

Are there signs of compassion fatigue during the world's worst humanitarian crisis?

Anke Nel

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Major news outlets around the world recently turned their attention to the crisis unfolding in Ukraine and have been providing viewers with 24-hour coverage of the Russian invasion and the resulting growing humanitarian crisis. This is to be expected, as one only needs to see the harrowing images of wounded children, or of a heavily pregnant and injured woman on a stretcher, to understand the scale and brutality of the invasion. Those images, and countless others that have circulated since the invasion began in February this year, are reminiscent of other images used to illustrate human suffering during the initial stages of wars around the world. Well-known examples are American photographer Steve McCurry's iconic photograph of the 'Afghan girl', 12-year old Sharbat Gula, taken at a refugee camp in the 1980s (NPR 2021), and the image of two-year-old Alan Kurdi, a Syrian refugee whose lifeless body washed ashore in Turkey after an attempt to reach Greece, which became a 'worldwide symbol of the suffering caused by the Syrian war and the European refugee crisis it triggered' (New York Times 2020). While photographs of acutely malnourished children published in the media are frequent reminders of the civil war currently raging in Yemen.

Initially such images certainly assisted in drawing support and donations from the international community and sympathisers around the world, and although their impact remains powerful, 'compassion fatigue' ultimately sets in—probably due to the sheer number of countries around the world in desperate need of humanitarian aid (Hodal 2016). In the aforementioned context it becomes difficult to encourage donations, especially in the case of complex multi-party wars such as those being fought in Syria and Yemen, which after years of violence have shown little signs of cessation. It is therefore worthwhile considering whether the Ukrainian conflict will suffer the same fate once the initial reaction to the invasion has died down.

The war in Yemen, for example, is often referred to as the ‘forgotten war’, despite its status as the largest humanitarian disaster in the world (CSIS 2018). According to Stephen O’Brien, the United Nations humanitarian affairs coordinator, the level of disregard for human life and the resulting suffering in that country is nearly incomprehensible (VOA News 2015). Furthermore, parties involved in the conflict are accused of violating both international human rights law and international humanitarian law to the extent that it should ‘shock the conscience of humanity’ (HRC 2020).

Since the start of the war in Yemen in 2015, 111 000 people have lost their lives (Cook & Gordon 2022), and since the beginning of 2022 one person has died or has injured him/herself every hour (Respers 2022). These figures are expected to increase in the foreseeable future. Moreover, thousands of airstrikes have resulted in the breakdown of medical and educational facilities, while food insecurity—which worsened as a result of the Ukrainian invasion—has impacted more than 16.2 million people in Yemen, with in excess of 2.25 million children suffering from acute malnutrition (Reuters 2022; European Union 2022). Furthermore, outbreaks of cholera and COVID-19 have worsened conditions for civilians who have already lost their access to the basic human rights of education, food, personal security and health care (Robinson 2022).

Overall, the international community has largely failed to respond in a manner that matches the dire humanitarian situation on the ground (UNSC 2021). The significant decrease in funding received from the international community is stifling humanitarian agencies’ efforts to help civilians who now have to ration already scarce supplies (Reuters 2022). It is for this reason that late last year the University of Pretoria’s Centre for Mediation in Africa (CMA 2021), in association with the International Christian University of Japan, hosted a seminar to discuss peace initiatives in Yemen. The speakers emphasised the importance of a social contract and rule of law for the Yemeni people. During the seminar, Ambassador Ahmed Hassan from the Yemeni Embassy passionately called for a solution that would secure peace and stability in his country. He emphasised the fact that it needed to be a sustained and lasting peace that would secure Yemen’s future prospects, much like the transition process in South Africa.

When we commemorate Human Rights Day on 21 March this year and South Africans reflect on the injustices of our country’s past and the ongoing human rights abuses in Ukraine, it is equally important to remember the civilians trapped in the ‘forgotten war’, whose rights have been abused for the past eight years. While there is an obvious and direct need to curb compassion fatigue and secure aid for civilians in Yemen, we also need to address the apparent double standards that exist in the international community, where some of the countries that strongly oppose Russia’s human rights abuses in Ukraine are the very countries currently supplying arms to countries in the Middle East that are accused of similar abuses and atrocities in Yemen (Marchant 2022).

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