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Transcript

The Politics of Aid

Sir John Holmes

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Chair: Lord Williams of Baglan

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14 March 2013

Michael Williams:

Good evening ladies and gentlemen and welcome to Chatham House. It's a real pleasure this evening to welcome Sir John Holmes, a colleague formerly in the Foreign Office but latterly also a colleague in the United Nations. Many of you may know, John spent perhaps the largest part of his career in the FCO; he was principal foreign adviser to two prime ministers, Sir John Major and Tony Blair, and his career in the Foreign Office I think finished when you were ambassador in France.

In fact, I remember coming to the residence one evening John, a very cold evening in January, when I was attending a donor's conference in Paris on behalf of the secretary-general and I think it was just before you were finally making up your mind to go to the Department of Humanitarian Affairs as under-secretary-general. Well the good news – I don't know if I had any part in it myself, probably not – is that you did take up that job. Between 2007 and 2010 you were the under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs. During that period you travelled relentlessly to some of the most difficult humanitarian situations in the world: in Sudan of course, both in the South and Darfur; in the DRC, the Democratic Republic of the Congo; in Sri Lanka; and in Somalia.

Recently, you've written this memoir, this reflection on your years in the UN, *The Politics of Humanity*. I thought that was a particularly apt title because the humanitarian field, as all of us who have worked in it in different countries over the years all know, is often all too heavily politicized and militarized. John, I give you the floor now and we look forward to your remarks.

John Holmes:

Thank you very much Michael and thank you very much to Chatham House for hosting this event and thank you very much to all of you for coming along. The theme, obviously as you're aware, is humanitarian aid and the role of government which is to a large extent the theme of the book which Michael was just referring to, which is about my time at the UN between 2007 and 2010.

Before I get on to talking about the theme, I just thought I might try to put what we're talking about in context because I think it's important to get that right. I think the starting point for that is to try to make the mental leap to put yourself in place of a person who is in the middle of a disaster, whether it be a natural disaster or a man-made disaster, obviously a conflict of some kind. It's actually quite difficult. I think the nearest most of us are likely to come to it, if

we're lucky in a comfortable country like this, is the sudden loss, the sudden death if you like, of someone very close to you – a spouse or a child, when all of a sudden the world is turned upside-down, when all the familiar anchors in your world seem to have gone and what mattered so much yesterday no longer seems to matter at all today.

If you multiply that several times, when not only a member of your family may have been killed but also your friends and your neighbours are killed and scattered. Your house is gone, your village is gone, your livelihood is gone – your life in short is completely upside-down. On top of that you don't know where you're going to find anything to eat or drink, you don't know where you're going to find someone whose going to help you care for your injuries or for the injuries of those close to you and you haven't got anywhere warm and dry to sleep.

In other words, everything that was familiar and stable in your life has disappeared and you have no idea what you're future is going to be and when, if ever, normality is going to return to your life. As I say it's very tough to imagine what that must be really like, sitting as we do in a comfortable and stable country. I'm not sure I can really even now, after four years of living it on a daily basis, make that leap.

The point is that many millions of people every year are in this kind of desperate state and each of them is an individual with his or her own grief and his or her own story to tell. Each of them wouldn't have found it any easier than you to conceive of it happening to them before it actually did.

The latest and most visible people to find themselves in this position are of course those affected by the dreadful civil war now raging in Syria. More than a million people have fled the country to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and elsewhere and several million more are internally displaced. And many of those are in a terrible plight. Again, their world's been turned upside down and the international community is not in fact in this case, at least so far anyway, responding with the resources needed despite the publicity given to it.

But I was quite struck – I went to Jordan a few months ago with the International Rescue Committee to see some of the Syrian refugees in Jordan – by the kind of things they said to me. What they said very often was, 'This sort of thing doesn't happen to people like us, not Syrians. We're accustomed to giving other people help, we're accustomed to giving other people shelter; we're not ones who should be desperate for help. We hate this situation of

depending on the generosity of others in the world. We can't believe that's where we've got to.'

But that's where they were. They and those like them around the world really do desperately need our help.

If I emphasize this right at the beginning that's because this is the uncomfortable reality behind what the book is about. I apologize if what I'm going to say is not very liked, not necessarily very amusing, but the subject doesn't easily lend to that, so most of it is rather serious. The point is that this underlying misery and desperation is what we always need to have in our heads, in our minds when we start to talk about the drier points of humanitarian policy and about relations between governments and humanitarians.

It's also this very difficult and unpleasant reality which is the reason why the four basic principles behind the successful delivery of humanitarian aid are so vital. That is humanity – the compassion we all need to give the resources to help; independence – that's independence of any consideration of politics, race, religion or anything else; impartiality towards those that need assistance – so that must be based purely on need and not on anything else; and finally neutrality – in other words neutrality between the warring factions, whoever they may be if there's a conflict and whatever we may think of their causes or indeed of them as individuals.

The point is, in my experience, governments and others didn't always understand or want to understand those principles – both governments who were on the receiving end of aid, and sometimes even the donor governments. That is why the situations I describe in the book became so difficult to manage at different times. But I should just say how I, as a long serving British diplomat as Michael said – how did I get into all of this in the first place? And that's where I really start the book explaining why I was an accidental humanitarian.

The point is, I was leaving Paris where as Michael said I was an ambassador for a few years and I wasn't sure what was going to happen next, when I got a call from Tony Blair, who was then the prime minister, and he was looking for someone to be the senior British person in the UN Secretariat in New York. Now he wanted me to be the under-secretary-general for political affairs, which was natural obviously with my background, and that was also a position that British diplomats held with great distinction for many years.

However, when I went to see the secretary-general-designate, Ban Ki-Moon, in New York, I discovered that that job was not actually available – for various

reasons, they'd actually offered it to the Americans. So he offered me the role of under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs instead. And I said, 'Well, that's very interesting secretary-general, but I know nothing about humanitarian affairs. In any case I think I'm the wrong nationality. You know, the British – this was not long after Iraq, obviously – the British have been going around the place killing people quite a lot so I'm not sure I'm going to be well regarded in this position. You need a more cuddly nationality; you need a Dutchman or a Norwegian or a Swede.'

He didn't accept that argument and he insisted that I should at least consider it. I talked to other people who knew a little bit about this, perhaps people like Michael as he said, and learned the value and opportunity which the job offered and eventually I accepted it. And I haven't regretted it, despite the horrors and difficulties it brought me into contact with over the following four years. I did learn a huge amount. But also when I finished the job in 2010, I just felt that I had to write bits of it down in a way I never felt about my Foreign Office career, although that was fascinating at times as well.

The essence of the job, just to make it clear, of emergency relief coordinator is to ensure that humanitarian relief is well-coordinated and effective and is available wherever it is needed, in terms of cash and the right people. Why was such a coordinating role required at all? Well that's because the humanitarian system, as those who have engaged in it will know, is not really a system at all, but is a very fragmented collection of different organizations, UN agencies, the Red Cross family and many, many NGOs all working in the same sort of area. They're all well-intentioned, most of them extremely effective, but they're also all independent. They have overlapping mandates, overlapping responsibilities and sometimes very different ideas about what's needed.

So bringing this cacophony together, if you like, making the whole at least equal to the sum of its parts was the key task of the emergency relief coordinator and one of the key points of that was that I had no ability to give anybody any orders, no authority over them, the only levers were my capacity to persuade these organizations that they need to work together and of course the recognition of the organizations themselves that they needed to be coordinated if it was going to be effective.

Now what is the book actually about? We explore in depth some basic policy themes: famine and food insecurity; the rights and wrongs of humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect – which is obviously very relevant to where we are on Syria and we can talk about that no doubt; accountability

for abuses and not least the role of the International Criminal Court; the need to focus on the prevention of disasters rather than just the response after they happen; and the future needs and nature of humanitarian assistance. I also talk a little about reforms in recent years to the way that humanitarian aid is organized and coordinated. I think there has been a lot of progress in improving and professionalizing the performance of humanitarian aid in recent years but that's a rather technical subject which I'm certainly not going to go into now.

Most of the book is actually devoted to disasters or conflicts in individual countries – or territories, in some cases – which particularly preoccupied me when I was doing the job and which I spent a lot of time visiting, because as Michael said, I was travelling for about half of the time. And I wrote it this way with these practical examples not because it was important to say what I did or didn't do – that's not the idea – but because I wanted to use these down-to-earth experiences, if you like to illustrate these policy dilemmas about humanitarian policy, this link between politics and humanitarianism, in a practical way instead of pontificating in theory about it.

So that's why I have chapters on the conflict in Darfur; the travails of southern Sudan and its eventual emergence into independence; the end of the war between the government and the LTTE, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka; the sufferings in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, particularly in the east – I say quite a lot about the scourge of sexual violence there and the horrors of the presence of the Lord's Resistance Army; the long-running civil war in Somalia; Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar/Burma in 2008; the Israeli intervention in Gaza in early 2009 – Operation Cast Lead; the earthquake in Haiti in early 2010; and then the humanitarian consequences of both conflict and natural disasters in Afghanistan and Pakistan. All of these provide interesting examples of where the humanitarian imperative runs up against the political realities in very difficult ways. And I'm going to touch briefly on five of them just to give you a flavour of how this really worked: Darfur in western Sudan, Sri Lanka, Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan and Myanmar/Burma.

First of all in Darfur, which many of you will be familiar with, where the conflict between the rebels and the government that started in 2003 and quickly displaced well over 2 million people, about a third of the population. The international community mounted what is still the biggest humanitarian operation in the world, costing more than a billion pounds a year, to keep the displaced people alive pending resolution of the conflict.

By the time I got there in 2007, there was not really a hot war going on. It was more of a messy and violent stalemate with very little opportunity for the people involved to go home. They were in camps – one camp alone in South Darfur I remember, Kalma camp, had more than 100,000 people crammed into a small area with no land to cultivate. And they were perpetually in dispute or conflict with the local authorities there. There was a very violent situation and our own staff, our own OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) staff, were very much involved in that; indeed one of them was expelled by the government because of it.

Now there is also a big humanitarian community on the ground in Darfur. There were about 14,000 people working for UN agencies, the Red Cross and NGOs, including about 1,000 international expatriate workers. And this community faced constant and increasing pressure from the government in Khartoum. They disliked their presence as witnesses to what was going on and they disliked their insistence in involving themselves – not only in providing the basics of food, clean water and medical care, in other words the basics of life – but also in trying to protect the civilian population against abuses of all kinds, including the abuses by the government themselves and including sexual violence, which was essentially a taboo subject.

I spent a lot of time during those four years visiting Darfur, visiting Khartoum to try to put pressure on the central government but also on the local government in Darfur to let the humanitarian community to do what we were actually there to do, which was to help the people who were in most need. This was very difficult and I have to say very unsatisfactory dialogue. We sometimes made steps forward but we usually had just as many steps backward.

This culminated in March 2009 with the expulsion by the Khartoum government of 13 NGOs, including some of the big international players like Oxfam – ostensibly because they had been indulging in unspecified unacceptable behaviour, but in fact really because the president, President [Omar al-]Bashir had just been indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. And humanitarian organizations, some rather outspoken in reality, were a doubly convenient whipping boy to use for retaliation. They weren't able to hit back but they were also good to get out of the way with their inconvenient and embarrassing statements and activities at times. This expulsion was also incidentally done in a very brutal manner with threats, intimidation and seizure of equipment and documents, again in a very unacceptable way.

The dilemma was how to react to this. There was a choice essentially between pulling out all the humanitarian organizations in protest against this kind of unacceptable action and the unacceptable conditions this was creating for those still working in Darfur, and staying in Darfur, staying in Sudan while trying to reverse the decision, however hopeless that might be, and meanwhile trying to stop a second, even worse humanitarian disaster in Darfur because of the capacity to help on the ground that had been lost because of the expulsions. We decided in the end to stay in, despite the provocation of the expulsions, and try to improve things by dialogue – however difficult again – but also using political pressure from governments and institutions like the Arab League who might be considered to have some influence in Khartoum.

That decision to stay in was controversial at the time, and only partially successful I have to say. We did in fact largely prevent another major humanitarian crisis but we never managed to establish a very satisfactory basis for operations with the Sudanese government, and I think that remains the case today. So should we actually have drawn a line in the sand and pulled out altogether and face the Sudanese government with the real consequences of their decision and force them to face up to it? Maybe that's an issue we can debate. Some of you may have been familiar with it at the time.

Meanwhile, just to say, the Darfur crisis has not been resolved. It's disappeared largely from our TV screens and our newspapers. And that illustrates more on the main frustrations that I felt and many others felt in these kind of situations in Darfur and elsewhere, that the political actors – whether the ones actually engaged in the conflict or the international actors trying to act on this from outside – have failed to take advantage of the breathing space, the sticking plaster if you like, that the humanitarians put on the situation. It left us literally holding the baby because they've failed to resolve the conflict. And even worse, we're left in a position where we're in danger of seeming to contribute towards prolonging the conflict by dealing with its humanitarian consequences, because we're sparing the warring parties in facing the realities of what they've done. What we're also doing after 10 years, without of course meaning to, is creating a whole generation of aid-dependent people, who will find it very difficult to go home in the future.

Second is Sri Lanka. This is like Darfur, still a live issue although the conflict is itself over. And it is again somewhere I visited a lot over the four years between 2007 and 2010. But the particular context here is what happened in

northeast Sri Lanka in the first months of 2009, when the government forces finally defeated the LTTE Tamil Tiger rebels.

Up to 300,000 Tamil civilians were with the LTTE right to the end, mostly held against their will by the LTTE and effectively used as a kind of human shield as the fighting forces of the Tamil Tigers with the civilians retreated into an ever smaller area/enclave, under the military pressure from the government. While the LTTE themselves were firing on any civilians trying to escape and effectively committing war crimes in doing so, the government forces were also using heavy weapons and air strikes in areas where they knew these Tamil civilians were and where they knew there were bound to be many deaths and injuries. There *were* deaths and injuries, thousands of them, perhaps tens of thousands of them, before the eventual total defeat of the LTTE and the eventual release of the emaciated and disease-ridden civilian survivors.

Now there were very few witnesses – international witnesses I mean – to what was actually happening, and virtually no aid, because the journalists and the humanitarian workers had been excluded from this LTTE-held area at an earlier stage. This led to a series of controversies which continue to rage and which I go into in the book. Should the humanitarian community have pulled out of this area when the government told them they needed to in September 2008 or should we have tried to stay longer? Should we have condemned the government even more loudly and publicly than we did and given, even more loudly and publicly than we did, details of the civilian casualties of the LTTE-held area to increase international outrage even when we weren't sure of how reliable these figures actually were? Indeed, more fundamentally, should we have gone on working with a government behaving that way at all and pulled out of the country altogether as a form of protest?

There isn't time to go into these controversies but I believed – and I still believe – that we were right to hang in there despite all this and to do what we could do to influence the government from within as well as from without, while attempting to look after the Tamils who did escape from the LTTE and of course the rest of the Tamil population when they eventually got out. We did play a large part in ensuring the Tamil civilians were properly treated after the war physically and psychologically and that they were able to return to their homes after a few months rather than being kept in camps for years, as looked likely at one stage.

This decision to stay in there and to work to help the most vulnerable was – despite my own experiences at the hands of the government a couple of

years before… When on a visit, a minister went so far as to describe me as a terrorist after I said that Sri Lanka at the time was the most dangerous place in the world for humanitarian workers after a massacre of humanitarian workers there. I actually got it in the neck from both sides because some people in the Tamil diaspora also called me a 'conniver in genocide'. Maybe if you get both it from both sides, you might be getting something right I suppose.

The point is anyway there is certainly room again for genuine debate about what we should have done in those circumstances. Should we have stayed or should we have gone? Should we have continued to work with the government, however difficult that was, or should we have denounced them more actively? Is the humanitarian community ever capable of setting red lines about its own presence or will we always be driven to stay in there, almost whatever happens, to try to help the most vulnerable people?

Third: Afghanistan. Again there's no time to go into the details of what is a very complex situation, but the essence of the problem there – as many of you will be aware – was the blurring of lines between political and security objectives and of humanitarian objectives and activities.

I think the nadir of all this came when US troops had at one stage [said] villages cooperating in the fight against the Taliban would be given humanitarian help but those who didn't would not. That was obviously completely unacceptable. But the whole situation was very difficult for the United Nations because they had a mandate from the Security Council to support the government after 2001 and therefore their activities became very easily confused and mixed up with those of NATO and the military operation. It was then an extra problem for the humanitarians within the UN because how could they separate themselves from the rest of the UN and therefore by extension from NATO without being seen by the locals, including by the Taliban and other militias, as just one Western ball of wax, if I can put it that way, thus jeopardizing our ability to operate safely and effectively? The point was that humanitarians were increasingly being attacked and targeted in Afghanistan in a way they had not been before, even when the Taliban were in power before 2001.

This came to a head in a way in my time as emergency relief coordinator because coordination of humanitarian activities in Afghanistan had been put inside the UN mission generally. We decided at that point – this was in 2009 – that we simply had to separate ourselves out from that UN mission and establish a separate office physically and of course organizationally.

That sounds a bit trivial perhaps, maybe it sounds rather simple, but actually this caused huge ructions within the UN and the UN mission who couldn't see the logic of what we wanted to do, and thought we were just being precious and over-innocent. We got little or no support from the Western governments involved either, even those who were usually rather sympathetic to humanitarian causes, because they simply seemed unable to grasp this need for us to be able to operate independently and impartially if we were to do our job properly or indeed do our job at all. There was also a separate huge issue about the desire to talk to the Taliban as humanitarians, not on a political front, in order to persuade them to respect humanitarian principles and again let us do our job.

We did eventually succeed in persuading everybody to let us set up a separate OCHA office – OCHA being the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. But that problem of confusion of roles between military and political actors and humanitarian and development actors and their respective responsibilities has considered – and it's been added to by a wider tension between the United Nations and NATO about civilian casualties which has also not gone away.

I'm conscious that I'm running out of time. Perhaps I will skip over the DRC because that's a very complex situation and I don't want to skip over it without giving it justice.

So let me just turn finally to a natural disaster, a situation which is usually rather more simple. And this is the natural disaster in Myanmar/Burma in May 2008, when Cyclone Nargis hit and a massive tidal surge caused the death of 140,000 people in the Irrawaddy Delta in the space of a few hours. A further 2 million people were displaced and desperately needed help.

But the Myanmar regime at the time refused for weeks to allow international aid workers into the country. They obviously feared, because they were paranoid about the international community at the time, that these humanitarian workers would in reality be CIA agents or even worse, Western journalists. So they took a lot of persuading – first of all by myself on a visit and then by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon – that the needs of the people affected by the cyclone were so desperate that they had no choice but to accept outside help, and that more importantly, we were not attaching any political conditions to this help.

Our cause in trying to persuade the government to accept international help was not assisted, I have to say, by some loose talk from Western capitals – not actually London, but one close to here – that if the regime wouldn't accept

aid voluntarily, it should somehow be forced to do so at gunpoint. In practice, intervention was not a realistic option in this situation in any way and talking about it in that way simply fed the paranoia of the regime and didn't influence the situation in a helpful way. Another time also much of the press and some Western governments were not convinced it was possible to have a sensible or productive dialogue with such a regime.

I believe there was no choice faced with such a huge humanitarian need, and that the regime could be brought to see sense if they were approached in the right way. In the end that was what more or less did happen, not least perhaps because Ban Ki-moon was able to talk to them as a fellow Asian and convince them of the UN's goodwill. We were also able to use the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN, as a way in to decision-makers in the capital.

I actually like to think that this ultimately successful experience of persuading them to allow the aid workers in may have played a small part in beginning to open a crack in the defences of a regime which had hitherto been pretty impenetrable. In any case, as you know, the situation has changed out of all recognition for the better and that's a very desirable outcome.

Just to conclude quickly – and if you want to know more about these situations obviously you'll need to read the book – what conclusions do I draw from these experiences? Let me just single out five quickly.

First of all, governments, both from donor nations and more particularly from countries where humanitarian operations are conducted need to understand much better than they do now – and respect much more than the they do now – the principles according to which humanitarians have to work to be effective. This also means humanitarians have to explain them much better, why they're necessary, and of course this is one of the aims of the book.

Secondly, talking to governments and to non-state actors, even ones other people identify as terrorists, is almost always better than shouting at them, certainly for humanitarians but perhaps this is a wider point for others as well. The right balance between maintaining operations and louder denunciation of local governments or rebel movements is always hard, but I believe it has to be struck pragmatically and according to the specific political context, which means the nuances and dynamics of that context need to be properly understood, which is not always the case.

Thirdly, so-called humanitarian intervention, in other words armed intervention to protect populations from their own governments in accordance with the responsibility to protect, has to be approached with huge care. Again,

knowledge of the politics of the country where intervention is being contemplated is essential – including the nuances of the situation – because the unintended consequences of intervention are often so great and so negative that it really has to be a last resort. This is of course a very live issue now in Syria.

Fourthly – and I haven't talked much about this but it's very important – preventing natural disasters and reducing the risk from them when they do strike has to be given a much higher priority than we are giving it now, compared to responding with help after they strike. That needs to be both by the governments of the countries concerned but also by the international humanitarian and development community. We need to spend much more time on building local capacity in disaster-prone countries to deal with their own disasters as much as possible. This approach focused on disaster-risk reduction, to use the jargon, and local capacity building should be the model for humanitarianism in the future.

The final conclusion: there is still going to be a need – even if we move to this model of disaster risk reduction, local capacity building – there is still going to be a need for more international resources and more international humanitarian capacity to deal not only with conflicts but also particularly, I think, with the major natural disasters which are going to be increasing both in frequency and intensity because of the increasing effects of climate change. Some of those even the best-prepared local governments will not be able to deal with. I think providing those resources will remain a worthwhile cause worthy of our support and I hope the book will help to persuade you of that as well. Thank you very much for listening.