Rapid Communication: The Fate of Global Humanitarian Assistance Amidst Growing Health Challenges

Frederick M. Burkle Jr. MD, MPH, DTM, PhD (Hon.) FAAP, FACEP[1] ,
Amir Khorram-Manesh MD, PhD[2,3,4] and Krzysztof Goniewicz PhD[5]

[1]Global Scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, USA; [2]Department of Surgery, Institute of Clinical Sciences, Sahlgrenska Academy, Gothenburg University, Sweden; [3]Center for Disaster Medicine, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden; [4]Gothenburg Emergency Medicine Research Group (GEMREG), Sahlgrenska Academy, Gothenburg University, Sweden and [5]Department of Security Studies, Polish Air Force University, Dęblin, Poland

Abstract

With the widespread democratic decline and the rise of autocratic regimes, global humanitarian assistance efforts have often fallen short of expectations. Historical humanitarian assistance efforts have changed, becoming less effective, or disappearing. Given the direction that global health crisis risks are taking today, it is crucial that diplomatic, structural, logistical, security, and operational questions be asked and appropriate global solutions sought for the future management of pandemics and climate change crises.

Historically, we have witnessed a decline in the absolute number of deaths from conflicts since 1946, often attributed to the values, laws, and democratic institutions that flourished after WWII (World War II). However, we are now witnessing a marked change in the number and the nature of major conflicts that threaten our collective efforts to ensure global peace and save democracy.[1] Critical are the warning signs that historical humanitarian assistance efforts we have worked under have markedly changed or are disappearing.

Although the link between democracy and effective humanitarian assistance is not always straightforward due to slow or politically influenced democratic processes, competing national interests, foreign policy agendas, and systemic challenges such as corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies, the fundamental values and principles inherent in democratic systems generally create a more conducive environment for establishing and sustaining robust humanitarian assistance efforts in response to conflicts and disasters. The emphasis on human rights, accountability, civil society engagement, and international cooperation provides a strong foundation for effective and principled humanitarian action.[2]

Today, there is an emerging consensus globally that threats "to the stability of the current international order are rising" leading to a "specter of widespread democratic decline."[3] Factors contributing to these changes are the decreasing numbers of people living in democracies, changes in the extent of democratic rights, and an increase in autocratizing countries.[4] In 2021, fewer than a fifth of the world's population lived in "fully free countries."[5] The US is considered a "flawed democracy."[6] Autocratic regimes create a hostile environment for independent organizations, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and often neglect or mismanage their health care systems. The suppression of civil society and the weakening of health care are mutually reinforcing, leading to a decline in the overall well-being of the population.[7]

A 2021 Richard Horton Lancet Editorial cautions that while liberal democracy has wavered during complex crises facing the world today, the public "might lose faith in its efficacy and, over time, be susceptible to the attractions of more authoritarian rule."[8] However, evidence is clear that "autocratic regimes have characteristically failed to adopt investments in public health, education, and prevention measures to keep pace with population growth and density." A year before the Lancet Editorial, in 2020, Burkle argued that public health emergencies of international concern, such as infectious disease outbreaks, climate change, epidemics, and pandemics, represent an increasing risk to the world's population.[9] It is safe to assert that globally we will not adequately manage a major pandemic or the consequences of climate change without the coordination of all countries despite their political preferences. Autocratic regimes are "seriously handicapped by sociopathic narcissistic leaders who are incapable of understanding the health consequences of their populations or their responsibility to their global neighbors, as illustrated in their lack of ability to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, placing the rest of the world at

increasing risk."[9,10] Increasingly, hours of debates among disaster medicine colleagues ask, "Are we using our global health resources appropriately or are those efforts in vain?"

Within autocracies, varied levels of religious restriction exert effects dangerous enough to spark a civil war.[11] Prolonged conflicts, such as the enduring conflict between Israel and Palestine, can transform religious beliefs into ideologies that fuel the quest for survival and justice. These ideologies make political resolutions difficult to achieve and result in decades of occupation, forced displacements, expulsions, significant loss of life, economic stagnation, and global health crises.[12] Autocrats are both envious and fearful of organized religion's ability to mobilize the citizenry. Melanie Sauter describes that the "paradox of humanitarian neutrality occurs when humanitarians adhere to neutrality resulting in being perceived as less neutral by conflicting parties. Providing aid to all, including perceived enemies, especially non-state armed groups, becomes a primary obstacle to humanitarian access.[13] Autocratic governments and foreign military interventions pose greater threats to the neutrality of humanitarian workers, often resulting in severe repercussions. To quash domestic opposition, autocrats worldwide are not only learning from each other but also increasingly working together.[14]

Somewhat unexpectedly, certain autocracies, for example, China, have acknowledged their limitations and allowed a growing presence of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but only if closely monitored and overseen by a government ministry or a government-run (NGO).[14] Many scholars and policymakers can pursue development goals (often called "bypass aid") in this manner. Some international NGOs operate in authoritarian regimes, "even in countries that have become more hostile." One author concluded his writings with the quote: "It's complicated. Dictators love NGOs, but they don't."[15–16]

NGOs have the potential to undermine autocracies and bolster democracy. While many autocracies may harbor uncomfortable feelings toward NGO work, others argue that they still "remain a powerful force for democracy."[16] Yet, in December 2024, the Taliban in Afghanistan, in one of many crackdowns on women's rights since they took power in 2021, stated they would close all NGOs employing Afghan women allegedly because they didn't wear the Islamic headscarf correctly.[17]

NGOs increasingly experience widespread crackdowns globally primarily because they still have the potential to undermine authoritarian governance. However, those responding to worldwide public health emergencies must be increasingly cautious regarding their individual and collective security, ability, and capacity to launch and maintain serviceable humanitarian responses. The "dangers of kidnapping, sexual assault, robbery, severe injury, and death are commonly acknowledged," yet remain significant threats that NGOs frequently overlook.[18] Recommendations currently focus on "comprehensive security awareness training and building robust capabilities for crisis management."[18–20]

In 2023, Abby Stoddard and others reported that more aid workers died by violence than in any previous year on record, with 280 fatalities reported in 33 countries. More than half of these deaths (163) were aid workers killed in the first 3 months of the conflict in Gaza, mostly by airstrikes.[22–23] As of August 7, 2024, the provisional global fatality counts of aid workers reached 172, the highest rate ever in recent years. Major armed conflicts in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine have accounted for the highest proportion of aid worker attacks and killings by state actors, suggesting a further erosion of international humanitarian law and a shrinking of security within humanitarian operations.[22–23] In Gaza, Sudan, and other conflicts, concerted humanitarian advocacy efforts with governments – both public and behind the scenes – have resulted in little change in policy and tactics. Far from protecting and facilitating humanitarian aid, militaries have repeatedly obstructed and endangered aid programs. Global efforts to address the problem of violence against aid workers through UN resolutions and international media campaigns like "#NotATarget" have also not managed to slow the continued upward trend of global casualty numbers.[21] NGO Security Risk Management programs attempt to "unpack the changing environments, practices, discussions, and technical considerations impacting the safety and security of aid workers and operations."[22–23]

Regarding the increase in security issues affecting aid workers, it is also strongly argued that "much of international medical volunteering is done for the wrong reasons, in that local people serve as a means to meet volunteers' needs, or for the right reasons but ignorance and ill-preparedness harm the intended beneficiaries, often without volunteer's grasp of the damage caused."[24] Without greater coordination, global aid groups must improve coordination with host and local governments and institutions.[25] Ethical considerations serve concerns with international volunteering, recommending that all volunteers must ask: "What are your motivations, are you confident that your presence will not cause harm to the community, can you ensure that your volunteering truly benefits the community, and whether the local community will feel respected and benefited from one's actions?"[26] The development of WHO's new strategies regarding EMT work, "Emergency Medical Teams 2030 strategy," lays a strong foundation, but its sufficiency will be determined by its successful and sustained implementation. It's a roadmap, and the journey requires dedicated effort and resources.[27]

Multiple NGOs faced closure and security threats during COVID-19 as NGO security, finances, and operations collapsed.[28] Finding a match between volunteer competencies and the host country's needs is a high priority. In addition, health care and health security go hand in hand, necessitating minimum health security and infrastructure to protect health care providers.[29] Given the direction that global health crisis risks are taking today, it is crucial that these questions be asked and solutions sought for pandemics and climate change crises. These questions must be addressed in the context of a potential global crisis for every country where NGOs work.[30] How NGO resources and personnel will be used, managed, and protected in climate change and global pandemic crisis management is increasingly critical. A logistical field mantra followed by one of the authors (FMB) over many years: "Send the right people, with the right training, for the right purpose."

While the spread of autocracies poses a major global concern, the specific impacts of one nation's actions are contingent on the potential for a sudden scarcity of international resources and the resulting vulnerability of health care workers. The notion that withdrawing resources in an increasingly violent world enhances security or national greatness dangerously ignores a hidden, yet growing, threat.

Ethical standard. NA.

References

1. **Khorram-Manesh A.** Global transition, global risks, and the UN's sustainable development goals–a call for peace, justice, and political stability. *Glob Transit.* 2023;**5**:90–97. doi:10.1016/j.glt.2023.06.002

2. **Green J.** Ideas matter: why does democracy matter for growth? Accessed May 3, 2025. https://www.theigc.org/blogs/ideas-matter/ideas-matter-why-does-democracy-matter-growth

3. **Kendall-Taylor A.** How Democracy's Decline Would Undermine the International Order. Commentary. Center for Strategic & International Studies. Published July 15, 2016. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-democracys-decline-would-undermine-international-order.

4. **Herre B.** The World Has Recently Become Less Democratic. Published May 2024. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://ourworldindata.org/less-democratic.

5. Freedom House: Press Release: New Report: The Global Decline in Democracy Has Accelerated. Published March 3, 2021. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-global-decline-democracy-has-accelerated.

6. **Azpuru D**, **Hall M**. Yes, Our "Flawed' Democracy Just Got Downgraded. Here's Why. Washington Post. Published February 23, 2017. Accessed 17 January 2025. news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/23/yes-our-flawed-democracy-just-got-downgradedheres-why/.

7. **Santos EA.** The Struggle for Human Rights in Authoritarian Regimes. Accessed May 3, 2025. https://www.diplomacyandlaw.com/post/the-struggle-for-human-rights-in-authoritarian-regimes

8. **Horton R.** Offline: Is democracy good for your health? *The Lancet.* 2021;**398**(10316):2060. doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(21)02747-1

9. **Burkle FM**. Declining public health protections within autocratic regimes: impact on global public health security, infectious disease outbreaks, epidemics, and pandemics. *Prehosp Disaster Med.* 2020;**35**(3):237–246. doi:10.1017/S1049023X20000424.

10. **Khorram-Manesh A**, **Burkle FM, Jr.** Narcissistic sociopathy in global autocratic leaders: arrested development, obsessive demand for power, and the emergence of unlawful hybrid wars. *Disaster Med Public Health Prep.* 2022;**17**:e263. doi:10.1017/dmp.2022.213

11. **Kim D**, **Choi HJ**. Autocracy, religious restriction, and religious civil war. *Pol Relig.* 2017;**10**(2):311–338. doi:10.1017/S1755048316000778.

12. **Khorram-Manesh A.**, & **Burkle Jr, FM.** When religious beliefs become an ideology to motivate a war. *Glob Change Peace Secur.* 2024;1–23. doi:10.1080/14781158.2024.2418588

13. **Sauter M.** Humanitarian Aid in Autocracies, the Risk of Compromised Neutrality. Published May 3, 2024. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://talks.ox.ac.uk/talks/id/7d9e75fe-10c2-4dd2-a5e6-637905e80165/.

14. **Ghattas K.** As Autocrats Deepen International Ties, Their Opponents Seek Strength in Solidarity. Financial Times. Published August 20, 2023. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://www.ft.com/content/b0c3a9bb-6073-4ab8-ae0c-0da721bbece4

15. **Heiss A.** NGOs and authoritarianism. In: *Routledge Handbook of NGOs and International Relations*, ed. Thomas Davies. Routledge; 2019.

16. **Impact Magazine**. Holding Power Accountable: How NGOs Champion Change in a Complex World. Published March 11, 2024. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://www.theimpactmagazine.org/holding-power-accountable-how-ngos-champion-change-in-a-complex-world/.

17. **Associated Press**. The Taliban Say They Will Close All NGOs Employing Afghan Women. Published December 30, 2024, 4:39 PM HST. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-ngo-women-closure-1fde989369785f8df0e83c81d48626f1.

18. **Quereshi S.** Safety Concerns Plague Humanitarian Aid Work. Think Global Health. Published December 9, 2024. Accessed January 17, 2025. thinkglobalhealth.org.

19. **Strategic Risk**. Spotlight On: Escalating NGO Risks and How to Tackle Them. Published February 23, 2024. Accessed January 17, 2025. strategic-risk-global.com.

20. **Humanitarian Outcomes**. Aid Worker Security Report 2023. Security Training in the Humanitarian Sector: Issues of Equity and Effectiveness. Published August 17, 2023. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/AWSR_2023.

21. **Humanitarian Outcomes**. Figures at a Glance. Published July 2024. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/figures_at_a_glance_2024.

22. **The Global Interagency Security Forum**. GISF Podcast/ Abby Stoddard: State of Practice: The Evolution of Security Risk Management in the Humanitarian Space. Published January 30, 2024. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://gisf.ngo/resource/state-of-practice-the-evolution-of-srm-in-the-humanitarian-space-gisf-and-humanitarian-outcomes-research-paper/

23. **Stoddard A.** Running in Place: Security Risk Management in Humanitarian Operations. Abby Stoddard. Published March 3, 2024. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://odihpn.org/publication/running-in-place-security-risk-management-in-humanitarian-operations/

24. **Bauer I.** More harm than good? The questionable ethics of medical volunteering and international student placements. *Trop Dis Travel Med Vaccines.* 2017;**3**:5. doi:10.1186/s40704-017-0048-y.

25. **Deserranno E**, **Nansamba A**, **Qien N**, et al. Why well-meaning NGOs sometimes do more harm than good. Published August 7, 2020. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/international-aid-development-ngos-crowding-out-government.

26. **Roth L.** Ethical Considerations Related to International Medical Volunteering. Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. Published May 11, 2022. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://www.scu.edu/ethics/healthcare-ethics-blog/ethical-considerations-related-to-international-medical-volunteering/

27. **WHO**. Emergency Medical Teams 2030 Strategy. Accessed May 3, 2025. https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/372867/9789240076945-eng.pdf

28. **Worthington S.** A Pandemic Induced Crossroads: International NGOs after COVID-19. FOCUS. Published July 29, 2020. Accessed January 17, 2025. https://www.forus-international.org/en/custom-page-detail/75620-a-pandemic-induced-crossroads-international-ngos-after-covid-.

29. **Khorram-Manesh A**, **Burkle Jr, FM.** The role of health care and health security in war, disaster & crisis preparedness. *Disaster Med Public Health Prep.* 2024;**18**: e250. doi:10.1017/dmp.2024.143

30. **Lough BJ**, **Tiessen R**, **Lasker JN**. Effective practices of international volunteering for health: perspectives from partner organizations. *Glob Health.* 2018;**14**:11. doi:10.1186/s12992-018-0329-x.