

Mass evacuations: learning from the past

Caelin Briggs

Twenty years after the evacuations from the Bosnian 'safe areas', humanitarians continue to struggle with dilemmas around humanitarian evacuations.

Between 1993 and 1995, humanitarian actors made multiple unsuccessful attempts to evacuate civilians from the Srebrenica enclave. On July 11th 1995, Serb forces broke through the southern perimeter of the town, triggering a mass movement of 25,000 people desperate to escape before the enclave fell. Srebrenica had been declared a "safe area" by the United Nations (UN) but as the Serb forces pushed through the streets, neither the peacekeepers nor humanitarians could protect the civilian population.

Evacuations and 'population exchanges' were a regular feature of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and were often facilitated by international organisations whose concerns about complicity in ethnic cleansing were outweighed by the need to find any means to protect people from greater harm. Many of the facilitated movements from the safe areas in July 1995 were as much forcible transfers as they were evacuations, and shared similar, chilling characteristics: men were separated from their families and detained, convoys were stopped and searched, and trucks containing men were diverted and thousands of these men were never seen again.

Parallels: the Balkans and Syria

Twenty years later, humanitarians continue to struggle with many of the same challenges in evacuations and siege environments. In February 2014, the UN was asked to facilitate an evacuation from Homs, Syria, the terms of which had been decided by the parties to the conflict largely without the involvement of the humanitarian community. Among the conditions imposed was a requirement that humanitarians would not evacuate any men between the ages of 15 and 55. While humanitarians were eventually able to negotiate around that particular condition, they were not able to prevent hundreds of men from being detained for questioning

and interrogation. The longer these men remained in captivity, the more painful and obvious the parallels to the Balkans became.

Evacuations of civilians from besieged areas can be a critical protection measure in the face of imminent violence. In some cases, an evacuation may be the only option available to save lives. But often, if not always, evacuations are also defined by grave dilemmas. There may be no good outcome available, leaving humanitarians to try to determine the least damaging way forward in the midst of only bad choices. With this in mind it is important for humanitarians to reflect on lessons from the Balkans and other evacuations in the succeeding two decades in order to develop strategies to minimise harm. These lessons include:

Don't wait until it is too late to deal with the tough issues: If potential dilemmas and complications are not discussed until an evacuation is imminent, staff on the ground will be left to make fast decisions on their own. At an institutional level, organisations should discuss common dilemmas and develop guidance for their staff.

Do a careful mapping of potential dilemmas: Mapping potential dilemmas is critical in helping to manage complications that may arise during an evacuation but, perhaps more importantly, it can also help humanitarians decide whether to proceed with an evacuation in the first place. In some circumstances, the risks associated with an evacuation may outweigh the likely benefits. The determinant is not the dilemma itself but the level of risk it carries with it, and how this ranks against the immediate imperative to relocate the population.

Employ a systematic approach to risk analysis: Once a contextualised list of

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possible dilemmas has been developed, humanitarian actors should chart the severity of each dilemma, how the risk compares to the urgency of the evacuation, and whether there are possibilities to mitigate the risks. This assessment will help the decision on whether to proceed with the evacuation and, if so, it will support humanitarians to develop contingency plans for the best-case, worst-case and most likely scenarios.

Sharing lessons: For high-risk interventions like evacuations, there is still some reluctance to speak forthrightly about what went well and what did not. Given that many of the same dilemmas and challenges arise time and again, it is imperative that we share lessons learned.

Conclusion

If civilians are being evacuated, it means political leaders have failed to reach an agreement, states have failed to protect their citizens, and parties to the conflict have failed to uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law. Evacuations are likewise not a solution – they are a temporary, life-saving measure to be pursued only when other options have been exhausted.

It is helpful to recall this in order to lend perspective on the role of humanitarians in such a context. There is a tendency to see a humanitarian evacuation as a success and solution to a crisis, when in fact it is neither. At their best, evacuations can provide short-term, life-saving protection and buy time for leaders to find a solution, but an evacuation in and of itself can neither prevent nor respond to a breakdown of protection in the long term.

Humanitarians have an imperative to take every possible measure to promote the safety and well-being of conflict-affected communities, including through evacuations where necessary. But, ultimately, the responsibility for finding a permanent resolution to the crisis continues to rest with political leaders and the state.

Caelin Briggs caelin.briggs@nrc.no
Humanitarian Policy and Protection Advisor,
Norwegian Refugee Council. www.nrc.no

The Norwegian Refugee Council has recently produced a guide called *Considerations for Planning Mass Evacuations of Civilians in Conflict Settings*. Please contact NRC Geneva for more information nrcgeneva.policy@nrc.ch