Making accompaniment effective.

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Unarmed Resistance: the transnational factor

13-17 July 2006

Centre For Peace and Reconciliation Studies

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Why is international accompaniment effective? And what can be done to make it more effective?

Liam Mahony and Luis Enrique Eguren (1997), in their study of international accompaniment, say that it works through deterrence: aggressors decide that the negative consequences of bad publicity and international pressure outweigh advantages of attacking activists. Accompaniment can expand the political space available to activists and limit the actions aggressors can take with what they consider "acceptable" costs. Other studies of nonviolent intervention (Moser-Puangsuwan and Weber, 2000; Müller, 2006), filled with rich detail about actions and their consequences, give less attention to how intervention works.

More detailed insights can be obtained by exploring the process called political jiu-jitsu. Nonviolence researcher Gene Sharp (1973) studied hundreds of actions and campaigns. He found that when violent attacks were made against peaceful protesters, this could be counterproductive for the attacker, encouraging more people to become activists, generating more support for the protesters from third parties, and weakening commitment from some members of the attacker group. This occurred in 1905 in Russia as a result of killings of protesters, in 1930 in India as a result of beatings of protesters, in 1960 in South Africa as a result of a shooting of protesters by police, and in 1991 in East Timor as a result of a massacre of protesters by Indonesian troops. In each case, police or troops had overwhelming superiority in force. But by exercising it against nonviolent protesters, they actually strengthened their opponents. Like the sport of jiu-jitsu, in which the energy of the opponent is used against them, political jiu-jitsu turns the attacker's violent energy into support for the protesters.

But these famous examples are exceptions to the rule. In most cases, violent attacks on protesters do not produce a jiu-jitsu effect. Why not? Looking at these and other examples shows that attackers predictably use a variety of methods to inhibit outrage from their actions. These methods can conveniently be grouped into five categories: cover up the action; devalue the target; reinterpret the action; use official channels to give an appearance of justice; and intimidate or bribe people involved. For example, prior to the 1991 Dili massacre, there were other equally serious massacres in East Timor, but these received little attention, mainly due to censorship by the Indonesian government. At Dili, foreign journalists witnessed the killings. Their reports led to international outrage.

This process by which perpetrators attempt to minimise outrage using the five methods also applies to other sorts of injustice, such as police beatings, censorship, unfair dismissals, torture and genocide. This generalisation of Sharp's political jiu-jitsu is called the backfire framework (Martin, 2005, 2007): when the methods of inhibiting outrage fail, the perpetrator's actions can backfire.

This framework can readily be applied to accompaniment. Two injustices are potentially involved. One is whatever local activists are dealing with, such as beatings and threats, extrajudicial killings or environmental destruction. The other is threats to and attacks on the activists. Accompaniment is designed to reduce the danger to activists, allowing them to continue their valuable activities.

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Cover-up is the first method perpetrators use to inhibit outrage: if possible, they carry out killings in secret, out of the public eye. Accompaniment makes this much more difficult. It introduces witnesses, moreover ones well connected with international networks with the potential for publicity, including media coverage, and diplomatic intervention.

Devaluation of the target is the second method of inhibiting outrage: targets of injustice are called terrorists, criminals, traitors and subversives. They are sometimes slandered, for example being accused of spying or sexual misbehaviour. International accompaniment challenges this devaluation by showing that someone — an independent person, from a valued foreign country — believes the activist is doing worthwhile things. Furthermore, the foreign organisation has picked out this activist as worthy. This validation is a powerful counter to devaluation.

Reinterpretation is the third method of inhibiting outrage. Government officials might say the activist's concerns are not important, or are being addressed, and that the activist has not been threatened or harassed, or that attacks are due to rogue elements. An international volunteer can help to challenge such claims by documenting what activists have been doing. The very presence of independent witnesses is powerful testimony that what is at stake is human rights, thus challenging the government's line.

Official channels are the fourth method of inhibiting outrage. After the Dili massacre, for example, the Indonesian government and military set up inquiries that led to token sentences for a few individuals. Official channels like courts, ombudsmen, expert panels and government agencies give the appearance of offering justice, but in practice they are often biased in favour of perpetrators. As well, they are slow, procedural and expensive. Accompaniment is an alternative to official channels; indeed, it implies official channels are not working.

Intimidation is the fifth method of inhibiting outrage. Intimidation is a primary tool used against activists. Accompaniment helps counter intimidation: the presence of witnesses gives moral support to activists.

International accompaniment thus responds to every one of the five standard methods by which perpetrators of human rights abuses try to reduce outrage from their actions.

This framework can be illustrated by many different accompaniment operations. An example is the first use of escorting by Peace Brigades International (PBI), in Guatemala in the 1980s (Mahoney and Eguren, 1997, pp. 17-57). The Guatemalan government was carrying out horrific attacks on opponents. A favoured method was disappearances: activists were taken away, presumably murdered, with no information about what had happened or who was responsible. Disappearances rely on the method of cover-up to reduce outrage, along with intimidation: anyone who protests might be the next to disappear.

But some in Guatemala were willing to protest. In early 1984, Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM) — Mutual Support Group — was formed. Most of its members were women who had lost family members due to government repression. GAM asked for support from PBI. The story of GAM and PBI shows how accompaniment challenges each of the five methods of inhibition.

First, cover-up: while PBI observers were present, no members of GAM were killed. Indeed, the government wanted to get PBI volunteers out of the country, for example by cutting short their visas.

Second, devaluation: the government fiercely attacked GAM. For example, Guatemalan ruler General Mejía Victores said it was linked to "forces of subversion" (pp. 25, 38). PBI was also denigrated: it was said to be a tool of the US government and to be supporting, indeed manipulating, the subversive organisation GAM (p. 42).

Third, reinterpretation: President Mejía conceived himself as a nationalist who promoted the interests of his country by defending against subversives (pp. 30-36). The army even portrayed itself as the victim, not the attacker, saying it was subject to a "perverse campaign of harassment and persecution by the so-called 'GAM' … in open hostility to the dignity and prestige of the armed forces" (p. 46).

Fourth, official channels: the army carried out its killings under a facade of parliamentary democracy. But the government would not establish an inquiry into disappearances, despite demands by GAM. The government thus did not rely heavily on official channels to reduce outrage from its actions against the population. But it did in trying to get PBI out of the country, for example in producing a detailed legal argument saying PBI volunteers were not international observers (p. 42).

Fifth, intimidation and bribery: disappearances were certainly intimidating. Many people were reluctant to join GAM due to fear of being tortured and killed. Intimidation was also used against PBI volunteers, for example when they were stopped by men in cars who threatened them or demanded to see their passports (pp. 40, 42). PBI volunteers were told, privately, that they would not be expelled from the country if they promised "there would be no disruptive actions" during a forthcoming election campaign (p. 43), which can be interpreted as a form of bribery.

In summary, PBI's support of GAM, by challenging the methods used by perpetrators of repression to reduce outrage, reduced the ability of the government to carry out repression without adverse international consequences. After two GAM activists were assassinated, the international pressure on the government was intense: "If the GAM assassinations were intended to squelch efforts at building international pressure against Guatemala, they had clearly backfired." (p. 28). PBI's presence helped ensure there were no more such assassinations, and GAM activists recognised it. GAM leader Nineth de García said of PBI, "Thanks to their presence, I am alive" (p. 28).

Backfire analysis also suggests ways to increase the effectiveness of accompaniment. To counter cover-up, documentation and communication are vital, so having cameras and tape recorders is valuable, as is ready access to international communication.

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Emergency response networks — people in other countries ready to send messages of concern — are powerful tools in countering cover-up.

The higher the status of the accompaniers, the more effectively they help counter devaluation. Furthermore, exemplary behaviour by volunteers helps validate those accompanied. This is the aim of training.

Countering government lies and rationalisations is an important task. If volunteers have skills in investigation, critical analysis and clear expression in writing and speaking, they can use these to help activists engage more effectively in the struggle over interpretations, and can communicate their own understandings to international audiences.

Often it is better to avoid official channels. Rather than writing a letter to a government official, it is better to write a letter to a newspaper or e-mail list — the government official will probably learn about it as well. Rather than calling for a government inquiry, it is better to write and publish a detailed account of the events, or set up a people's inquiry. Many people believe that official channels should be tried, to give the other side a chance. Often, though, it is better to use a mobilisation strategy.

To counter intimidation, one method is to expose it. Being prepared to document and publicise threats and harassment is vital.

The basic approach is to think about the tactics likely to be used by the aggressor — such as cover-up and devaluation — and to develop one's own tactics accordingly.

I thank Tom Weber for helpful comments on a draft.

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