men playing a bizarre game with a truck filled with cucumbers. The refugees would laughingly pitch the vegetables back up at the off-loaders who returned the sport in kind. The ground was strewn with crushed pickle by the time the vehicle lumbered off to pick up and deliver its next load.

Before leaving the camp, I stopped in to pay my respects to the man in charge of the hospital and dispensary, one Dr Yetka, to see if the MSF medical donation had yet arrived.

It had not, and, moreover, Dr Yetka said he would not accept the drugs unless ordered to do so by his superiors in Diyarbakir.

Turkish bureaucracy at its best, and just the sort of thing to drive an altruist to drink.

But there was an easy solution at hand: Asking to use his phone, I called the Ministry of Health office in Diyarbakir, and solved a potentially embarrassing situation in a moment. The drugs arrived later that day, and were well received and then dispatched to areas of need.

Then, in an effort to get to the bottom of the World Vision-circulated rumor that the Turks had made off with thousands of doses of medicines donated by WHO, I tactfully broached the subject with Dr Yetka.

I was embarrassed that I had bothered.

Dr Yetka, with no ulterior motive at stake, looked into his books and informed me that the five missing WHO kits had been received weeks before and dispatched to the mountain camps--three to Cukurca in Hakkari province, and two to Isikveren in Sirnak province. Curiously, but typically Turkish, he also noted that he had no immediate need of more drugs just then--in direct contradiction to the Ministry's plea in Diyarbakir. The MSF donated dope was, in effect, redundant--at least for the time being.

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Mehmet Efe and I next pushed on past the American and British helicopter field and staging area through the town of Cizre, still spilt down the main street between two feuding Kurdish clans (one side enjoys postal service while the other side has a monopoly on garbage trucks) and into the Cudi Mountains that cut off the Anatolian plateau from the Mesopotamian flats and form the real border between the modern states of Iraq and Turkey. The range also defined the frontier between the lowland empires of Babylon (claimed by Saddam as the inspiration of Iraq) and the highland empires of the Medes (allegedly the forefathers of the Kurds). It is here, according to the Muslim tradition, that Noah's Ark finally came to rest after the great deluge, and, for those inclined to believe there is at least a kernel of truth in the ancient books of religion and lore (like Gilgamesh), the idea of the Tigris and Euphrates flooding the lowlands of Mesopotamia and forcing people to build boats is a lot more reasonable than the notion of a universal inundation covering even the 17,000 foot peak of Mount Ararat, 300 miles to the north. Still, it was a sobering thought, comparing the Biblical survivors of God's vengeance against a sinful and traitorous people with Saddam Hussein's vision of cleansing Babylon of the unwanted: it was those who stayed in the plains who were saved from the wrath of Saddam, while those who had fled to the high places along the rugged, Turco-Iraqi frontier were dying like flies.

And it was to assess the real situation in those camps that we had come, although there was still much road to cover.

Distances grow greater along winding, hair-pin roads, and the frequent road-blocks to check our identities did not hasten matters; we must have been checked a half dozen times, if once, along the 50 kilometer trip.

To the uninformed relief worker, it might appear that this obsession with security was designed to slow or obstruct aid from getting to the refugees. But Turkey, it will be recalled, is still fighting a low-level guerrilla war with the Syria-based and Maoist-inspired Kurdish Workers Party, or PKK, who have been responsible for over 4,000 deaths since initiating their struggle in 1984, and the area is tense in the best of times. Within the context of the refugees, if the aid workers see ten helpless Peshmergah Kurds from Iraq, the Turkish military sees three PKK agitators, three Iraqi agents, three Islamic fundamentalists, and one refugee. The difference in perception could not be more profound, and could not be less understood by the European do-gooders.

The PKK, meanwhile, understands the game. And if they remain indifferent to the fact that their ideology has fallen out of fashion and chose to dismiss the profound reforms in Turkey's Kurdish policy over the past year, they are keenly aware of public relations with the western press, and have apparently suspended attacks on installations, soldiers and government-armed village guards for the duration of the refugee crisis.

Since my last trip down the "terrorist road" in 1988 much had changed in Turkey regarding government policy toward the Kurds. The very subject was then taboo, and Kurdish as a language was effectively forbidden: Mehmet Efe had then risked a beating for even speaking his

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native tongue in front of soldiers and officials. Then earlier this year, as the culmination of a long liberalization process, the law governing acceptable languages in Turkey was recognized for what it was--an affront to human dignity and intelligence--and thrown out of the constitution. Overnight, Kurdish once again became legal tender in Turkey, and the country's 15 million Kurds rejoiced. On the ground it meant one thing: Mehmet Efe could now merrily chat away in Kurdish without looking over his shoulder, even with the heavily armed soldiers and officers manning the blockades--many of whom just happened to be Kurdish themselves. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this change of attitude within the context of the Turkish body politic, but it is a point constantly and consistently overlooked by the NGOs, journalists and other instant experts on Turkey, who prefer the nice and tidy cliché of the cruel Turkish soldier versus the noble Kurdish peasant.

Finally, after several hours, we arrived at the small dorp of Uludere, or "Grand Stream", a tiny town pinched in a gorge and literally built over the white water river by the same name. A dozen minor tributaries rush down from the slopes or shoot gushing from the living rock, making the settlement hiss with the sound of water.

But if the location is grand, Uludere itself is small, dirty dorp consisting of several shops, a post office, a small, nasty hotel and a single restaurant. The largest structure is the four story "security palace" which houses the jail, police administration offices and the weapons depots of the large contingent of Special Forces troops based in town, whose brief it is to chase PKK guerrillas through the rugged terrain.

In normal times, it is a rare day that Uludere sees an out of state license plate. But as the only town of any size in the disaster area, it was now totally overrun by foreigners, and locals were growing rich by charging what the market would bear from the scores of NGOs and journalists who used the town as their staging base.

Typical of the trade was our rather unprepossessing abode for the night, a two-room shack owned by a village guard named Yagmur. Three Dutch journalists had taken up residence under the same roof, and Yagmur was charging them 600,000 Turkish lira, or about \$200, for the pleasure of laying their sleeping bags on his floor. It was unclear whether this was the nightly, weekly or monthly rate, but the journos were unlikely to stay longer than two days in any case: the refugee crisis was a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am sort of story--precisely the reason I was refusing to cover it as a hack.

Through an introduction by a ethnic Kurdish member of the Special Forces team we met wandering around the darkened town with his night vision goggles and Breta machine gun, we also checked into the Yagmur Arms, but stayed for free: The Dutch may be famous as liberal, refugee-loving Europeans, but Yagmur and his pals liked guns, and were delighted in my interest in discussing the relative merits of the weapons in Yagmur's anti-terrorist arsenal.

Sometimes it helps to be from Montana.

To the mounting concern of the Dutchmen, we sighted a couple of loaded government-issue Kirikkale revolvers on a garish tapestry of Jesus with sheep and halo tacked to the wall above their heads, thus

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emphasizing Yagmur's request that one of the three put on his pants. Oblivious to local sensibilities, the man had been lolling around in the near nude, which made Yagmur more than a little uncomfortable, and trigger-happy.

At 0600 hours the next morning, we got in our vehicle and joined the caravan of relief workers, assessment teams and refugee voyeurs wending their way down the gravel road that defines most of the Turco-Iraqi frontier.

But rather than start the climb up toward Isikveren, the largest, most awful and most visited "camp" of refugee Kurds, we proceeded down the road toward Yakmal and Andac, the former having been designated as a new, lower altitude collection camp for up to 40,000 refugees, and the latter, then containing around 10,000 exiles, being one of the areas to be evacuated due to egregious sanitary conditions.

For Mehmet Efe and myself, it was rather like a deja vu experience, for it was precisely at this point on the frontier in August, 1988, that we had watched tens of thousands of Peshmergah guerrillas pour across the border as the Turkish military formed a human wall between the fleeing refugees and Saddam's closing army who, just released by cease-fire from the Iranian front, ^{were} taking revenge on the Kurds. Then, as now, the ~~Kurds~~ were regarded as little more than traitorous vermin who had allied themselves with the enemy and stabbed the Iraqi nation in the back during its hour of need.

Poor Kurds! As a group, they never seem to learn, and are still prone to follow their inept leadership into the next disaster, and the next, and the next. That very morning, Jalal Talabani, the head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, was meeting with Saddam in Baghdad to "negotiate" a settlement for an autonomous Kurdistan from a position of total defeat...

A haze hung over the valley that could have been fog, although the morning sun had already cut through the nightly mist that settles over the rest of the rugged border area at this altitude.

We knew what it was the moment we saw it: the greasy smoke of a thousand refugee camp fires, fueled by all the green wood, plastic and dung the refugees could get their hands on.

We were nearing zero-point on the frontier, defined here by an idyllic, babbling brook, a few cement marking posts, and the instant tent cities of hundreds of thousands of displaced people.

After several more hair-pin turns along the road, new detritus of the disaster appeared: garbage, clothes, strips of plastic wrapping, bottles and paper, the floating gunk and crud and invisible miasma of unsanitized life in a camp of thousands who are using a river as a sewer.

It was sad, as the brook, in better times, is a thing of great beauty--a blue ribbon cutting through the red rock and clay hills of middle Kurdistan, rather like the lesser tributaries of the Madison or Gallatin rivers in central Montana. It was a place you would like to camp in, try out a few different flies on the local trout, cook a

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barbecue, and then, like a good environmentalist, pack out what you packed in.

All such bucolic thoughts were flushed from my mind as we rounded a last bend and discovered the campers--10,000 of them in this group, cluttering up an entire mountain-side from its base in the stream to the crest of the once-forested but now denuded peak. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of make-shift shelters clung to any space with a hint of purchase, all made out of any material at hand: card-board boxes, plastic ground cloth, old clothes. Nearest the river, in what was presumably the 'high-rent district' which housed the clan leaders, the shelters were made out of torn off sections of the nylon parachutes dropped by the US Army, with a few, standard white canvas tents supplied by the Turkish Red Crescent and other relief organizations thrown in for good measure.

And between the flimsy structures stood the refugees, looking like nothing so much as penguins marooned on an ice-flow drifting out to sea: Knots of young and middle-aged men, psychologically castrated guerrillas and city-soft urbanites alike, weary looks etched on their faces; children playing with home-made wheel toys or just sitting in the dust; women scrubbing clothes in the filthy miasma of the shallows of the river, dreaming of making them clean; old men squatting in make-shift toilets on the river-bank, just up-stream.

All had been caught up in the maelstrom of early April, when the Kurds of northern Iraq had been possessed with the bad sense to believe that the Americans had really destroyed Saddam Hussein's army in Kuwait, and that their own guerrilla forces could provide a coup de grace to the Baath regime in Baghdad.

They had the bad sense to believe in the Americans, some say, but there is also an argument to be made that they had the bad sense to believe in themselves.

Enough journalistic palavara has been written about the politics of the disaster, and enough peculiar names have been quoted about individual loss and personal plight, so I will not subject the reader to anymore quotes or alleged profound insights and simply concentrate on what happened when I was there.

The name of the place in the lexicon of aid workers and journalists is "Andac", although where they got the name is anybody's guess. Local Kurds refer to the area as Kasrek, while the Turkish military simply refers to it as Border Post Stone 25.

In any event, Andac is--or was--the last, large concentration of refugees along the western border road where two valleys in northern Iraq form a funnel into Turkey. I did not go up the far (southern) face of the mountain, but Turkish soldiers said that long lines of cars, tractors and other transport marked the end of the flight along passable roads, after which the refugees had taken to their heels to cross over the last escarpment before settling on the frontier.

But if the sight of so many displaced people created initial shock and distress, the effect was magnified ten-fold by what greeted along the roadside: small mountains of bread, hills of bagged noodles, and then, crunched underfoot by tennis shoe and tire, hundreds of shirts and pants and slacks and shoes and even dainty ladies' underwear, all

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collected in the cities and towns of the Turkish East, and trucked down the god-forsaken border road, only to be dumped and trashed.

"They only want the chocolates," explained a Turkish non-commissioned officer we met on the road.

I thought he was making a bad joke, but the mounds of food told a completely different story.

Then, as if to verify his claim, we apprehended the sound of two approaching C-130 transport aircraft.

"Damn it," snarled the officer, "we told the Americans we are moving this camp to Yakmal, and they are still dropping supplies here!"

The refugees, too, had heard the motors of the big transport planes, and immediately, a flood of laughing children began fording the stream, followed shortly thereafter by adults, also wearing smiles on their faces. Distraction was at hand; at last there was something to do.

The big planes circled once, and then, having selected a drop site, began off-loading their cargo of relief supplies. One, two, five and then ten camouflage-green parachutes (to blend with the sky? It was a little odd) opened under each plane, drifting lazily toward the earth. Two or three of the palettes, however, either snapped loose of their harnesses or the parachutes did not open, and these came careening down with all the force gravity could muster, smashing into the ground behind a ridge littered with tents and refugees. This was worrisome, because some half dozen deaths had previously resulted from similar drops earlier in the week, and was referred to in the ghoulish Turkish press as 'fatal aid'. But during our three hour stay in the camp, no reports of that sort reached us, so the bundle-bombs must have landed in the clear, or the refugees managed to get from under their shelters before they were crushed.

The rest of the relief material--perhaps twenty parachutes in all--floated down, and we followed the growing numbers of refugees rushing past the rotting mountains of bread and sacks of flour and noodles toward the new aid packages, which ^{had} descended in a field beyond a fork in the river, the lesser stream still defining the border gorge, with the main current coming directly out of Turkey.

As we arrived, the early birds were already carting away whole boxes of the US military's modern version of C-rations: little girls, having cut off nylon cords from the parachutes, had created harnesses for themselves and were acting like draw horses, dragging the boxes in the dust; young bucks, able to shoulder more, had used the same cords to make back-packs out of new blankets, while balancing boxes of bottled water or other food stuffs on their heads as they made their way back across the stream to their camp sites.

Here and there, ahead of us, we could see knots of refugees pushing and shoving and swarming over the scattered sky-aid like so many ants or locusts; several fights had already broken out, with the younger and stronger men muscling their way through the older and weaker to claim the most desirable parts of the drop.

"When they first came, we asked who the clan leaders were and tried to distribute goods through them," the NCO walking with us explained,

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"But after a day or two that system completely broke down, and it was every man for himself again."

At first the soldiers had been able to frighten off the over-eager, but after another day or two it became apparent to the Kurds that the soldiers would not shoot at them, and the chaos began again. Subsequently, there had been one death by shooting in Andac, and other deaths at other camps--the worst incident being at Uzumlu outside Cukurca on the eastern side of the frontier. There, allegedly, a French journalist had started shouting "attack them, attack the soldiers!" in Kurdish to the refugees, and they had.

Then, at the far end of the valley, shots rang out--one burst, followed by two, and then five, and suddenly the valley echoed with sustained automatic gun-fire.

"Your men?" we asked the NCO.

"No," replied grimly, "we don't have anybody down at that end of the valley."

The shooting was increasing, and seemed to be getting nearer as we approached the closest parachute.

"Stop shooting, whoever is shooting, stop!" screamed the NCO into his walkie talkie, "Whoever you are, stop shooting!"

To no avail. It appeared that there was a little "free lance" guarding going on, namely, by elements of the local village defence force, armed by the government, who had decided to socialize a little of the drop-in aid for themselves by frightening away the refugees. But rather than firing into the air, they were actually shooting at the refugees as they approached the aid palettes.

But for all the commotion, there was only one slightly wounded refugee, a young man who attempted to show us his wounded leg by pointing to a small rip in his blue jeans above the knee. At first we refused to believe that he had been shot at all, and assumed that he might have ripped his pants in the free-for-all fight to get at the goods. But he was insistent, and so we demanded that he drop his pants so we could take a better look. Indeed, he had received a peculiar, oblique shrapnel wound, most likely the result of a ricochet bullet, or fragment thereof.

"You see what they do, the Turks! You see what they do!" cried a couple of young refugees who had gathered around us, "They come and drive us away with their guns and take everything, everything!"

This was a little hard to take, because the alleged aid bandits were also Kurds, albeit those with Turkish citizenship. But my primary problem with listening to this aspect of the plight of the refugees was that we were standing in a veritable mountain of C-rations, water bottles, stacks of blankets, bales of used clothing, bundles of rain ponchos and other donor debris. All around us, young and old refugees were picking through the manna, slicing up parachutes for better tents, and rolling up the nylon cords and parachute straps for future use, and I felt compelled to ask just what, exactly, the man meant by 'everything'.

"Everything!" came the chorus reply from the growing number of refugees gathering around us.

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"What's this?" I queried, my voice and temper rising, pointing at a stack of C-Ration boxes three feet high and scattered over an area as big as a driveway.

"Well," ventured one of my refugee interlocutors, "They take half."

"Which half?" I demanded.

"They take all the good stuff!" came the reply.

"What's the good stuff?"

The question stumped them.

"The fabrics, the cloth!" someone else offered.

Just then I saw a fat, ten year old kid pick up a pack of C-Ration food, slice it open with a pocket knife, sniff it, and then throw it in the dirt.

"Hey," I demanded, "come here!"

The kid tried to run off but I grabbed him by the arm.

"Why did you throw that food away," I demanded.

"It wasn't me, it was someone else," he lied.

"Because its pork," another refugee answered.

Holding the kid with one hand, I reached down and picked up the discarded C-rat package. Beef Stroganof, the label read.

I couldn't control myself any longer, and, my Arabic having gone to seed somewhat, I reverted to Turkish to vent my spleen, calling on the good Mehmet Efe to render it into as colorful a Kurdish as he saw fit.

"Its beef!" I shouted at the top of my lungs, "Its goddamn beef!"

Shouting at the top of my lungs, I reached down into the heap and pulled out some other discarded packages--Chicken a la King, Spaghetti with Meat Sauce and then, to my private dismay, Potatoes Au Gratin with Ham. I decided to keep silent on that one, although the Quran explicitly tells believers that they may eat anything when starving to stay alive. For those who wanted to order from the a la carte menu scattered on the ground, there were vacuum packed crackers, peanut butter, cakes, instant coffee with "non-dairy" product creamers--everything needed by a grunt to stay alive in the desert or jungle, on top of a mountain or in the sea. And all had been left untouched, save for the chocolates bars and cigarettes included in the drops.

It was incredible.

Mehmet Efe was busy translating my screed, but at the end of my speech, he was still shouting, now in his own voice. A cowed look came over the gathered faces in the crowd, and when Efe finally took a breath, I asked him what he had said.

"I told them we are all Kurds--the village guards, myself, them, all of us, and that we are our worst enemies. I told them that we are a lying, low and evil bunch of traitors to ourselves, that we have no one but ourselves to blame for our catastrophe," he said.

"Give that packet to me," said an old man, reaching for the Beef Stroganof the chubby kid had disdained, "I will eat it."

I am not sure if he ever did, but at least he had the decency to feign gratitude.

As we walked back across the aid-strewn landscape, I picked up a pack of "fortified peanut butter- knead before using", while Efe started collecting all the individual packets of Folgers Instant Coffee he could find; I told him he didn't really want the non-dairy creamers.

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Wandering back up the meadow toward the main road, the rotting mountains of bread and the sacks of flour and noodles took on an new poignancy.

What about the reports of starving people, destroying orchards and gardens before forcing themselves to eat roots and leaves? Perhaps that had been true in the first days of the crush of **Kurds**, but by the second week, the refugees had become reluctant not only to eat C-rations dropped from the sky, but even good, solid Turkish bread brought by local relief workers!

Fussy refugees.

It was too crazy to be true.

And not a word of it had ever been mentioned by any of the NGO groups in Diyarbakir. ^{of}

There, the word was/starving refugees and evil, uncooperative Turks.

I was angry, but felt sick.

Efe was nearly in tears.

At the main camp, the Red Crescent Society was busy loading trucks with refugees and their surprisingly hefty belongings for transportation up to the new, centralized camp at Yakmal. From there, presumably, they would eventually be transported to Silopi and then to the new "safe haven" camps in Northern Iraq.

The air-drop, and all the confusion it had created, had been unnecessary, for the entire Andac/Kasrek/Border Marker Stone 25 camp was being moved that day.

Offering transport to the wounded refugee which he declined, we got back in the car and began the drive back to Yakmal, picking up a village guard along the way.

"They say some of the guards are taking the food aid that the Americans are dropping," Mehmet Efe casually remarked, as clever as a any hack I have ever met.

"Yeah," said the guard, tucking his Kaleshnikov under the seat, "I don't, but some of my friends do. They ruined our farms and slaughtered our sheep and then they leave half the stuff rotting on the ground. Wouldn't you take some, too?"

I found it increasingly difficult to disagree with the man's attitude.

We dropped the guard at his post, crossed the Zab river and proceeded toward the new camp, eating the dust of a dozen trucks packed with refugees on their way to join the 40,000 already present at the new center at Yakmal.

When we had passed by the camp in the morning, all was quiet. But now, around noon, there was activity everywhere. American, British and German helicopters were buzzing the camp, sending hurricane-like winds through the flimsy tents ringing the grass landing strips as the choppers came and went, dropping off supplies and picking up patients to be air-vacced to hospitals. No longer would supplies be dropped helter-skelter from C-130s, but would be pin-point delivered by the birds.

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Yakmal was much better organized than Andac, and was slated to grow by another 10-20,000 as the Andac crowd and others came down from the mountains to be settled in several areas which enjoyed fresh spring water in season, meaning until June. Medicines Sans Frontiers and Medicines du Monde both had fairly large and well staffed hospitals in place, and the Turks were in the process of setting up their own. A team of physicians from the German Red Cross who arrived during our stay were slightly chagrined at finding so much medical help already in place, and asked the US army commander in the area to have one of the huge, double propeller Chinook choppers sling their two, five-ton mobile hospital units out of the area and across the mountains where they could be of greater use. It was shades of the boat-lift in Apocalypse Now, only it was medicine being moved, and not PT 109.

Quite frankly, it was pretty clear that the dough-boys, along with their Turkish cohorts, were the only organization capable of bringing order to such a camp, and that the effort was appreciated by the refugees. One of the grunts hanging around the edges of the encampment confided that many refugees had actually come up to apologize for their animal-like behavior during the first crush, assuring the soldiers that they were not always such beasts, and were ashamed of themselves.

Still, there was an overwhelming sense of waste at Yakmal, too.

Whereas in Andac it was the heaps of bread and noodles caught ones eye, here it was the potatoes: hundreds, maybe thousands of 50 pound bags lined the road, largely untouched by the refugees they had been brought to feed.

"They are not used to eating spuds," said a sergeant from up-State New York, "And they don't have the oil to make fries."

French Fries? If you don't have a pot to boil the tubers, why not bake them? Why not eat them raw?

The soldier did note that when a load of tomatoes came in, there was the predictable mob-scene so familiar from the television footage provided by CNN. But the potatoes still lay in their 50 lbs gunny sacks, rotting on the road.

Indeed, the real problem at Yakmal and the other camps was not so much food and shelter, but sewage. Once again, the river that defined the frontier was serving both as a source of drinking and cooking water as well as a wash-basin and sewer. Oxfam, with the aid of Yankee choppers, was bringing in pipes to deliver spring water from above down to the lower settlements, but the problems of 40,000 to 50,000 people living al fresco in an area that in normal times is inhabited by 4,000 at most were manifest. And like the village guard we had encountered along the road, the local population of Kurds were growing increasingly resentful of the prospect of the long-term presence of their cousins who had, in effect, poisoned the water supply for everybody downstream of their camp.

I had a chance to sound out local sentiment when I offered to assist the point man for the Paris-based IACF, or International Action Against Famine, a man named Frederick. His brief was to find a local, long-term place to for his four person team to stay, and the only possibility was in the nearby village of Yemisli, population 500.

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In the event, it was a pleasure helping the man out, for among the sundry relief groups I had encountered, his seemed to be the only one to volunteer the notion that it was the Turkish government and private citizens who had so far provided most of the aid but had received none of the cudos or thanks, and even more importantly, his was the only group that bothered to address the very real sense of jealousy and resentments of the impoverished locals.

"Populations in an imported disaster zone have to be coddled and mollified to some degree in the face of the massive, international assistance being delivered carte blanche to the target group," he said, "The only difference between these people and the refugees is that these people are not refugees."

Indeed, no sooner were we ensconced in a local house than our host presented us with his wife, chronically ill for over two years. Medical attention in the evening hours was clearly going to be the coin IACF paid to the locals as "rent", and Fred accepted the idea so easily and naturally, and seemed so devoid of the ego-enhancement tendencies of the other NGO groups, that I would be lying not to say that I was sorely tempted to stay on in Yakmal/Yemisli to throw in my two bits under the umbrella of the Famine group. Altruism can be wonderful if there is no hidden agenda.

But I did not stay, for in my own survey assessment of the disaster, there was still one more camp to visit--Isikveren, "That Which Gives Light", the largest single refugee holding area (circa 150,000) in the region, and the one that has attracted most media attention, with the concomitant pouring in of aid from around the world.

Everyone was there, vying with each other for space to pitch tents on the ground to fighting over places on helicopters to view--and assess--the disaster from the air. If half the four-wheel vehicles clogging the roads had been filled with food and medicine, there is no doubt that the death list of children and adults would be far lower. But it was assessors, voyeurs and camera crews who clogged the path, and, I am nearly ashamed to admit, I was, ultimately, one of their number.

The UNHCR coordination team was there, as were sundry other NGO groups I had met in Diyarbakir--Save the Children, the Red Cross, World Relief, and many others. Once more they were meeting and assessing and meeting some more. Talk of a massive fund raising drive a la 'BandAid' was in the air, and several of the relief groups had now thought to bring along their own publicity teams in order to awaken the world's consciousness to the magnitude of the disaster.

And it was there that I met Ric, my old nemesis from World Vision, the man who had been spreading the rumor that the Turkish government was absconding with WHO drugs and throwing a wrench in the works of the timely and equitable distribution of blankets and food. Curiously, he was sitting next to a freight of water bottles trucked up by the Turkish Red Crescent which had been deposited among the half dozen tents that made up the despised Turkish Ministry of Health's busy

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infirmary. Perhaps, lacking Turkish, he wasn't aware of the irony of his presence. He scowled when he saw me, but gave a gruff hello.

Next to him sat another man, a camera swinging from his neck.

"You're the guy who speaks Kurdish, right?" he asked in a broad Australian accent, "Tell me a couple of typical Kurdish women's names."

"What for?" I asked. ~~me~~

"To caption my pictures," replied the man, "We're launching a big fund raiser in Australia. And oh, could you tell me what you've heard in the hospitals? You know, the most tear-jerking stories. Starvation, depravation--that sort of thing."

Well, if you're making up stories, you may as well make up the names.

So I gave him a list, none of them true, and then told him some sad and tragic tales of people with fussy diets and a reluctance to wear used clothes.

It was, in many ways, the perfect moment to depart: NGOs and journalists working hand in hand to further distort a tragedy into a travesty, more interested in the further financing of their own careers as professional voyeurs than in actually getting something done or even--God Help me!--recognizing that some disasters are of people's own making, and that they are somehow responsible for scraping their own shit off their own shoes.

So Mehmet Efe and I drove back the six hours to Diyarbakir, and once there, I made my assessment.


My first move was to send Efe over to CARE to organize their team of drivers.

My second was to get on the next plane out.

The third was to violate my vow of silence, and end my short career as an unprofessional volunteer.

Well--a grand, if spleen-filled adventure! And whether it is over yet is an open question. The MSF people have professed an interest in my father and my wife to join them on a volunteer basis, and also myself, so I am currently weighing the relative merits/delaying Central Asia in order to spend a month in Kurdistan among the refugees (Carol Rose's turf?) versus proceeding directly across the eastern frontier into Armenia and Azerbaijan on my way to Tashkent. I will have made a tentative decision somewhat later this week, and will keep you informed.

Best Regards,

Thomas Goltz 
Diyarbakir/Uledere, Turkey

Received' in Hanover 5/13/91