

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

9 February, 2016

Regarding the article: “Aiding Disaster: How the United Nations’ OCHA Helped Assad and Hurt Syrians in Need” (published 1 February 2016 in ‘Snapshot’, Foreign Affairs)

Dr. Sparrow’s article highlights the grim reality for civilians enduring a brutal war in Syria, where millions are subject to the political and military interests of the parties and their supporters. Over 250,000 killed, 6.5 million displaced from their homes, and 13.5 million relying on aid to survive. Children starved, mothers denied medical care, towns besieged, families forced to flee. Despite diplomatic efforts, no way forward has yet been found.

In the meantime, national and international humanitarian workers continue to help Syrians in dire need: unarmed and undeterred every day for nearly five years. Why? Because of the humanitarian imperative that action must be taken to prevent or alleviate human suffering arising out of disaster or conflict.

Nothing should override this principle. This, and the other long established principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence are what guide humanitarians, despite the real risks faced every day.

Attempting to portray the United Nations’ work with and in Government areas in the country as a lack of neutrality or impartiality is not only deliberately misleading: it is grossly irresponsible.

Were the United Nations to leave Damascus, as the writer suggests, then we would be failing in our obligation to the civilians – regardless of who they are, where they are located and any other beliefs or factors – to do everything we can to get them aid and protection.

Humanitarian organizations must work with all parties in a conflict, to negotiate unconditional access by all available means, checkpoint by checkpoint, mile by mile, to take food in and get the wounded out. It is slow, painstaking, dangerous, heartbreaking work. Over 80 aid workers, many of them volunteers, have lost their lives in this crisis.

Stating that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs covered up the critical need in Madaya could not be further from the truth. Countless public documents and briefings have put that on record as we report month after month, in harrowing detail, on the Government and armed groups’ failures to protect civilians and facilitate access.

Unfortunately the article contains numerous other inaccuracies, misrepresentations and misleading statements, which could confuse public understanding, let alone endanger the lives of aid workers and the people caught up in this conflict.

The failure of the international community – given the information we have provided them – to demand the protection of people from starvation, to demand the humanitarian access due under international law or to hold accountable those committing war crimes has been inexplicable.

We therefore welcome the commitments made by participants at last week's London Conference, to use their influence with all parties to halt abuses, and to allow humanitarian agencies rapid, safe and unimpeded access in order to reach besieged and hard-to-reach areas throughout Syria.

After five years of savage violence and political failure, the people of Syria – and the readers of Foreign Affairs – deserve better.

Yours sincerely,
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