

Millions May Die ... Or Not BY DAVID RIEFF Foreign Policy |SEPT/OCT 2011

How disaster hype became a big global business.

David Rieff è autore di *Un giaciglio per la notte. Il paradosso umanitario*, Carocci 2005. Una dura denuncia del business umanitario.

On Sept. 28, 2001, with the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan imminent, Jeremy Hobbs, the executive director of Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, issued an urgent call for donations to the group's Afghan Refugee Crisis Appeal. "Up to 5 million innocent people face starvation and death in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran," he insisted. "We must act now to prevent what could possibly be the worst humanitarian catastrophe since World War II."

Really? Worse than Biafra in 1967, worse than the Cambodian refugee crisis, worse than the Ethiopian famine of 1984-1985, and worse even than Somalia in 1991? How could a senior official at one of the most experienced and well-respected private relief agencies in the world suggest with such confidence that the crisis in Afghanistan was likely to outstrip these tragedies?

To be fair, Hobbs left himself a grammatical out. "Up to" 5 million people might die, he said; the crisis "could possibly" be the worst humanitarian disaster since World War II. But this was the moral equivalent of the fine print in a contract you get from a bank with a Visa card. Oxfam was not just advancing a possibility; it was issuing a warning about an event that might very well occur if an emergency response was not mounted immediately -- and it was staking its credibility on this assessment.

And it's not just Oxfam that's given to this kind of exaggeration. The world's emergency relief organizations, from other major NGOs like Care International and World Vision to the U.N.'s specialized agencies like the World Food Program and the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), are always warning the public about the never-more-dire plight of war refugees, famine victims, and the latest unfortunate souls imperiled by nature's wrath. They should count themselves lucky that we have such short memories. If people actually remembered just how often their claims have proved to be overblown, contributions would almost certainly fall off dramatically. A quick search for the "world's worst humanitarian crisis" brings up a trove of competing claims: Darfur, Congo, Pakistan, Somalia. And the list goes on. Relief agencies are constantly insisting that what is about to take place in Afghanistan or Burma, Haiti or Rwanda, is nothing short of apocalyptic, only for it to turn out that these predictions of disaster are wildly exaggerated, when not simply unfounded.

Sadly, over the course of the past few decades, exaggeration seems to have become the rule in the world of humanitarian relief. The Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004, which is generally believed to have killed almost a quarter of a million people in 14 countries, is a stark example. In the immediate aftermath, NGOs and U.N. agencies were predicting that without massive aid, the death toll would double because of hunger, lack of clean water, and the spread of infectious disease. Their appeals were extraordinarily successful, raising more than \$14 billion from governments, corporations, and a remarkably large number of private donors. And yet, there was little basis for such anxiety: The general rule in natural disasters such as tsunamis and earthquakes is that most fatalities occur in the first 24 hours. The mismatch between the vast sums of money raised globally for tsunami relief and the real needs on the ground was so extreme that Doctors Without Borders soon began returning contributions, while Oxfam diverted funds to other crises. But this did not stop the U.N. from taking credit -- on what basis, no one could quite say -- for having prevented a second wave of deaths.

The culture of shameless embellishment never seems to dissipate for long. Here is Elisabeth Byrs, the spokeswoman for the U.N.'s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs,

speaking in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake that devastated Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on Jan. 12, 2010: "This is a historic disaster," she said. "We have never been confronted with such a disaster in the U.N. memory. It is like no other." Let's be clear: This is not the compassionate rhetoric of solidarity, but advertising hype. It's bigger, sadder, worse! The fact that those who dispense such misinformation mean well does not lessen the distortion.

In war zones, the inflation of anxieties that is the handmaiden of humanitarian work has become almost as extreme. In the two years after the 1994 Rwandan genocide -- in which more than a million Rwandan Hutu refugees huddled in camps -- it was common to hear UNHCR officials insisting that forcing the refugees to return to Rwanda would lead to tens of thousands dead on the march home or killed by the forces of the Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). In 1996, though, the RPF did shut down the camps, and there were virtually no casualties among those who returned home. There were indeed terrible massacres in the forests of eastern Congo, but the victims were those who refused to return and tried to flee west.

The charitable interpretation of all this is that relief groups are just indulging in hyperbole, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "deliberate exaggeration, not meant to be taken literally." But this is hardly likely, precisely because most of the people who partake in this apocalypse-mongering know better. Clearly, the relief folks have a motive here. If they do not exaggerate, private donations and government and U.N. grants to their organizations will dry up.

And the tragic thing is that they're probably right. Doctors Without Borders puts out a list every year of the 10 most forgotten crises, largely measured by the lack of airtime and column inches devoted to these humanitarian emergencies in the international media. All relief agencies know that, where disasters are concerned, not only the media but the public as a whole practices a species of serial monogamy, focusing on one crisis to the exclusion of all others until what is sometimes called "compassion fatigue" sets in. Then, attention shifts to the next emergency.

These days, only the most extreme, most apocalyptic situations are likely to move donors in the rich world -- that is, the donors who count the most (some 90 percent of all the funding for humanitarian work still comes from the OECD countries). With donor fatigue an ever-present possibility, admitting that they might not actually know how many people have been killed or made homeless -- or acknowledging that original estimates may have been overstated -- is thought to undermine the cause of rescuing people. That's why a recent report prepared for the U.S. Agency for International Development by Haiti expert Timothy Schwartz, suggesting that the official death toll in the 2010 earthquake of 316,000 overstated matters by roughly 500 percent, caused such consternation both in Port-au-Prince and in Washington -- as if accurate figures somehow provided a license not to care.

At a time when foreign aid is even more unpopular than usual in Washington, these anxieties are understandable. But hyperbole is not just a morally questionable strategy; it's practically unsustainable. By continually upping the rhetorical ante, relief agencies, whatever their intentions, are sowing the seeds of future cynicism, raising the bar of compassion to the point where any disaster in which the death toll cannot be counted in the hundreds of thousands, that cannot be described as the worst since World War II or as being of biblical proportions, is almost certainly condemned to seem not all that bad by comparison.

It is probably accurate, though, that telling the truth in all its complexity will make getting the attention and mobilizing the concern of people in the rich world that much more difficult. Whatever activists may sometimes prefer to imagine, we are human beings, not solidarity machines. But we are not indifference machines either, and presented with the facts as they are, instead of dark nightmares, we might just do the right thing.