

FOREWORD BY LORD MALLOCH-BROWN

# BLINDED BY HUMANITY

INSIDE THE UN'S HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS

MARTIN BARBER



I.B. TAURIS

**MARTIN BARBER** was a senior UN official and has extensive experience in humanitarian affairs and peace operations – both at UN headquarters and in the field. He served as Director of the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) at UN headquarters in New York from 2000 until his retirement from the UN in 2005. Previously, he was chief of policy development and advocacy in the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

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*'Blinded by Humanity* is an engaging examination of the UN's efforts to accomplish its humanitarian aims and political goals, which at times may seem at cross purposes. Martin Barber's wide experience and frank analysis will interest UN watchers and humanitarian activists alike because it provides valuable insights on how to make the UN a more effective instrument for peace, security and human rights.'

Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations

'Sometimes understanding humanitarian work and the workings of the UN seems insurmountably complex. Martin Barber's book is an essential tool to break through the complexities and understand various aspects of humanitarian assistance and the UN.'

Jody Williams, Winner, with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), of the Nobel Peace Prize, 1997

'Every humanitarian, and new recruit to the UN, would benefit from reading (this book).'

Lord Malloch-Brown, former Deputy Secretary-General of the UN and Administrator of the UN Development Programme (UNDP)

'Humanitarian efforts are too often dominated either by academics with no practical experience or practitioners unguided by research. Martin Barber has managed to combine the two in this valuable merger of real-life experience and knowledge.'

Jan Egeland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council and former Emergency Relief Coordinator

'A fascinating read that will be of great interest to all those concerned with how the UN and the UN system actually work.'

Mats Berdal, Professor of Security and Development, King's College London

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MARTIN BARBER

**I.B. TAURIS**

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For William and Tom

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But my greatest debt is to my family: to Keolila, my partner for 28 years, who cheerfully accepted the constant disruptions that are part of this type of life, and to William and Tom, who had less choice in the matter, but have given me great joy and wonderful support.

## FOREWORD

Martin Barber was of ‘the Indo-Chinese Refugee’ generation – as was I. There was an earlier group of humanitarian workers who were the ‘Biafra generation’ and others followed, drawn into humanitarian work by Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, Central America and later still the Bosnian conflict and the Great Lakes region of Africa and now Syria. Each stimulated an outpouring of sympathy – and each led young men and women to postpone more orthodox careers to go and help. We came as idealists anxious to save victims from the terrible inhumanity of conflict. We came to save lives.

When it was over – and for Martin that was many decades later – we were forced to a reckoning: had we achieved what we set out to do? Each of us had our own moment of truth when the head finally controlled the heart and we came to realise that our apparently simple acts of charity often had unintended consequences. That things are never simple and that relief workers must have the modesty to listen and learn – and not presume things are ever straightforward as Martin concludes at the end of his book. This is the story of his own journey of self-discovery. It is one that every humanitarian and new recruit to the UN would benefit from reading.

He writes: ‘If there is one message that I would pass on to young people wanting to do good in the world, it is this: be passionate, but know your world. Everybody can have good intentions, and indeed, most people do. If you fail to understand the context in which you are working and the people you are working with, and if you do not assess, with infinite care, the likely impact of your actions on them, you may find that you will do more harm than good.’

Admittedly, Martin was hardly the callow innocent that I was when I arrived to work for him in Thailand in 1979. He was already a veteran of VSO in Laos and subsequent post-graduate field work in social anthropology in the region. He had exactly the enviable local knowledge that many of us lacked.

But as his career took him on to Pakistan and Afghanistan, to Bosnia and elsewhere he, like the rest of us, had to learn how little he knew. Perhaps because he had started at such an advantage in Indo-China, doubting that the mass resettlement of Vietnamese, Lao and Cambodians in the US and the West would be the straightforward panacea that was anticipated, he brought a much stronger caution and critical judgement to humanitarian work from a much earlier stage than most of us.

This is his story of a lifetime's witness of unintended consequences. But those early years in Laos and then Thailand gave him the other critical qualification for a humanitarian career: passion. Without passion, that scepticism that is so useful in the world of the UN with all its compromises, quickly descends into cynicism. Those of us who stuck at this did so because, like Martin, early on a flame was lit that never extinguished: he cared. As this book, which charts his personal journey from Laos to Abu Dhabi, so eloquently shows, his is a humanitarianism that balances head and heart.

Lord Malloch-Brown

## PREFACE

War and refugees were recurring themes of my childhood. My father often admitted that his service in the British Army during World War II had been the most interesting years of his life. He liked to talk about the places he had been while in uniform, the people he had met, the amusing and tragic events that he had witnessed.

One of his favourite stories concerned my birth. In February 1945, he was in Holland with his battery of anti-aircraft gunners when he received the news of my birth. He was staying with a local family. That evening, he told them his news. ‘Oh, Major Barber, what wonderful news’, cried Mrs Vadenburg. ‘And to think that you haven’t been home for two years!’ Mr Vadenburg quickly corrected his wife. My parents always assured me that my father had indeed been involved in my conception.

In civilian life my father, like his father and grandfather before him, was a chartered accountant. He had taken the job reluctantly, because his father wanted at least one of his sons to follow in his footsteps. His three elder brothers had all declined. My father would have preferred to be a publisher.

In 1949, to the delight of my mother, a Londoner, my father got a job in London, and we moved south from Sheffield. In his spare time, my father soon became involved with a charity called the British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR), initially as its honorary treasurer, and later as chairman. He would often tell us stories of the refugees from Eastern Europe who had come to Britain after the war, and also of the extraordinary ladies who gave of their time and money to help them. My uncle Adam was himself one of those refugees, from Poland. One Christmas Day, previously a strictly family affair, we were joined for

lunch by a young refugee from Bulgaria, whose story, told in halting English, made a lasting impression.

So, it seemed quite natural that the first thing I should do after leaving school was to join a work camp organised by the United Nations Association (UNA) of the UK in southern Austria. The aim of the camp was to help a Romanian refugee family to build their new home in a village outside Klagenfurt.

The energy of the Romanian, and his gratitude for the help we were giving him, seemed limitless. He got up at four every morning to milk the cows on the farm where he worked. When he had finished work on the farm, he would come over to the building site. While we were straining to push the heavy barrows of bricks up the wooden planks to the bricklayer, he would run up singing lustily. He had known what it was to have absolutely nothing – as German speakers his family had been forced out of their home in Romania – but now he had been given a chance. He was unstoppable.

St Andrews University, on the east coast of Scotland, was a quiet and rather conservative place in the 1960s. I joined the Debating Society and found that I enjoyed the cut and thrust of argument. I took part in debating competitions in Dublin and Glasgow. This opened my eyes to the great issues that would consume Western Europe in 1968.

In 1966, during the summer vacation, I took part in another UNA work camp, this time in north-western Greece, close to the Albanian border. We installed a piped water system in a village where, for hundreds of years, families had got all their water from the village spring and carried it back to their houses in buckets. As the project progressed, we would have the pleasure of inviting village families to turn on the tap in their gardens for the first time. Then the pancakes would come out, the ouzo would flow and work would stop for the day. But then, the next day, when we had to turn off the supply while we installed the tap in the next house, old ladies would rush up to our camp to complain furiously that they had no water. How were they supposed to live without water? With the arrival of a modern convenience, the memory of centuries of hard work can be so quickly erased.

With these experiences, I could not imagine following my father into his accountancy firm. Indeed, he did his best to dissuade me from doing so. He had no desire to impose on me the burden that he had taken on from his father. So, in 1968, I applied to go out into the world with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), a British volunteering charity.

A two-year volunteer assignment, even in a country as captivating as Laos, does not lead inevitably to a career in an international organisation. Even after another two years in Laos doing research for my doctorate in social anthropology, I might well have returned to an academic career in the UK. But in late 1974, I was invited to join the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) groundbreaking programme for internally displaced people in Laos, and the decision to accept was not difficult.

Forty years later, after a career working with people caught up in some of the twentieth century's most intractable conflicts, I have had the opportunity to reflect. The years have brought a rich feast of experience, from tantalising glimpses of what might have been, to the very worst that we humans can do to each other, as well as the best. While I celebrate the achievements and the friendships crafted in shared experience, the nagging question remains: could we, should we have done better?

In 2006, I was invited to offer a course at the University of Edinburgh on 'The United Nations and Complex Emergencies', for 36 final-year students of politics, international relations and social anthropology. The experience forced me to refine my thinking on some of the most difficult issues in the humanitarian field, but it also confronted me with the fact that there are few books about this field written by practitioners. There is plenty of academic work; particular operations have been analysed in depth, but when my students asked where they could find out what it was like to have a career in this field, there seemed to be little on offer. So, I decided to try and fill the gap.

While describing life working for the UN in various situations, in this book I also look at a broad set of questions: how effective have international organisations been in bringing peace and comfort to people affected by conflict? How did the UN perform? And, based on the lessons it has learned since 1975, how might the UN improve its capacity to help people affected by conflict in the twenty-first century?

Through the lens of my own involvement in specific operations, I examine the work of the United Nations in humanitarian assistance, aid to refugees, peacekeeping, peacebuilding and mine action (de-mining), with a particular focus on Laos, Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the countries where I worked. The book analyses recent policy developments intended to improve the quality and effectiveness of the UN's work in these fields, and it assesses the extent to which recent reforms are likely to make the UN a more effective partner for countries emerging from conflict.

Working for the United Nations in countries consumed by conflict can be both exhilarating and frustrating. The exhilaration comes from the unique legitimacy and prestige of the UN, its ability to bring people together from all parts of the world to focus on a desperate problem affecting people in one place, and to make a real difference. The frustrations come from the reverse side of the coin. The diversity that can achieve wonders can also breed misunderstandings and failure. When a global organisation fails to deliver, people suffer.

A colleague once said that there are two types of people who work for the United Nations: those who feel it is a privilege to work for the global organisation, and those who spend their time worrying about what the UN owes them. Colleagues in the first group were more congenial and interesting, since they were always searching for ways to improve the performance of their organisation. This book is a personal effort to celebrate the achievements of the United Nations in countries in conflict, while honestly setting out and analysing its weaknesses. It is intended both as a contribution to the historical record and an objective assessment of where changes are needed.

To be successful, leaders of United Nations operations in countries emerging from conflict need to work in partnership with a daunting range of organisations and individuals. These include: the host government, its ministries and local authorities; rebel groups that have to be persuaded to join the political process or allow the passage of humanitarian aid; representatives of affected communities; military officers, whether from the warring parties or international peacekeeping forces; the governments of donor countries that fund the operations; a plethora of international and regional organisations, from the World Bank and the agencies of the UN system to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); a myriad of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), both national and international; journalists from the affected country and around the world; commercial companies keen to contribute equipment and services to the effort; and, of course, the individual women and men recruited to work on the operation, with their own needs, skills, hopes and fears.

It is small wonder that coordinators of such operations can have a significant impact on the success or failure of the enterprise, or that it is notoriously difficult to find people capable of fulfilling the task effectively. The leadership of UN operations, its nature, requirements and challenges is a particular focus of this book.

The material in the following pages comes from three sources: the literature on UN operations; interviews and correspondence with former

colleagues and present staff of the UN system; and my own documents, notes and recollections.

The book is organised chronologically. The introduction provides background to three main areas of my work: protection and assistance for refugees, coordination of humanitarian response and peacekeeping. It also points to some of the striking similarities in the recent histories of Laos, Afghanistan and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Chapter 1 is about Laos between 1968 and 1977. It introduces some of the issues developed in the two following chapters, about refugees in Thailand and in Europe. Chapter 2 is about the arrival in Thailand of refugees from Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia between 1975 and 1981. It looks particularly at when and how resettlement in Western countries became the solution of choice. Chapter 3 is about the reception of refugees and asylum-seekers in Britain between 1981 and 1988. It tackles questions about asylum, refugee law and economic migration.

Chapter 4 is about Afghanistan. It looks at how the UN handled the crisis there, from the departure of Soviet troops in 1989 until 1996. It considers issues of coordination and the response to landmines, and asks if there are lessons that still have to be learned, and which could help the international community in Afghanistan today. Chapter 5 looks at the international community's response to the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a focus on the period between 1996 and 1998, immediately after the end of the war.

Chapter 6 takes us to the Headquarters of the UN in New York and looks at the first term of Kofi Annan as Secretary-General from 1997 to 2001. It examines the reforms that he introduced to the UN's humanitarian and peacekeeping operations. Then, Chapter 7 examines the story of the remarkable international response to the problem of anti-personnel landmines. Chapter 8 offers a brief look at an often neglected feature of international aid, the contribution of Gulf Arab donors.

Chapter 9 is about the 'coordination' of humanitarian operations, the focus of so much of the work I have been involved in, and now the responsibility of a large office in the UN Secretariat. Chapter 10 is a concluding essay that bears the title of the book. It identifies seven 'blind spots' that, in my view, constrain international organisations in their efforts to bring help to those in need and to bring peace and prosperity to troubled countries. It asks whether the United Nations is prepared for the operational challenges of the twenty-first century. Has the UN learned how to respond quickly and effectively in an emergency; how to find, train and support good leaders; how to make the parts of the UN

system work effectively together; and how to empower people in affected countries to take the lead in the recovery of their own societies? Or does the UN remain, in some areas, obstinately blind to its own shortcomings, as well as to practical ways of addressing them?

The book is intended to be accessible to the general reader with an interest in the United Nations, but it is aimed particularly at students of international relations and humanitarian affairs, not as a textbook, but as general reading, to add the flavour of real life to their studies. If the brightest young people aspire to join the United Nations, the future of this unique global institution will be assured. If this book is also of interest to academics, diplomats, policy makers and United Nations and NGO colleagues, I shall of course be delighted.

# INTRODUCTION

Before launching into the main narrative, I felt it would be important to set the scene briefly and give some background to the three principal UN activities that feature in the story – the aid to refugees, the coordination of humanitarian response in emergencies, and peacekeeping operations. I have also included a short essay on the shared experiences of Laos, Afghanistan and Bosnia in the second half of the twentieth century, and I have introduced one of the central themes of the book under the heading, ‘Good intentions are not enough’.

## **The United Nations and refugees**

Who is a refugee, and what are his or her rights? These questions continue to stir debate today, more than 60 years after the adoption in 1951 of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

Consultations leading up to the adoption of the 1951 Convention were all based on definitions limited in time and space. When the Convention was agreed, it defined a refugee as a person who:

As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951, and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or, owing to such fear unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country [...] and is unwilling to return to it.

Not only did the Convention restrict refugee status to the victims of events before 1951, but it limited those events to what had happened in Europe. It was the process of de-colonisation in Africa in the 1960s

which would generate the next major refugee emergencies. Operating under its Statute, which, unlike the Convention, did not restrict the definition of a refugee in time and space, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) offered to help. The process towards universalisation of the refugee definition, and of the institution established to protect and assist refugees, had begun. In 1967, a Protocol was adopted which extended the provisions of the 1951 Convention in time and space, to cover all persons anywhere who met the definition of a refugee.

The key provision of the Convention and Protocol, which imposes a binding obligation on states, is that refugees may not under any circumstances be forced to return to the country of their nationality against their will. This is the principle of *non-refoulement*. States ratifying the Convention and Protocol agree to keep on their soil people who are able to demonstrate that they meet the criteria for refugee status. It is hardly surprising that a few states were reluctant to accede to the 1967 Protocol and some took many years to do so. Many of those states that did accede might have thought twice about it, if they could have foreseen developments in international travel over the next 40 years, and the ease with which people who manage to escape persecution in their home country could show up in countries on another continent.

In Chapter 3, I take a closer look at what happened when principles established for the protection of refugees in Europe were deemed to apply, unchanged, to people leaving Africa and arriving in Europe, or leaving Asia and arriving in America.

### **Coordination of humanitarian response**

In the 1980s, when I was at the British Refugee Council (BRC), it had become obvious that the UN lacked the capacity to coordinate the response of its own agencies to humanitarian crises. As an NGO working with refugees, we could see that the UN's work with refugees was well organised, because UNHCR had clear responsibility to lead the international effort. However, when people were displaced within their own countries as a result of conflict, nobody knew who was in charge of the international response. At the BRC, we campaigned for the UN Secretary-General to assign responsibility for assisting internally displaced persons to an existing UN agency or to create a new office to take it on. We were rebuffed, but our intervention and those of many other bodies, had an effect. When the Geneva Accords of 1988 brought

to an end the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar asked his former rival for the job and ex-UN High Commissioner for refugees, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, to become the UN coordinator of economic and humanitarian assistance programmes relating to Afghanistan (UNOCA), with his headquarters in Geneva. The appointment of Sadruddin for Afghanistan was one of a number of *ad hoc* responses to the challenge of coordinating the international effort in emergencies.

Eventually, in 1991, the General Assembly adopted resolution 46/182, which created the post of Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) at the UN headquarters in New York. It also asked the ERC to chair a new Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), bringing together not only the UN family of agencies, but also the Red Cross and Red Crescent movements and international NGOs. This represented an extraordinary turn-around. From a situation only 20 years earlier when the UN's role in international humanitarian response to emergencies had been limited, quite deliberately, to natural disasters, the United Nations, in the person of the Emergency Relief Coordinator, was being asked to lead the whole international effort to respond to what were now called 'complex emergencies'.

The first ERC, Jan Eliasson of Sweden, and his brand-new Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), had a difficult beginning. They were up against the free spirits of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), UNHCR and World Food Programme (WFP), who were not used to being 'coordinated' by a department in New York. Initially, most of DHA's senior staff in New York were not seasoned humanitarian workers, but had been transferred from economic units of the Secretariat. Although some had come on secondment from the UN agencies, the agencies' lack of enthusiasm for the whole enterprise meant that they did not always send their best staff to take up these posts.

DHA's difficulties were further compounded by the fact that its headquarters was split between New York and Geneva. While staff in New York had never worked together before, the team in Geneva, based around the staff of the old UN Office for Disaster Relief Coordination (UNDRO), had been working solely on natural disasters, and would need time to adapt to the new environment of complex emergencies. In Chapter 6, I look in detail at the transformation of DHA into the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in 1997, and the brief, but pivotal reign as ERC of Sergio Vieira de Mello.

In 2006, just 15 years after the establishment of DHA, the General Assembly did another extraordinary thing; it set up a fund, the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), with an annual target of US\$450 million, and put it entirely in the hands of the ERC. From being a non-player in the world of humanitarian relief, the UN Secretariat had become not only the chief coordinator, but also the principal source of rapid funding in the immediate aftermath of a rapid-onset disaster.

### **Keeping the peace**

The end of the Cold War, bringing with it an unprecedented period of consensus in the Security Council, saw a flurry of new peacekeeping initiatives, for which the UN Secretariat was completely unprepared. Although the operations in Namibia, Mozambique and Cambodia were concluded without too many disasters, the period between 1993 and 1995 saw the ignominious withdrawals from Somalia and Haiti, the genocide in Rwanda and the massacre of 8,000 Bosnian men and boys at Srebrenica. When Kofi Annan took office as Secretary-General of the United Nations on 1 January 1997, many people predicted that UN peacekeeping would not recover. They could not have been more wrong. Chapter 6 looks in detail at how the reputation of UN peacekeeping was substantially restored.

This brief account of how the United Nations deals with the three principal components of crisis response – support for refugees, coordination of humanitarian aid and peacekeeping – has told three quite separate stories. Since 2000, and the publication of the Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations, chaired by Lakhdar Brahimi, the three strands have been brought closer together, culminating in the creation of a number of ‘multi-dimensional peace operations’, in which a deputy special representative of the Secretary-General is given responsibility for coordinating both humanitarian and recovery action from within a peacekeeping mission. Chapter 9 offers a short essay on this phenomenon, looking at the pros and cons of this arrangement.

### **The Great Game – twentieth-century style**

The three war-torn countries where I worked between 1975 and 1998, although separated by thousands of miles, have a lot in common. Laos, Afghanistan and Bosnia and Herzegovina are all land-locked and mountainous. They each contain several distinct ethnic groups, which

have close ties to larger populations of the same ethnicity in neighbouring countries. They all could be said to have got 'caught in the cross-fire' of wider conflicts between their larger neighbours, backed by the great powers. They all exported a substantial part of their populations as refugees. As one writer on Laos put it, they were either 'buffer-states or battle-grounds'. Tragically, in the second half of the twentieth century, they all became both.

At one level it is easy to see what the three countries had in common. The competition for influence in Central and South Asia between Russia and Britain in the nineteenth century became known as the Great Game. Similar games were played out in Southeast Asia between Britain and France and later between the United States and the Soviet Union, and in the Balkans between Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire. In all three cases, the rival powers could not see any great benefit from ruling these countries, but they felt they had to prevent their rivals from doing so. Instability in these countries was preferable to peace under the influence of one's enemies.

The game was played in very similar ways in each case. The powers exploited the natural fault lines of ethnic rivalry or dynastic succession, or both. Local leaders ambitious for power were encouraged to press their claims by force of arms if necessary, with the backing of the great powers or their local proxies. Long-simmering resentment at perceived injustice found a sympathetic ear with the generous outsiders.

In Laos, the minority hill tribes had for centuries been kept out of the productive lowlands by the dominant ethnic Lao. Modern education opportunities and jobs in the administration went predominantly to the Lao. The pro-communist Pathet Lao (Lao Nation) movement found it easy to recruit among the hill tribes by articulating this injustice.

In Afghanistan, the Pushtoon kings from Kandahar had retained their control over the Tajik and Uzbek communities in the north in part by settling landless Pushtoon families from the south on some of the most productive land in the northern valleys. Sponsors of opposition to the status quo had little difficulty in tapping the rich seams of historical resentment.

In Bosnia, the Serbs viewed the Muslim Bosniacs in a similar fashion to the Lao hill tribes' view of the ethnic Lao in the lowlands. The Muslims, with Turkish support, had taken over the most productive land in the valleys and pushed the Serbs up into the hills. In Serb eyes, the Muslims kept for themselves the best opportunities in education and employment and looked down on the Serbs as uncultured peasants.

Seen in this way, the three countries were, and to differing degrees still are, volatile powder kegs waiting to explode again. In each case, their best days in history coincided with the rule of a strong leader able to keep the lid on internal opposition. In Laos, this means going back to King Souvigna Vongsa at the end of the seventeenth and start of the eighteenth centuries. In Afghanistan, King Zahir Shah and his advisors managed to balance the competing pressures for 40 years from 1933 to 1973, and in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Marshal Tito held it together as part of Yugoslavia after his exploits in World War II, until his death in 1980 released all the latent tensions and hostilities.

When considering the recent history of Laos, Afghanistan and Bosnia it is interesting to look at how Switzerland managed to avoid the same fate during the great wars of the twentieth century in Europe. In simple terms, it had by then acquired a mature set of national institutions which enabled it to adopt a policy of neutrality and then stick to it. Its constitution guarantees that its different communities (French, German and Italian) need a substantial degree of control over their own lives. In other words, the highly decentralised cantonal system is key to the strength of Switzerland as a diverse, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society, capable of resisting pressures from outside to turn in on itself by demonising members of the other ethnic and linguistic groups.

While Laos, Afghanistan and Bosnia show many similarities in the history of their descent into internal conflict, the story could hardly be more different in the roadmaps they have each chosen, as they seek to emerge from it. The Bosnian constitution, negotiated at Dayton, Ohio in 1995, is closest to the Swiss model. The distinct identities of the Muslim Bosniacs, the Catholic Croats and the Orthodox Serbs are recognised in the structure of the 12 cantons of the Federation of Bosniacs and Croats, and the Serb Republic within a decentralised state.

Since the Pathet Lao took over in 1975, the Lao People's Democratic Republic has been a one-party state. But this national structure has not prevented continuous debate within the party about how the country should be governed. The fact that the party leadership is predominantly from the communities that were historically marginalised has helped to even out the opportunities for education and employment. The party is increasingly able to ensure that the provincial and district leadership teams represent all the major ethnicities present in the province. In the 35 years of its rule, the party has gradually decentralised and encouraged local branches to seek out talented cadres by listening to the opinions of local party members.

Of course, the children of the top leaders enjoy a privileged lifestyle in Vientiane, and corruption can be found at all levels of society, but historical imbalances have been substantially corrected, and the playing field is more level than it was. Even if Laos is not the parliamentary democratic paradise that Western politicians might wish for, it has found a measure of stability and increasing levels of prosperity that some of its neighbouring democracies are beginning to envy.

Afghanistan has not chosen either of these paths. It has not decentralised and it has not sought to correct historical inequities. On the contrary, the Constitution of 2003 put all the powers of patronage into the hands of a president elected by universal suffrage, which obliges candidates to make deals with regional power-brokers who can deliver the votes.

I will return to this theme in Chapter 4, on Afghanistan, when I look at why the international effort to restore stability has so far failed, and is likely to continue to fail, unless changes are made to the strategy that reflect the country's history and learn the lessons of twentieth-century conflicts in the countries with which Afghanistan shares so many historical features.

### **Good intentions are not enough**

While this book features a large cast of organisational and individual characters, they can be considered in two broad groups: first the refugees and displaced persons, the orphans, widows and those disabled by bullets or maimed by landmines, those who have lost their homes, their livelihoods and sometimes their mental health from exposure to war; and then, on the other side, the army of institutions and individuals who want to help.

We shall meet these two protagonists, the needy and the helpers, in all kinds of different settings; but running through these encounters will be a simple idea: good motivation without competence is not enough, or, more simply, the 'why' cannot be divorced from the 'how'. Too often the most basic admonition to 'Do no harm!' is overlooked and actions are justified not because of the impact they will have on those in need, but by the satisfaction they bring to those who give. It has been a central focus of my career to promote the marriage of the motivation – to bring help to those who suffer – with the professional competence required to do the job effectively.

# Lao People's Democratic Republic



- ★ Capital
- Towns of Interest
- International boundary

Working date: April 2024  
Source: UNHCR, UNLOC, UNODC  
Feedback: [mapsgis@unhcr.org](mailto:mapsgis@unhcr.org)  
Filename: LAO\_JoinMap\_Publication\_v01

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Figure 1 Map of Lao People's Democratic Republic.

# 1

## STARTING OUT

### In Laos

The panel of interviewers at Queens College, Dundee in April 1968 was intimidating. In the middle sat the director of Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). He was leafing through a voluminous binder.

‘Would you like to go to Rwanda?’

‘What would I be doing?’

‘Teaching English at a Roman Catholic School.’

‘Would I be expected to support the school’s religion?’

‘They won’t expect you to teach religion, but they might not be too happy if you were actively opposed.’

I said that might be a problem. The director resumed leafing through his binder.

‘Would you like to go to Thakhek?’

‘I don’t think I know where that is.’

‘It’s in Laos.’

‘Er, yes. But, isn’t there a war going on there? Won’t my parents be worried?’

The director said that the war was in the countryside, that Thakhek was on the Mekong River, and that if there was any problem, I would be able to take a boat across the river and find safety in Thailand.

This interview took place during my final term studying French and German at St Andrews University in Scotland. On the basis of the explanation about evacuation, I persuaded my parents that this would be a great first job.

When the formal offer came, it was for a post as an English language teacher at the Lycée in Luang Prabang. The map seemed to indicate that, while the town was indeed on the Mekong River, at that point both sides of the river are in Laos. I kept this information to myself.