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The first humanitarian convoy to enter Baghdad, Iraq, in 2003



## War and ~~peace~~

« *Every battle is the latest* », said Giraudoux. One has to agree that, with every year that goes by, the feeling of watching countries and regions tumble by their droves into violent spirals of destruction seems, sadly, to stem less from the magnifying effect of media focus and more from powerful global trends.

What is striking about modern warfare is the frequent lack of any end in sight to the crisis, as well as an incredible difficulty in moderating their violence. Afghanistan, Somalia, the DRC... **These countries have shuddered under the incessant sound of gunfire for the last 20, 25, 40 years.**

Aside from these never-ending and largely forgotten wars, in the last few years we seems to have reached a new level, as whole regions have fallen into a pattern of generalised confrontation. The shockwave from the Syrian crisis and the related crises in the Near and Middle East in particular, have sent the world reeling into a new era.

If political will often seems absent in brokering peace, it is also the outside imposition of conflict's reasons, the stakes, the type and the diversity of the parties, the scale of the violence (more than 320, 000 victims) and humanitarian consequences (almost 4.5 million refugees in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan and more than 7.5 million internally displaced in Syria) in what is coyly referred to as the "Syrian crisis", which make its effects almost irreversible and any search for a peaceful resolution practically useless. **The regional crisis around Lake Chad, and more widely, the multiplication of theatres of tension and /or conflicts in Sahel, both illustrate this and defy all accepted conflict resolution mechanisms.**

There are some conflict's dynamics that cannot be understood without analysing the underlying causes of the conflict in question, such as pressure on resources in the context of a growing population and an unsustainable inequality in living conditions resulting from wealth being monopolised by a select few. All these essential factors are, too often, overlooked, and increase the relevance of humanitarian operations in the field of conflict prevention.

**Nowadays, 20 million people exist on the edge of famine in these war-torn countries;** in Nigeria, in South Sudan, in Somalia, and in Yemen. The Central African Republic, the DRC, Darfur, and Mali remain ravaged by internal conflict. **More than 15,000 people have lost their lives in the Mediterranean in the last three years and Europe,** like others elsewhere, thinks of nothing but building walls. Ukraine has plunged us back into our worst memories of the Cold War. Kashmir makes us constantly fear that we have not yet seen the worst, the Israeli-Palestinian impasse convinces us that we can never really hope for the best. The sounds of marching are clearly heard in too many state offices.

This is the same world, which will eventually have to face up to the huge challenge of refugees fleeing climate change and the resulting humanitarian consequences, on a scale unlike anything we have yet known. The need to make peace is urgent...

**Olivier Routeau**

*Head of Emergencies and Development*

## ON THE HUMANITARIAN FRONT

**S**ince our creation in the '70s, Première Urgence Internationale has taken action in dangerous, inaccessible areas, at the heart of armed conflicts, where the NGO has made it its mission to intervene as quickly and effectively as possible to help the local population. It is an endless challenge.

One of Première Urgence Internationale's mission statements is "go where others will not". Since the '70s, it has entered areas seen as "difficult", whether because of safety issues, access to programme beneficiaries, or political instability. The geopolitical situation, for example that in Mali, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, or the Central African Republic, often complicates any humanitarian response.

### Measured risks

"*We adapt to the specific conditions of the country we are in, and situations can develop rapidly*", explains Ewelina Gasiorowska, Première Urgence Internationale's Africa desk manager. Despite opening a mission in Mali in 2013, Première Urgence Internationale has decided to wait

before starting an intervention in Kidal, in the north of the country, an area afflicted



***Go where others will not. »***

by violent clashes, which make access to essential transport routes extremely difficult.

"*At the time, the security situation was too chaotic and the risk for our staff too great. We thought it was better to wait*", Ewelina recalls. Finally, in August 2015, Première Urgence Internationale decided to begin some projects in the region, which has been hard hit by food insecurity and by a lack of access to water and healthcare. Since then, mobile clinics have been sent out to nomadic populations in order to help them to have access to healthcare and to tackle malnutrition. Several community health centres have been reopened, too.

"*Every day, we evaluate the level of risk and take a decision to go to one area or another. Last summer, we put our projects on hold for several days because the battles did not allow our teams to get through to the populations*", Ewelina adds.

More and more, humanitarian aid workers are seen as potential targets in conflict zones. Our increased visibility no longer allows us to protect our workers, in particular against the threat of kidnapping in some areas. Humanitarian workers have become a bartering chip for certain armed groups.





## Mali

In Mali, mobile clinics travel to visit nomadic populations so that they can access healthcare.



*"The fact of being an NGO isn't a protection any more. Years ago, when we first started to carry out humanitarian work, we were untouchable", Ewelina recalls. Because of this, risks must be weighed and some measures must be taken, according to the local conditions. For example, some nationalities have privileges in particular countries. "In Mali, for example, it's impossible to send white personnel to the north of the country", Ewelina explains.*

### Crossing the front line

In Afghanistan, Première Urgence Internationale avoids being too visible and keeps a low profile to carry out most of its activities, explains Première Urgence Internationale's logistics manager, Stéphan Magnaldi. There are no logos on its unmarked vehicles, and the staff must follow instructions to the letter ahead of and during moves. *"We have to be strict,"* Stéphan points out, *"we put in place specific measures such as following the movements of our vehicles. This strategy gives us a short window to react if anything happens and makes possible to alert our teams if we have any concerns or if any potential risks appear."* Good logistics management is vital during interventions in conflict zones, both to assure the general safety of staff and goods, but also to make sure that issues of building management, movement, travel and communications are appropriately supervised.

*"One of the greatest difficulties during an armed conflict is crossing the front lines. We have to make certain that people and goods can pass without trouble from one side to the other,"* Stéphan explains. In addition, a shared logistical response, bringing together the aid of several NGOs, can, in certain situations, not only make some areas easier to access but also provide a faster distribution of aid to beneficiaries on the ground.

### Discussion and acceptance

Discussion between the different parties involved is a real concern for organisations with a presence in these zones, because an armed conflict situation usually means that there are a lot of different groups who are directly or indirectly involved in the crisis.





*"To carry out evaluations in Mosul, in Iraq, where violent confrontations have occurred since October 2016, we have to pass multiple check points, and therefore we have to obtain a pass from different military factions,"* explains Paul Spagnol, Première Urgence Internationale's Middle East and Europe desk manager.

A discussion is often necessary for staff and equipment to be able to get to the population in need, and it guarantees them a certain amount of safety. In these situations, Première Urgence Internationale must ensure that it does not appear to support any group or political party. Teams proclaim their neutrality loud and clear, as well as the impartiality underpinning their actions.

Their choice of words is important. *"In Mali, it's essential,"* Ewelina confirms. *"When we put our teams together, we keep our values of independence, neutrality and impartiality front and centre so that there can't be any confusion about the purpose of our mission among the local population. Our staff rely on their ability to be accepted among the local population. It's absolutely essential to be transparent about our activities to the locals,"* Ewelina insists. *"They must not lose their trust in us."*



***We train our teams to prioritise the values of our organisation such as independence, neutrality and impartiality. >>***

### **"Adapting to the field"**

Apart from publicising the organisation's principles, the ways in which we help vary according to the situation. For example, in Ukraine, gripped by armed conflict since 2014, where it is impossible to import medicines, our NGO has to get its supplies from pre-existing local networks. We have set up a system of tickets, which patients can exchange for drugs prescribed by doctors in local pharmacies preselected by Première Urgence Internationale.

Another method we employ is the mobile clinic. To get as close as possible to the front line or to move more easily in countries where the situation is evolving rapidly, Première Urgence Internationale sets up mobile clinic programmes. Made up of medical personnel, nurses, doctors, pharmacists and psychologists, they travel to reach populations affected by conflict and provide support in existing healthcare centres overwhelmed by the crisis. For example, in Iraq, our teams get as close as they can to the front lines and come to the aid of both displaced persons and host populations in need in these areas where healthcare systems no longer exist or have stopped working.

In Tobzawah, a village 15km outside Mosul, Sharek, health and hygiene assistant at Première Urgence Internationale's mobile clinic headquarters, states: *"We carry out a lot of vaccinations, do blood pressure checks, monitor the health of patients affected by chronic illnesses, like diabetes, and perform clinical exams on infants. We work with a mental health team who is following up and monitoring post-traumatic stress in people who have fled Mosul. We work in the areas around Mosul town and we regularly hear distant sounds of bombing. We know that there's a certain amount*

*of danger in working this close to the front lines every day, but we also know that these populations need us, and that our presence here is vital for these people."*

### **Appeal as the ultimate resort**

In some other contexts, our ability to intervene can be tightly curtailed and our ability to set up and properly run our activities is extremely limited. In Yemen, for example, which has plunged into a severe humanitarian crisis, with 18.8 million people – two-thirds of its population according to the United Nations in January 2017 – in need, humanitarian NGOs run into extremely difficult access problems.

In fact, international organisations are subjected to harsh security constraints and face difficulty in getting visas and authorisation to move about or conduct their activities. *"Faced with these circumstances, we use appeals as a way of alerting the international community and notifying authorities,"* Paul explains. Faced with the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, Première Urgence Internationale and other NGOs have organised joint action with the press to put pressure on public opinion and

change it.

*"These plea actions can sort out some situations. I would say that in some cases it's the ultimate resort."*

Faced with increasingly complex crises, humanitarian workers must persevere in order to be able to respond to the needs of the population.

Whether by transparency and demonstrating our values or by developing specific intervention methods, Première Urgence Internationale will find ways to set up activities in at-risk areas and at the heart of armed conflicts, always with one primary goal: to help and to respond to the needs of vulnerable people in danger.

## **Afghanistan**

In Afghanistan, our NGO avoids being too highly visible and keeps a low profile in carrying out most of its activities.



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# RAPE AS A WEAPON OF WAR

During the First Congo War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1996, rape was used as a weapon to spread terror through the population. Today, as the east of the country becomes a war zone once more, the practice is seeing a revival.

*"Often, people outside the country think that it is no longer a threat, but still we have rape victims coming to us to tell their story,"* explains Marcel Dyang Damba, Première Urgence Internationale's coordinator for the Tanganyika area in the DRC. Marcel recalls how, recently, a little girl, only three years old, was raped in an area where our mobile clinics were operating. In this area of the country, children and adults alike are potential targets of these attacks, carried out by officially recognised armed groups, militias and, more and more, by opportunist criminals who take advantage of the situation to break the law. *"Armed groups rape women to spread terror, for example by humiliating the men of the opposing community and flouting their authority. It's a way of showing that men on the opposing side are incapable of protecting their women,"* Marcel adds. *"Rape is also used strategically, to make people move away and free up areas of land."* Between July and December 2016, more than 223,600 people were forced to flee their homes in Tanganyika (according to the Tanganyika Commission for Population Movement).



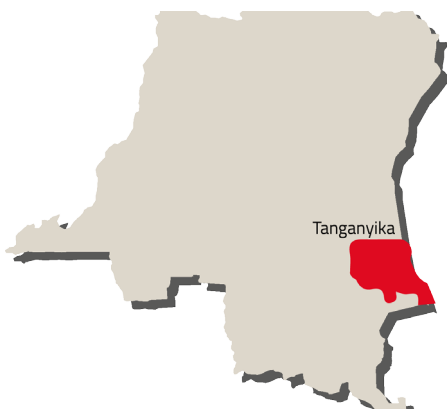
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## 48 rapes every hour in 2011

In 2011, a study published by the American Journal of Public Health reported that 1,152 women are raped every day in the DRC, amounting to 48 rapes every hour. These instances of sexual violence loom over the local population, becoming a daily threat to women performing everyday tasks like working in the fields or going to the river to collect water. Première Urgence Internationale's teams organise educational campaigns in these communities to encourage rape victims to quickly come forward and identify themselves to our medical teams. "The victims can then receive treatment with PEP (post-exposure preventive) kits in the 72 hours following a rape," Marcel explains. The kit consists of diagnostic tests (for pregnancy, syphilis and HIV) and medication (antiretroviral, the morning-after pill and antibiotics) aimed at reducing the health risks associated with rape. Survivors will also receive mental health care in order to minimise the psychological effects.

## Cultural taboos

However, sometimes the victims may be kept captive by their assailants for several days, for example being held in the forest, compromising the optimum conditions for use of PEP kits, which should ideally be prescribed in the 72 hours following a rape. Another difficulty is that victims don't dare to break their silence because of powerful cultural taboos, or the strong risk of being renounced by their husbands and families. *"Children are more and more often becoming targets of this type of violence. There's a growth in beliefs which lead some people to think that they can increase their power in battle by forcing this kind of violence on children or pregnant women,"* the coordinator adds. Première Urgence Internationale's activities aim to help victims to talk about their experiences, to help them and to offer them guidance, if they wish, in prosecuting their attackers. Our goal is to give the victims back their dignity, but also to put an end to this practice. Among all war crimes, these attacks stand out especially as crimes against humanity.







# INTERVIEW

## WHEN THE CRISIS LASTS

Stéphane Biron is Première Urgence Nationale's regional manager for countries affected by the Syrian crisis. Here he reviews the humanitarian consequences of a situation, which lasted for more than six years.

### *What is the effect of a crisis that lasts for so long?*

There is a wide variety of consequences. In Syria, we have seen public services weakened from lack of investment by the state, which has had to divert finances elsewhere and whose resources have been deeply impacted by international sanctions and the devaluation of the Syrian pound (90% in six years).

Public servants have been especially badly affected by the crisis and public infrastructure has withstood the worst of the hostilities.

The State's ability to fulfil its role properly has been seriously compromised. In Syria and in Iraq, the front lines move and the population follows these movements to avoid the fighting, which creates a rent in the social fabric, with people constantly forced to uproot themselves.



*It will be years before people can resettle permanently. >>*

### *Is there a difference, in providing humanitarian aid in countries affected by a long-term crisis?*

Emergency needs are still the same in this situation. You have to respond to issues of accommodation, health, malnutrition or access to water, hygiene and sanitation.

However, the fact that a crisis is long lasting also means that people lose their means of survival. For example, if a Syrian small business owner comes back to his local area several years after having been displaced, he will not be able to re-establish his old business in a shop, which has been destroyed, pillaged or burnt down. People lose all means of generating an income and permanently resettling if they wish to. This means that we have to respond to both emergency and recovery needs.

### *What is Première Urgence Internationale's response to these issues?*

We offer people different levels of assistance, according to their needs. We respond to emergencies, but we also put long-term solutions in place to help people regain their independence. For example, we might rebuild apartments so that inhabitants can move back in. We also set up what is known as "income-generating activities" to help people to get some savings together. We might help someone to get a business back on its feet by providing working capital, helping them to rebuild their local area, buying replacement stock or training them to use new tools or materials.

The programme can last up to several months. In the context of the Syrian crisis, the problem of returnees is only just beginning to rear its head. It will take years before people can really start to re-establish themselves because now, they are either being held captive in besieged towns or living in refugee camps. But as soon as people start to come back, we'll be prepared. It is going to be a long-term undertaking.

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### QUESTIONS?

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