

Memories of an Aid Worker

Isabelle Daoust

Sometimes it takes a leap of faith to believe that your work will make an impact on the world—either now or in the future, for people you know and those you will never meet. My first job in the humanitarian profession ironically brought this question into sharp focus. Driving out of the airport in Abidjan, Cote d’Ivoire, and soaking in the quiet markets we drove through, illuminated by candlelight, I hoped that my recent training as a lawyer would help to provide basic protections for people in West Africa.

I had come to Cote d’Ivoire in April 1999 to work for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), an independent humanitarian organization dedicated to persuading governments to respect the rules of international humanitarian law (IHL), which are found in the Geneva Conventions. These rules provide impartial protection for the most vulnerable in armed conflicts, including civilians, prisoners of war, and sick and wounded combatants.

The Geneva Conventions were particularly relevant at the time, since two bloody conflicts raged in nearby Liberia and Sierra Leone. I worked with several offices located throughout the region to convince governments to agree to international treaties and provide assistance in drafting domestic legislation to respect and enforce international humanitarian law.

These rules, which were so essential to my job, would become even more relevant in my life. On Christmas Eve, halfway into my mission, I was plunged into the heart of a conflict.

It was the country’s first coup. Falling market prices for Cote d’Ivoire’s export crops of cocoa and coffee, coupled with steep reductions in foreign aid due to allegations of government corruption, had been putting pressure on the presidency. And while it was chaotic, it was thankfully bloodless. There was some gunfire and reports of looting in the city. Checkpoints were also being set up around Abidjan. The next morning, a military government was in place. I had never witnessed any form of civil unrest before. Now I was on the frontlines.

In the days following the coup, we read news accounts of human rights abuses. We knew that some members of the military that had refused to take part in the coup were being detained in a camp just outside the city. We also heard that there were instances of torture and ill-treatment to the detainees. My colleague, a Swiss doctor, and I were asked to visit the detention site to investigate the conditions of those detained and see whether or not the rumors we heard from human rights organizations were true.

We were soon able to see some 20 or 25 soldiers who were imprisoned simply because they had refused to participate in the coup. Following Red Cross procedures, we interviewed the prisoners one at a time. It’s important to do this without any witnesses present in order to assess fully how they are being treated. The prisoners described their treatment and told us about their living conditions. At the same time, with the consent of the prison commander, we were allowed to collect Red Cross messages to send to their family (the ability for detainees to communicate with their families is another right under the Geneva Conventions). Finally, we registered the detainees and one of them asked me personally to give a message to his wife so she would know that he was still alive.

At the end of the visit, we had a meeting with the camp commander to report on our findings. While some organizations are vocal proponents of change using public advocacy to place pressure on governments, the International Committee of the Red Cross uses confidential visits, dialogue and reports. In this manner, the Red Cross has unique access to observe and advocate in a discreet way for improvement to basic living conditions and rights. We made recommendations and noted changes that needed to be made in accordance with the Geneva Conventions. Unfortunately,



Isabelle Daoust in Mali with a Red Cross and army colleague.

(or fortunately) we never had a chance to return to that prison for a follow-up visit, as the prisoners were released a few weeks later.

My next assignment took me out of Africa to work on a campaign to ban landmines. A new treaty banning anti-personnel mines (also known as the “Ottawa Treaty” or the “Mine Ban Treaty”) had entered into force in 1999 and the Red Cross was encouraging governments to sign on with the hope that the ban could become universal. As part of my new functions, I eventually attended an Africa-wide regional conference on the Mine Ban Treaty in Bamako, Mali, a neighboring country not far from Cote d’Ivoire.

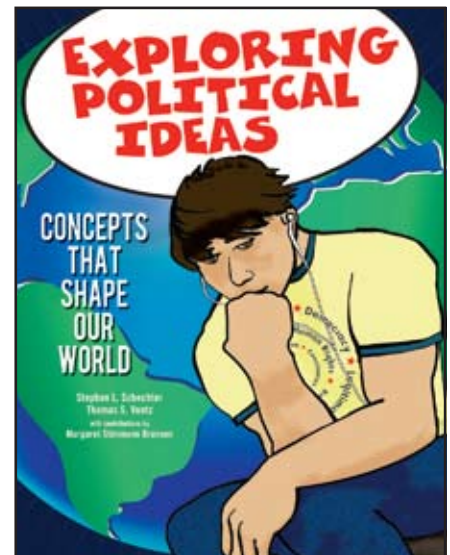
During the conference, an officer in uniform called out to me. I didn’t recognize him at first but the officer was eager to jog my memory: “Five or six months ago you visited me,” he said. “I was detained in this camp, and you took a message to my wife. She told me that she got the news that I was still alive and she was very relieved!”

The officer went on to say that conditions in the camp began to improve

immediately after the Red Cross visit. The detainees weren’t mistreated anymore, they were given enough food and water, and he confirmed that they were released shortly thereafter. It was one of the most moving moments of my life.

While I have not spoken to him since, it inspires me every day knowing that our work in international humanitarian law helps to provide a voice for the vulnerable like the officer from Cote d’Ivoire. 🌍

ISABELLE DAOUST manages the international humanitarian law program at the American Red Cross. Daoust has worked with the global Red Cross network for more than 10 years on three different continents. After receiving her law degree in Canada, she served in Africa advising governments on international humanitarian law and then in Geneva, Switzerland with the International Committee of the Red Cross. Most recently, she has worked with the Canadian Red Cross and American Red Cross to educate and promote the rules and principles of international humanitarian law. She can be reached at Daousti@usa.redcross.org. Her team actively promotes the free Red Cross curriculum “Exploring Humanitarian Law,” which can be found at www.redcross.org/ehl.



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