Operation Restore Hope, the American-led mission aimed at relieving starvation in Somalia, is just the latest example of what has come to be known as humanitarian intervention.

Other recent examples are the allied action to protect the Kurds in Iraq at the end of the Gulf War and the relief missions presently being mounted in the old Yugoslavia. They are significant in that they are multilateral in character; though only a relatively small number of countries have been involved, the operations have had the backing and endorsement of the United Nations. Other recent cases of intervention where a concern for human rights has been a significant, if not exclusive motivation, have been unilateral. These have included: India's invasion of East Pakistan in 1971—an action which stopped the killing of Bengalis; Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978; Tanzania's invasion of Uganda in 1979 which resulted in the removal of Idi Amin; and the French action in the Central African Empire in 1979 which ousted Emperor Bokassa.

The concept of humanitarian intervention is by no means new. A provision for intervention on behalf of those suffering under tyranny was recognised by the founders of the modern sovereign state system. It received further attention in the 19th century, though the notion of humanitarian intervention was then often used to rationalise the imperial designs of the European powers.

But in the latter part of the 20th century, the idea has come of age, for two reasons: improved global communications have made people more aware of human rights abuses in various parts of the world, and the promotion of human rights has become an increasingly important item on the agenda of international relations. The latter development has been reinforced by a relative decline in the importance of security issues in the post-Cold War era; by the almost missionary zeal with which the developed democracies, in the wake of the
collapse of communism, have sought to promote human rights; and by the increasingly active role of the United Nations.

The principles of sovereignty and non-intervention are central to the modern state system and the United Nations is pledged to uphold them. But the UN is also pledged to uphold the peace, and this has led to the view that the UN has a right to intervene militarily in situations where the abuse of human rights in a particular country threatens international peace—most commonly by causing a flow of refugees across international borders. This was the argument used by the UN to justify its intervention in Iraq to protect the Kurds. The argument would seem to apply even more so in the case of the former Yugoslavia. Any further intervention there will have a lot to do with concern that a continuation of 'ethnic cleansing' and other atrocities in the Balkans might send a flood of refugees into western and southern Europe with obvious consequences for the peace and stability of the region.

The operation in Somalia was justified not on the grounds that the situation there constituted a potential threat to international security, but rather on the grounds of relieving the appalling suffering of the Somali people in circumstances where all semblances of national government had broken down. The action represents a watershed in the UN's attitude to intervention—it is the first time the world body has regarded the relief of suffering as a primary justification for overriding the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention.

These developments have raised a number of important political and military issues. First, there is the question of the composition and command of the forces engaged in humanitarian intervention. The operation in Somalia has the endorsement of the UN and the forces involved come from a number of nations, including Australia. However, the force is overwhelmingly American and is commanded by an American—though he is required to liaise more closely with the Security Council than did his counterpart during the Gulf War. Elements on the Left have long been sceptical, often to the point of paranoia, about US intentions, and the disproportionately American character of the operation in Somalia fuels suspicion that it is little more than an extension of US foreign policy.

Such concerns might be allayed if the UN was seen to be more obviously in control. Operations like the one in Somalia could be placed under the control of the Military Staff Committee of the Security Council, as provided for in the UN Charter. Another possibility, which has been pushed recently by Secretary General Boutros-Ghali, is that the UN create a special standing army, made up of contingents from as many member states as possible, which could be used to enforce directives of the Security Council. But these proposals are not likely to gain easy acceptance. For the foreseeable future, operations like the one in Somalia, if they are to go ahead at all, are likely to have a significant American component.

Second, the Somalia operation raises questions about the legitimacy of the UN itself. Many Third World states are dissatisfied with a situation where so much power is vested in a small number of predominantly European countries—the victors of a war fought more than 50 years ago. They would like to see reforms in the structure of the UN such as an expansion of the permanent membership of the Security Council and the General Assembly. These concerns will have to be addressed if there is to be sufficient support for any long-term expansion of the UN's role in humanitarian intervention.

Third, reference to this sort of intervention as 'humanitarian' should not be allowed to disguise its military character. Opposition to the American presence in Somalia has been minimal, but this case could prove to be the exception rather than the rule. A more likely scenario is one in which starvation and human rights abuses are a product of widespread and organised civil strife. In such situations, intervention would almost inevitably involve taking sides in the conflict and perhaps determining the outcome. At the very least this could entail a longer than expected involvement for the intervening force.

Even in Somalia, this remains a possibility. The US originally had expected to be able to quit the country by the time of the Clinton Inauguration. The intention had been to replace the Americans with a UN force of some sort, but this is proving hard to organise. Washington may eventually be faced with the choice of either withdrawing from Somalia before the objectives of the intervention have been achieved or hanging on indefinitely. In any case, those who have argued that military intervention is an inappropriate and counterproductive means of dealing with human rights abuses will feel vindicated.

Recourse to the use of force in support of humanitarian intervention is likely to prove a major sticking point on the Left. At the time of the Gulf War many on the Left, especially in the federal parliamentary Labor Party, were persuaded to abandon their opposition to the use of force because the allied operation had the endorsement of the UN. But dissenters remained, and these same people could be expected to oppose the use of force in support of humanitarian intervention.

When confronted with pitiful images like those beamed out of Somalia, only the most insensitive among us could deny having wished that some international means were at hand to relieve the situation. This is not to deny that problems exist with the concept of humanitarian intervention. But the easy option—one which some on the Left seem to support—is to deny that there are any circumstances in which intervention, even with humanitarian objectives, is justified. Such a stand would sit uneasily with traditional Left thinking about international relations. The Left has a long and proud record of support for just causes in many parts of the world and this has often included support for armed struggle. The Left should support the intervention in Somalia.

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