# The Emptying of Cities

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The central ritual of Sukkot is to eat in a temporarily created structure: "All seven days, one should make the Sukkah his permanent abode and his house his temporary abode. In what manner? If he had beautiful vessels, he should bring them up into the sukkah; beautiful divans, he should bring them up into the sukkah; he should eat and drink and pass his leisure in the sukkah." (Sukkah 28b) By moving what is permanent and valuable from its ordinary place into a temporary structure, the ritual juxtaposes that which is familiar and permanent with that which is temporary: the Sukkot ritual causes us on a yearly basis to reevaluate the permanent objects and assumptions of our existence.

The last few weeks brought an eerie juxtaposition, but one which, like the transfer of furniture into a temporary structure in the backyard on Sukkot, pushed me to speculate about an assumption which has taken on a kind of permanence in our thinking about international intervention to stop egregious human rights abuses. The juxtaposition was the large-scale emptying of cities. On September 7 the city of Dili in East Timor was reported emptied and burned, its inhabitants having fled to the hills and to other parts of Indonesia. A week later the coastal cities of the Southeastern United States were emptied in preparation for Hurricane Floyd; three million people were evacuated - the largest peacetime evacuation in US history. The latter was an example of the best of our modern ability to avoid the impact of natural disaster in the face of increasingly accurate technologies for predicting the course of storms. The former was an example of the worst of thinly veiled state sponsored violence.

The juxtaposition of these two instances of emptied cities made me think anew about an assumption that has remained at the heart of post-cold war international interventions: that we should not move people to safety in advance of potential marauding gangs or ethnic paramilitaries, as we would in advance of a storm.

How and whether the international community should intervene in the face of egregious human rights abuses or humanitarian disasters is one of the most challenging questions of our time. Clearly we have not gotten it right yet. Would the know-how of storm evacuation systems ever be used by the international community as rapid response in the face of increasingly predictable flare-ups of ethnic and other sorts of group violence? Would we move people from their homes in advance of killer militias? (The weather has often been used as the quintessential example of complex and imperfectly predictable systems, not unlike predictions about social systems.)

Bosnian Muslims were certainly not moved to safety in the face of Serb ethnic cleansers, though the idea was debated by policy makers at the time. Instead, "safe havens" like Srebrenica in many ways facilitated the Serb advance, creating the "facts on the ground" that ultimately allowed for the Dayton accords. It is difficult in the face of this example not to ask whether a benign large-scale movement of people would have been an ethically more appropriate western response, albeit logistically and politically difficult. Logistically it is not clear where people would have been moved and for how long (look how long it took western countries to decide to accept Kosovar refugees after they were clearly forced out of cities) and the execution of such a policy would surely be more complex than evacuating people from Cape Fear, which, after all, was done through the voluntary act of getting in the car and driving. Politically such a policy appears to play into the hands of the ethnic cleansers; the safe haven policy, in retrospect rather insidiously, salved western consciences while leading to worse results. (See Jan Willem Honig and Norbert Both, Srebrenica: Record of a War Crime, Penguin 1997, for an excellent presentation of the problems of intervention in the contemporary period.)

This brings us back to Sukkot with its question about what is most permanent and what is temporary, and thinking anew about our accepted approach to that relationship on a yearly basis. What is valuable and what is expendable in the face of militias who kill and burn and who, in most cases, we know are waiting in the wings to wreak havoc as small peoples try to break off from large states which consider their territories dear? When should threatened peoples be encouraged to leave territory behind and what is lost or gained in doing so? Should our seemingly permanent commitment to avoiding preemptive relocation of threatened groups be reconsidered?

The reason that cities were emptied before the international community arrived in Kosovo, in East Timor, is not only because of a lack of will. It is largely because reaction times are slow in the face of the still intractable set of questions that arise each time international will has to be mustered for intervention.

Each time -- Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor -- the international community must struggle with a host of questions fraught with difficulties. Even if it was possible to answer the question of whether state sovereignty should be violated to enforce certain human rights norms, what about the next question : If the norms being violated are those of a group, does such an intervention turn into a defense of a right to self-determination? Is it possible to support the self-determination struggles of every small group around the world?

In addition, increasingly we see situations where "neutral" aid workers become hostages and thus become unable to accomplish what should be a straightforward task: getting food to hungry people. While the international community deliberates, more people are killed and more go hungry. But is it realistic for the neutral Red Cross to be armed?

Most difficult, and still unresolved: What do you do after the fire is put out, after the winds die down and the difficult rebuilding and reconciliation needs to take place?

This is not to say that population relocations are a preferable or right solution. However, the recent juxtaposition of emptied cities does offer an opportunity for the reevaluation of permanent assumptions. And reevaluation of what is possible and preferable is essential. After all, the international community might never develop a response that escapes from the swamp of intractable issues raised by increasingly common instances of mass expulsion or repression of peoples by states.