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Doing Good or Doing Harm?

By Aimee Rodriguez

What happens when humanitarian relief does more harm than good? Should we work to save lives even if it means sustaining the oppressive regimes that threaten those same populations? Is it better, sometimes, not to provide aid at all?

These are the questions on the mind of Fiona Terry, a humanitarian worker and winner of the Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order, an annual competition "designed to stimulate the recognition, dissemi-



Author and humanitarian worker Fiona Terry says organizations must weigh the potential negative consequences of humanitarian aid.

nation and critical analysis of outstanding proposals for improving world order." Terry will visit Duke on Sept. 18 to deliver the 2008 Kenan Distinguished Lecture in Ethics, "Doing Good and

Doing Harm: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action." Terry has spent the past 15 years involved in humanitarian relief operations in different parts of the world, including northern Iraq, Somalia, the Great Lakes region of Africa, Liberia and along the Sino-Korean border.

In her book, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*, Terry argues that humanitarian groups need to recognize the core paradox of their activity, that providing aid aimed at alleviating suffering can

have the unintended consequence of sustaining the oppressive action that caused the suffering. She faced such a paradox during the Rwandan genocide as head of the French organization Doctors Without Borders. Terry decided to withdraw from the refugee camps in Zaire because aid intended for refugees strengthened those responsible for perpetrating genocide.

She later spent three years in Myanmar with the International Committee of the Red Cross and is now working with that group as an independent researcher in Sudan.

Terry contends that humanitarian organizations

must be open to discussion and debate about the potential negative consequences of assistance and other ethical issues.

"You'd imagine they all would be (open), but that's not at all the case," she says. "It's astounding to see that there still is this idea that we as humanitarian workers are the salvation of the people we seek to help. That's just not true."

"We're delighted to have Fiona Terry as our 2008 Kenan Distinguished Lecturer," says Noah Pickus, director of the Kenan Institute for Ethics. "Her analysis of the ethical dimensions of the humanitarian aid system is particularly relevant, as evidenced by her recent work in Myanmar and the Sudan." ♦

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- TERRY

LECTURE: Fiona Terry

5 p.m., Thursday, Sept. 18

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