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# *Little Room to Maneuver: The Challenges to Humanitarian Action in the New Global Security Environment*

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**Abstract** The current global politico-security environment poses challenges to principled humanitarian action on three levels. Humanitarian actors are at pains to preserve a neutral stance in contested political environments, specifically those of occupation and counter-insurgency operations within the US-led Global War on Terror — a particularly difficult proposition when the major donor for humanitarian activities is also the occupying power. Their second challenge is to maintain operational independence in environments of post-conflict transition and other contexts where the life-saving work is over and political pressure increases for all international actors to operate under a unified, politically coherent peace-building strategy. Finally, humanitarians perceive a greater threat than ever before to the physical security of their own workers, as incidents of violence against aid workers appear to be on the rise.

**Key words:** Humanitarian, NGOs, Security management, civil military

## **Introduction**

Humanitarian providers play vital roles in countries undergoing and emerging from conflict, filling crucial needs and representing an important part of the international work toward stabilization and recovery. Never a politically simple matter, despite the apolitical ideal, humanitarian action now faces new and intensified challenges in the shifting international security environment.

Against a backdrop of the US-led global war on terror, the rise of asymmetric warfare and counter-insurgency operations, and the increased blending of civil and military responses, humanitarian actors see themselves operating in an environment in which their core humanitarian

principles are increasingly compromised by the interests of a security-dominated policy agenda.

These broader security dynamics have been made more challenging by the uncertain role of humanitarian actors in 'transitional' or post-conflict recovery situations. In recent years the international assistance community has forged an informal consensus on the importance of following a coherent and integrated approach to post-conflict scenarios aimed at consolidating the fragile peace and bolstering the state. However, as urgent humanitarian needs may still occur in these peace-building scenarios, a dilemma arises regarding how to preserve an independent humanitarian presence within this broader international political mission, and whether and how humanitarians are to engage with state structures, political actors, and militaries.

At the most immediate level, humanitarian actors struggle also with the erosion of their physical security — most certainly in the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, and possibly as a general trend. Whether the risk of violence for humanitarian actors has increased over time is not yet known definitively, pending a comprehensive compiling and analysis of the data. What is not in question, however, is that the international organizations' response to the security challenge has had major implications for humanitarian access and methods of operations in some places of greatest need.

These three broad challenges — the challenge of realizing humanitarian principles in highly polarized conflicts where the major powers seek to instrumentalize humanitarian aid for political ends, the challenge of maintaining operational independence among and increasingly integrated international assistance structures, and safeguarding staff in increasingly threatening environments — are examined in this paper. The paper argues that a two-fold response to these challenges is required. First, humanitarian and political actors must clearly define the activities that constitute life-saving humanitarian assistance and ensure their exemption from political (including recovery and peace-building) agendas. Second, humanitarians must be prepared to undertake a serious investment in the localization of relief response capacity. This would not only increase effectiveness of humanitarian action, but in the new security environment may also considerably mitigate some of the dangers to humanitarian workers.

### **Humanitarian action in the new global security agenda**

The US-led global security agenda embodied in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) has created a new framework for the conduct of international relations with fragile states. Fragile states are now viewed as potential harbors and staging grounds for global militant Islamist networks. Additionally, recent years have seen a renewed interest in reaching the Millennium Development Goals as an expression of pro-poor policies, and recognition of the failure of sanctions and conditionality

policies. In this way, the West has reversed its policy of disengagement from many developing countries that had ceased to be of strategic interest during the post-Cold War period (at least in principle, if not yet in practice) (Macrae and Harmer, 2003). More particularly, many governments are beginning to look at the linkages between aid and security, identifying humanitarian and recovery assistance as a 'soft' tool to be used in combination with political and military instruments to achieve counter-terror objectives. In countries where security interests are seen most clearly at stake, humanitarian assistance has gone from being the sole embodiment of the international response to a feature of the securitization and peace-building process (Duffield, 2002).

The securitization of aid phenomenon first became most apparent in Afghanistan, and then later in Iraq. In Afghanistan, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) found their arguments for the importance of their independence and neutrality had limited impact on military counterparts (Bishop, 2003), an estrangement that has continued and solidified in Iraq. In particular, US administration officials spoke of humanitarian NGOs as 'force multipliers,' and coalition military forces took on new small-scale aid endeavors.

In the case of Iraq, despite that fact the Geneva Conventions hold the occupying power primarily responsible for aid to civilians in an occupied country, the international humanitarian system geared up and initially began operations as per previous emergencies, although effectively under US military authority. The scenario that unfolded on the ground made it clear that the Iraq case involved many complex choices and challenges for the humanitarian implementing organizations, particularly in the absence of major displacements or critical humanitarian need. Many (mainly US-based) NGOs, for their part, made the conscious choice to participate within a Pentagon-led reconstruction effort in Iraq — some say as the inexorable result of pre-war fundraising and mobilization in anticipation of a major humanitarian disaster. This choice created ethical and operational problems for these organizations as well as significant security challenges.

Most of the NGOs entering Iraq after the US takeover did not have the longstanding ground presence in Iraq that would afford them the familiarity of local populations and the communications networks to elicit crucial security information. Rather, they entered a highly uncertain situation where they were inevitably closely identified with the coalition occupation and reconstruction efforts. More so than the NGOs, the United Nations found itself in an extremely difficult position in Iraq. It too was identified with the occupying power, and had already been the target of much popular resentment for its role in enforcing the 12-year sanctions regime. There was no clear understanding internally or between the United Nations and the coalition leaders about what the United Nations' post-war role would be, and how, precisely, it would relate to the occupying power, beyond taking up part of the burden for reconstruction.

The horrific bombing of the UN offices in Baghdad on 19 August 2003 drove home the precariousness and the ambiguity of the United Nations' position in the country.

In the aftermath of 19 August 2003 and the subsequent bombing of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)'s offices there has been a great deal of discussion as to whether these entities were targeted because they were seen as allies of the coalition, or whether they were merely convenient targets to create an atmosphere of disorder and terror, disrupting the effort to reconstruct and stabilize Iraq. The bombings assuredly accomplished the latter, and their ramifications are being felt throughout the United Nations system.

In most country cases the dilemmas do not present themselves quite so starkly as the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and one must use caution in ascribing the developments in the Afghanistan and Iraq cases — both highly complex and irregular diplomatic environments — to a universal shift in great power policy that harnesses humanitarian activities to political ends. For although the GWOT does appear to lay down a global blueprint for dealing with unstable developing states, thus far there is no evidence of a universal application of these new policies. Rather, some have observed what appears to be an emerging two-tier system of emergencies, with countries of particular concern to counter-terror operations on the one hand, versus 'normal' humanitarian crises on the other (Donini, 2003). In first-tier countries, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, three features are evident: first, great power security interests are predominant and all other aspects of politics and assistance are drafted to these ends; second, massive new private sector involvement has emerged in the reconstruction effort, including some areas — such as education and health — traditionally considered the province of humanitarian actors; and third, individual humanitarian actors such as UN agencies and NGOs face greater pressures and ethical dilemmas, as well as greater physical risk from those who target them as agents of the western power structure. Elsewhere in the world, the 'second-tier' emergency countries such (e.g. Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, South Sudan) continue to conform to an older paradigm, where aid per capita remains relatively low, although often manipulated for political interests.

Although overall government expenditures for first-tier emergency countries is much higher, driven by large reconstruction contracts with for-profit contractors,<sup>1</sup> there is to date no conclusive evidence to suggest that humanitarian actors in these crises are being deprived of usual funding; nor are humanitarian emergencies elsewhere in the world receiving lower amounts as a result of diversion of funding to areas of geo-strategic interests.

Nevertheless, humanitarian actors operating in the most highly insecure environments do face significant pressures by western governments to conform to their broader security agenda, and potentially risk contributing to their own insecurity — essentially setting themselves up as

targets. In addition, they see it as betraying the humanitarian principles central to their mission. Potential alternate approaches in such situations are few and underdeveloped. They include the traditionalist approach now being promoted by Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) that seeks to reinforce the separateness of humanitarian action from political agendas. Seemingly more akin to the Geneva-mandated neutrality of the ICRC than to the politically outspoken advocacy traditionally associated with MSF, this 'back to basics' approach calls for humanitarians to remain outside the dialog on political and peace-building affairs, to focus efforts on meeting needs in the most narrowly defined scope of humanitarian action (de Torrente, 2004). Notwithstanding its birthright as an outspoken advocate for victims rights to humanitarian aid, MSF seems to have come to the conclusion that when advocacy crosses the line into policy prescription, humanitarian principles are compromised; and when humanitarian efforts and actors are coordinated under a broader international response, humanitarian action invariably becomes a tool of political agendas (Vila San Juan, 2002). MSF has thus declared its policy of speaking only within its field of expertise, and only calling for military intervention, for example, in cases of genocide.

An alternate approach offered by a representative of CARE argues that rather than 'depoliticizing humanitarianism,' the humanitarian community should work actively toward 'humanitarianizing politics' (O'Brien, 2004b). In other words, humanitarian organizations would do better to adopt a politically attuned, rights-based approach that resists co-option by any political party, while actively engaging with governments to hold them responsible for meeting the humanitarian needs of civilians in crisis.<sup>2</sup>

### **Uncertain terms: securing an independent humanitarian role in crisis and post-crisis response**

The possible success of either approach — 'humanitarianizing politics' or going 'back to basics' — needs to be considered in light of a parallel trend to the securitization of aid: that of policy coherence and integrated models in responding to crises. Over the past several years, international political and assistance actors arrived at a shared understanding on some key principles regarding the relationship of humanitarian action and recovery efforts in conflict-affected and protracted crisis states. These include the importance of maintaining a 'light footprint' of the international community, and, once the acute crisis has passed, shifting the focus of international aid efforts away from direct service delivery to partnering and mentoring relationships with local state and civil institutions. The primary goal of assistance in these transitional and protracted crisis environments is to strengthen local governance to help shore up the fragile peace and prevent a slide back into conflict and crisis. The informal consensus around transitional assistance has helped fuel the movement toward UN-centered 'integrated missions' to guide countries through post-crisis

recovery. Despite the more benign intentions of the approach, difficult questions have merged, around whether and how the humanitarian and development communities have a shared agenda in assistance strategies.

Until 1992, UN peacekeeping and assistance activities were entirely separate, and there was little coordination even among the UN agencies within the humanitarian sphere. Widespread dissatisfaction over the competitive and duplicative inter-agency structure in humanitarian efforts led to the passage of Resolution 46/182 — a major step towards recognizing the importance of a more coordinated humanitarian system that includes the roles played by humanitarian NGOs as well as UN agencies.

In 1994 the first Humanitarian Coordinator was appointed in Somalia. Over the years, some of the more effective Humanitarian Coordinators have brought NGOs, as well as donors and local actors, into the field-based dialog with the UN actors, in arrangements sometimes referred to as ‘Country Team-plus.’ Gradually, in increasing numbers of countries, these non-UN actors were brought into a common discussion on planning and operations, and this has been credited with significantly improved overall humanitarian response in these countries.

The UN reform package of 1997, however, inadvertently undercut the growing cohesion in the broader humanitarian sphere by promoting greater *intra-UN* cohesion between the political, peacekeeping, development, and humanitarian departments. Driving the reform package as it related to field operations were pointed critiques of the United Nations’ performance in problem states, and the particular dissatisfaction of member governments not only with costly duplication of support structures for each agency, but also with what they saw as the fragmented political presence of the United Nations. Members demanded that the United Nations begin to speak with a single voice in these situations. Enter the concept of the integrated mission, led by a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) exercising “authority over all UN entities in the field,”<sup>3</sup> and “whereby all UN resources are harnessed under common direction towards consolidating peace and supporting the re-establishment of stable and legitimate central government with viable institutions” (ECHO, 2004).<sup>4</sup>

Humanitarian NGOs, as well as some UN humanitarian agencies, resist the movement toward integrated missions for the same reason they sought a separate Humanitarian Coordinator independent of the UN diplomatic presence in a country — to shield humanitarian action from the constraining effects of political considerations. These actors do not discount the benefits of coordination and complementary activities; rather, it is the fear of that the humanitarian agenda will become subsumed by or secondary to political and peacekeeping goals. As one observer put it, “In effect ‘integration’ may serve to undermine humanitarian action by transforming it from a fundamental and inalienable right of those in need into simply another tool of diplomacy”

(Gordon, 2004, p. 2). NGOs have called attention to the situation in a number of countries, including Angola and Liberia, as to how integration can hinder humanitarian action. In Angola, the rebel movement UNITA collapsed — hundreds of thousands of people streamed out of the former UNITA-held areas, and were in fairly desperate need of assistance. MSF identified the need for a straightforward aid response, but claimed that because the United Nations and donor community did not push the Angolan government for increased access for humanitarian responders, thousands of lives were lost. MSF reports that the United Nations went so far as to ask some donors not to fund individual agencies for rapid response, but to wait until the full community could go in together under a coordinated structure. Aid was thus held hostage to political agenda (de Torrente, 2004; see also Macrae, 2004; Minear, 2004).

The case of Liberia is also cited often by the anti-integrated mission camp as a particular failure from the standpoint of humanitarian concerns (Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2004), and certain NGOs have held it up as a reason they will not participate in other integrated mission frameworks elsewhere. Many NGOs in Liberia were unhappy with UNAMIL's incorporation of the Humanitarian Coordinator role (as a dual function of the Deputy SRSG) as well as OCHA into the integrated mission framework.

This step, which could be seen as the final step in realizing the full integration of humanitarian coordination under a political banner, may involve humanitarian concerns becoming subservient to the political process and/or the UN neglecting immediate humanitarian needs. The coordination of humanitarian action needs, however, its own humanitarian space. (Schenkenberg van Mierop, 2004, p. 2)

Others hope that the presence of the humanitarian function within UNAMIL will raise the profile of humanitarian issues among political actors in the mission. The lack of consensus among the NGOs as to whether the costs of integration outweigh its benefits is itself damaging to humanitarian coordination.

Despite the strong sense among UN officials that integrated missions represent the future of peace-building, a recent report on the issue found “little specific agreement” on the concept or practical application of this instrument (Eide *et al*, 2005). There are some in the United Nations who support a flexible and case-based approach to applying the integrated mission framework. Their reasoning holds that integrated missions are to be used when possible, or humanitarian independence when necessary (for instance, in cases of active conflict). In past experience, however, the United Nations has not had much success in establishing criteria to guide case-based decision-making, but, like all large organizations, naturally veers toward a default management structure. Additionally, amid the current concerns for staff security, the push for integrated missions in all



contexts promises to grow stronger, as security favors a centralized command structure.

*Political and operational challenges of multi-mandated agencies in engaging across the 'divide'*

Emergency humanitarian assistance exists outside the human development paradigm. It often involves the provision of non-renewable, non-sustainable aid inputs meant as a stopgap for emergency needs. Although it is to be avoided as a rule, humanitarian emergencies sometimes necessitate the creation of parallel mechanisms, such as temporary schools, health clinics, and civil administration institutions. Humanitarian action is inherently direct and grassroots, targeted at individuals and local communities.

While its practitioners may agree that humanitarian action represents a special category of assistance, the vast majority of assistance entities are in fact multi-mandated organizations, with programs spanning humanitarian relief, recovery, and development activities. The challenge to these agencies is deciding when to make the shift from direct aid provision to partnerships in peace-building and nation-building. Ideally this should be based on accurate assessments of needs and conditions on the ground, but political and funding considerations are often at play as well. The humanitarian community is also challenged by the fact that it lacks a common definition of itself. Until recently, there were no clear, shared parameters for what constitutes humanitarian action. Indeed, the trend over the past decade has been to expand the humanitarian concept to encompass a wider range of activities and allow for more actors to find a place at the humanitarian table. In the view of many humanitarians, however, this represents an unhelpful development, as it dilutes the existing consensus that humanitarian action is a special category of assistance with objectives and protections that need to remain distinct.<sup>5</sup>

The prevalence of integrated missions has in some sense taken the decision away from the individual agency, centralizing decision-making for UN agencies and requiring NGOs to choose between either operating within or outside the system, or to leave. At the heart of this dilemma in highly contested environments is the issue of humanitarian neutrality, which, as the next section illustrates, has moved from the realm of abstract principle to a very real and pressing operational challenge.

### **The security challenge and its implications for humanitarian operations**

Although it has not yet been determined with statistical certainty, it is widely held that casualty levels among aid workers have increased significantly over the years, particularly in the post-9/11 period. Until a denominator can be calculated representing the number of relief workers

operating in the field in a given year, it remains unclear whether the level of risk to this work has increased, or whether there are simply more workers in the field experiencing a corresponding number of dangerous incidents. In any event, as organizations perceived their staff to be increasingly directly affected by violence, humanitarian security has risen in importance and sophistication. The professionalization and standards movement that swept the community of humanitarian organizations included security planning and management as a key feature. Organizations began differentiating the area of personnel safety (e.g. common-sense guidelines preventing vehicle accidents and illness) from the more complex issue of security (targeted violence, acts of war) that required greater resources and skills, and a strategic approach that encompassed the whole of programming (Van Brabant, 2000).

Many of the largest UN humanitarian agencies and NGOs have lost one or more staff members each year to violence in the field since 2000. Among the most common causes of casualties to aid workers are banditry on the roads (ambushes with beatings or killings, car-jackings or simple robbery), landmines, kidnappings and, in some cases, armed attacks on premises or aerial bombardment. In addition there is the risk of common crime for which aid workers are often identifiable and appealing targets. Local staff or contractors, especially drivers hauling relief supplies, continue to bear the brunt of the violent incidents, but the threat to international staff is also perceived to have risen over the past decade, particularly in the rise of cases of kidnapping/hostage taking. Along with physical risks go the very real psychological risks and after-effects to humanitarian workers. Post-traumatic stress disorder, 'burnout', and vicarious traumatization (i.e. witnessing violence and atrocities against others) are growing problems among field staff, and are detrimental to aid work in multiple ways.

### *Evolving policies and practices in humanitarian security*

International humanitarian actors have attempted to counter the security challenge with a variety of mechanisms. Security has perhaps been the biggest factor in driving inter-agency coordination in the field, and at the headquarters level with joint training efforts. Traditionally the theory of enhancing the security of aid workers was based on the 'security triangle' paradigm, comprised of three crucial components, emphasized to varying degrees by different types of organizations. The first, *protection* seeks to reduce vulnerability (i.e. harden the target). To this end, humanitarian agencies have hired professionally trained security coordinators, provided training to staff members, and have invested in resources such as thick-skinned vehicles, body armor, gates and alarms, communications equipment, and explosive-proof materials. The second strategy, *deterrence*, entails presenting a counter threat, such as the presence of armed escorts or proximity to military forces. The component, *acceptance*, is

viewed by many in the NGO community as the most difficult yet most effective and principled means to reduce the threat to humanitarian actors. It entails the aid agency working towards becoming a familiar and trusted entity by local communities at the ground level, cultivating a network of contacts and intermediaries to maintain open lines of communications with key parties, and usually requires a long-term presence in the country pre-conflict, during the conflict, and post-conflict. All three of these strategies require as their basis a detailed and thorough security assessment, which is undertaken prior to the mission and updated continually as conditions change.

In the late 1990s and the past five years, new efforts in security enhancement of both UN agencies and NGOs, individually and jointly (through the major consortia and international networks such as RedR and People in Aid), have been seen. However, it has not resulted in a sense of greater comfort in field operations or any diminishment of the threat. In recent years, as will be discussed more in the following, rather the opposite has occurred. Although the major United Nations and NGO humanitarian actors universally concur on the importance of security, in actual practice the level of sophistication and investment into security measures varies enormously from one to another. Despite general improvements, much remains to be done, particularly in the area of security training, for a constantly changing and peripatetic field staff (InterAction, 2000). National staff, moreover, although they represent the majority of victims, receive a disproportionately low share of the training and material resources allotted by their organizations to enhance staff security (ECHO, 2004).

*The changing UN security regime and the phenomenon of 'aid by remote control'*

In October 2003 the Secretary-General announced a plan to reconfigure, strengthen, and modernize the UN security apparatus — a process that has recently begun under the new Under Secretary General for the Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS). At the same time he cautioned that the United Nations must not “succumb to a ‘bunker mentality’ and shrink from the work the world’s people expect it to do.”<sup>6</sup> Yet many of the organization’s humanitarian agencies and their partners fear this is precisely what has happened since the Canal Hotel bombing.

One agency director noted that the Iraq bombing was pivotal, but the process had actually started earlier. He warned that the United Nations was nearing the point where UN humanitarian action was beginning to resemble a national foreign service in its priorities — an example of a ‘force and fortress mentality’ indeed. The strongest critics have accused the United Nations of an institutional overreaction to the August 19 horror, and reminded that risk comes with the territory and will be

greatest precisely where the United Nations presence is needed most (Malone, 2004).

Senior officials at the UNDSS emphasize that their role is to provide an 'enabling' security environment for programming, not a restrictive one. The department, with the help of over \$3 million in new resources allocated by the UN's General Assembly, is now struggling to staff up and modernize UN security in ways comparable to multinational corporations and banks, who find ways to continue operating and safeguard their personnel in the some of the most unstable situations. The key to this endeavor is the concept of *risk management* analysis and strategy. The centerpiece of the risk management framework in the field is the Security Risk Assessment, which takes as a starting point the agencies' programming priorities and institutes the necessary security conditions to make these possible.

For their part, the agencies and NGOs note some early improvements in the UN security system along these lines, but charge that there are a great many UN security officers in the field yet who use evacuation as a principal security strategy and approach risk by restricting movement. UNDSS officials regretfully admit that this mentality does persist among some of its field officers, but countercharge that the agencies too often do not know what it is they want or need to do and make it inordinately difficult to engineer the security umbrella.

The United Nations plays both a functional and a coordinating role in humanitarian and post-conflict scenarios, and to the extent that these roles are now being driven, or at least severely constrained, by security concerns in insecure environments has ripple effects on the entire humanitarian system. Certain UN humanitarian officials lament that donors are recoiling from the high cost of additional security provisions, and NGOs are seeking to distance themselves as well to avoid the risk of association. In extraordinarily high-risk environments such as Iraq, even NGOs constrain the movements of their personnel, and by the time of this writing most have withdrawn from that country completely. Without the NGOs as implementing partners, and unable to move about freely themselves, UN agencies and donor governments are also turning to private contractors to carry out aid delivery in the most rudimentary forms of assistance programming. Humanitarian professionals in the United Nations and NGOs speak of the intense frustration with being confined to compounds or residences, hiring out aid services that cannot even be monitored visually but rely on telephone reports. Local aid organizations are also typically counted on to fill the breach when the risks are too high for international implementers. Yet in high-risk counter-terror scenarios they face enormous hurdles as objects of suspicion as potential fronts for terrorist organizations, and as targets themselves.

The relationship between the United Nations and NGOs on matters of security has, since the mid-1990s, been a source of frustration and false starts. In 1996 the UN Security Coordinator issued a Memorandum of

Understanding for including NGOs in UN security arrangements — developed without any NGO input — that was rejected by NGOs as unacceptable. While NGOs in principle are in favor of the United Nations playing a role in security coordination, they are unwilling to surrender operational independence and their own judgment on matters of security. To many observers, the greater problem is the reluctance among many NGO to invest in, establish, and consistently implement security procedures. Explanations for this reluctance include the conscious decision by some organizations to concentrate their finite resources on programming goals, simple inexperience or incompetence on the part of others, and still others not wanting to scare off potential field workers with an excess of talk and training centered on worst-case scenarios. There is also a disconnect between donors' expressions of willingness to fund additional security measures for their implementers' programs, and many organizations' doubts that such funding is available — and their fears that requesting it would detract from their programming capacity and/or competitiveness.

Another trend signals a different sort of NGO reasoning. In the post-9/11 political atmosphere, where humanitarians perceive a risk of targeting for their association with western interests, some organizations have moved even further toward an emphasis on acceptance strategies and blending in to local communities as their best hope — even as the United Nations and other international entities invest more heavily on protection and deterrence measures.

UN relief agencies also express concern that the emphasis on security within the framework of integrated missions threatens to paralyze UN humanitarian action. UN humanitarian actors are increasingly forced to choose between being good team players in integrated missions and being an effective humanitarian presence in areas where both need and risk are high (Stoddard, 2004).

### *Real or perceived? Assessing the risks to aid workers in the new global environment*

Are humanitarian workers at greater risk today than in previous years? The widespread sense among humanitarian practitioners holds the answer to be a resounding yes. Afghanistan is readily singled out, as a country where more aid workers have been killed in the nearly four years since the coalition campaign than in the prior 20 years of war and strife in that country. Iraq has seen a particularly terrifying trend of kidnappings and beheading of expatriate aid workers and contractors. However, it would be a mistake to draw definitive conclusions from these two exceptional cases. Also, data on the aid-worker casualties remain soft and, for the most part, dependent on voluntary reporting. Various studies (Sheik *et al.*, 2000<sup>7</sup>) published in the past have contained different parameters — some, for instance, including deaths caused by vehicle accidents and disease, some

## *Challenges to Humanitarian Action*

Table I. Aid workers affected by major violent incidents 1997–2004

	Total	United Nations	Red Cross	NGO	Nationals	Expatriates
1997	49	20	16	13	28	21
1998	54	24	18	12	42	12
1999	67	14	19	34	37	30
2000	80	31	5	44	62	18
2001	78	25	10	43	54	24
2002	62	15	7	40	53	9
2003	98	24	23	51	74	24
2004	89	15	6	68	60	29

*Source:* Center on International Cooperation/Humanitarian Policy Group Humanitarian Security Project preliminary data set.

including UN peacekeepers in the tally, and so on. None of them have the figures to provide the denominator — the number of aid workers in the field — an important consideration given the changing size of the humanitarian presence in insecure areas. In terms of total numbers, however, the short-term trend in violence against aid workers does appear to be on the rise.

According to the data currently available,<sup>8</sup> an average of 63 aid workers per year were victims of major violence (killed, wounded, or kidnapped) during 1997–2000, four years prior to the advent of GWOT and the new global security environment. During the four years since, 2001–2004, the annual average was 82. The risk to national staffers increased even more in the latter period, becoming three times as likely to be victims of violence as expatriate staff — a number that reflects their greater representation in frontline field work.

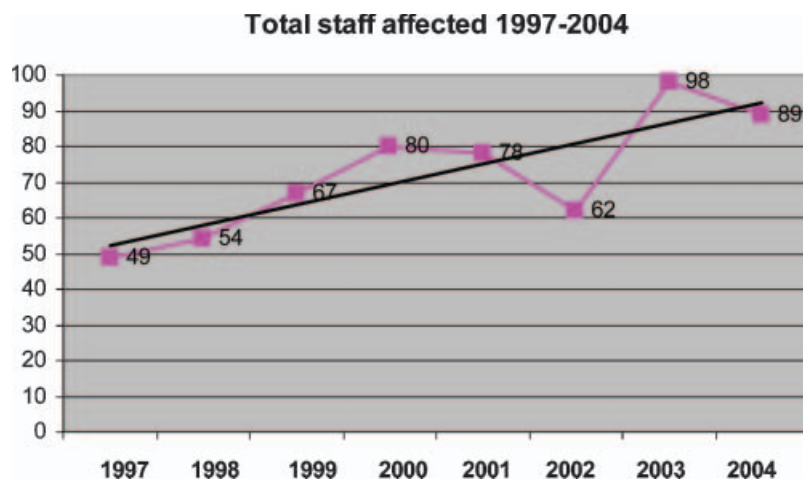


FIGURE 1. Short-term trend appears to show an increase in risk to aid workers. *Source:* Center on International Cooperation/Humanitarian Policy Group Humanitarian Security Project preliminary data set.

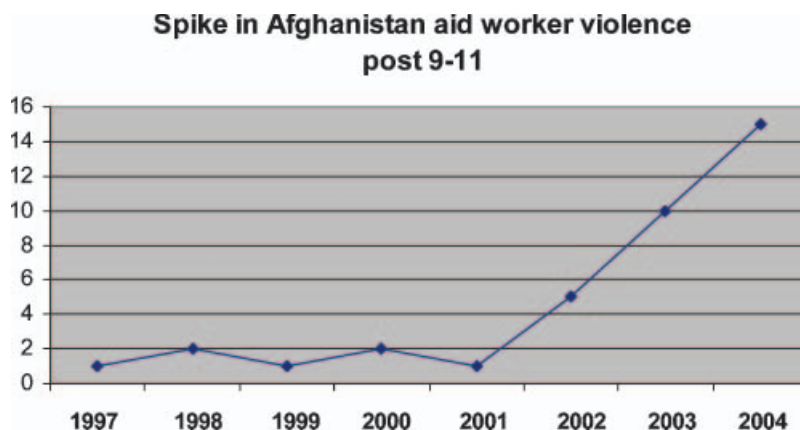


FIGURE 2. Major violent accidents against aid workers in Afghanistan rose dramatically after 2001.  
*Source:* Center on International Cooperation/Humanitarian Policy Group Humanitarian Security Project preliminary data set.

A theory often cited for the apparent rise — and one that is believed deeply by certain aid organizations who have suspended operations as a result — is the securitization of aid by western governments in the global counter-terror campaign, which has created a political association of aid organizations with this western agenda. Another explanation has militants choosing aid institutions as soft targets, for the purpose of sparking conflict or general disorder. Others refute the importance of the targeting issue, insisting that the majority of violent incidents are crimes of opportunity having nothing whatever to do with politics of humanitarian action and everything to do with its material resources. Clearly, attribution of increased risk solely to GWOT line-blurring or the sitting duck syndrome does not capture the full complexity of the situation, and humanitarian organizations need to arm themselves with more sophisticated analysis in order to be credible — another indication of the need for a thorough and accurate accounting.

Some in the humanitarian community have also posited a growing environment of impunity, spurred by such events as abuses of prisoners under GWOT, which has had the effect of easing pressures on allies and foes alike to respect internationally sanctioned principles of humane treatment and human rights (RedR, 2003). It is certainly the case that when it comes to the killing of aid workers, governments rarely resolve or even adequately investigate crimes against aid workers. One source quotes a figure of only 22 out of 214 cases of violent deaths of UN staffers having been solved (Lake, 2002).

It is possible that a longer-range analysis of casualty statistics may determine that 9/11 and the advent of GWOT did not represent the watershed in humanitarian security that they might now seem to be. Looking back at prior security incidents one sees a tendency to treat each horrific act of violence against aid workers as a turning point. Before the

UN and ICRC bombings in Baghdad and the upsurge of violence against international targets in Afghanistan, there was the brutal murder of UNHCR staff in West Timor rampages in September 2000. And before that, December 1996 saw the execution-style murders of ICRC workers as they slept in their residence in Chechnya. All of these had the effect of motivating the humanitarian community to take action to enhance security measures, and all denoted problems in perceptions, a lack of trust, and a basic disconnect or distancing between the aid organizations and the community they served. What 9/11 seems to have done, in countries of counter-terror concern in particular, is increase that distance. NGOs, traditionally the members of the humanitarian community closest to the ground, have decried the fact that in these places they do not know who to talk to anymore — whereas before, if they could not speak directly to the armed parties, they could at least communicate through intermediaries. In Iraq and parts of Afghanistan, they acknowledge, there is little understanding even of who the key players are.

## **Conclusions**

Given the prodigious efforts and analysis devoted to humanitarianism over the past 15 years, it seems implausible that issues of principled programming, civil–military relations and operational security should be thornier and more elusive than ever before. Yet here we are. Whether the challenges involve operational effectiveness, deeply held principles, or matters of life and limb, humanitarian actors cannot hope to resolve these dilemmas in isolation. Rather, solutions will require the will and action of political and military actors as well as members of the development sphere.

As regards the issues examined in the paper, the following are seen as areas for consideration and potential action:

### *Preserving space for neutral humanitarian action, unfettered but narrowly defined*

Coherent approaches and integrated missions may well be the future of donor and United Nations engagement in complex emergencies or transitions, but it must not come at the costs to humanitarian response. In instances of acute crisis or humanitarian need, humanitarian actors need scope to save lives and reduce suffering without regard to political agendas. Political actors should therefore be held to the credo of “integration when possible, independence when necessary.” This point was made in the Under Secretary General Jan Egeland’s commissioned study of humanitarian capacity known as the “Humanitarian Response Review,” which recommended further that “the DSRSG for Humanitarian Affairs and Development be empowered to ensure that humanitarian space is preserved and the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality are consistently upheld” (Adinolfi *et al.*, 2005, p. 11).



For their part, humanitarian and multi-mandated actors need to be much more rigorous in developing (and consistent in implementing) benchmarks for programming and positioning in situations of transition, determining if and when to shift focus and partners towards longer-term stabilization and recovery objectives.

Humanitarian actors would also do well to jointly develop an agreed definition of what constitutes humanitarian action. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC)'s current efforts to define humanitarian action for the purposes of transparency and harmonization in reporting might serve as a useful starting point for building consensus. Both relief and development actors must resist the tendency to define all aid efforts as emergency response, as any short-term funding advantages will probably give way to long-term donor fatigue.

Further toward this end, governments and humanitarian actors will need to revive and refocus civilian–military dialog. In so far as failed state scenarios have now garnered the attention of the developed world for security reasons, civil–military relations, particularly as regards humanitarian actors, will come to the fore. Recent efforts at finding common ground between military and humanitarian actors and reinforcing the concept of neutral humanitarian space have thus far been sporadic and fragmented.

### *Rethinking security*

*Acknowledging and accepting risk in the humanitarian sphere.* Humanitarian action in disasters and conflict scenarios inherently involves greater risk to personnel than most development or diplomatic activities. Applying universal security protocols to all UN personnel will effectively strip UN humanitarian agencies of their operationality, and place them in a role more akin to donors or contracting entities. If UN humanitarian actors choose to retain access and an operational role, graduated security structures will need to be developed, both within agencies and for the UN system as a whole. UN agencies, like NGOs, would then be able to determine their own risk threshold, providing an 'informed consent' mechanism is established for personnel, who would receive the additional training, equipment, and insurance provisions required for employment at the higher risk levels.

*Greater security through indigenization of aid?* Although it is as old as any debate in humanitarianism, the question of indigenization of humanitarian response remains a perennial challenge. Ironically, there may be more incentive to address this issue today, due to the changing security dynamics, than ever before. There is a belief that the security of aid efforts is best achieved through the acceptance of the aiding entity by the local community. This combined with the uncomfortable phenomenon of western-based agencies performing 'aid by remote control' in insecure areas reinforces the need to give local organizations greater ownership and control of humanitarian assistance operations. It has been raised in

humanitarian fora with new urgency of late, but beyond touting the familiar mantra of 'capacity building', the humanitarian community has expended very little toward developing indigenous response capacity. Long-term organizational mentoring partnerships between international and national/local entities could be established, for example, that go beyond the scope of any single project but rather encompass multiple activities over a period of years, and result in strong indigenous organizations that have the capacities to launch independent responses to emergencies in their own countries and regions (including access to crucial funding channels to international donors.) In the case of post-9/11 security scenarios where humanitarian response is needed and acceptance strategies do not work for international organizations, there can be no excuse not to take every effort to imbue local and regional actors with the resources and capacities they need to successfully go it alone.

## Notes

- 1 By way of example, in post-war Iraq the US government has awarded \$78 million in grants to UN agencies and NGOs, compared with \$3.4 billion awarded in contracts to private firms (<http://www.usaid.gov/iraq/activities.html#contracts>).
- 2 O'Brien makes his argument based on field experience in Afghanistan: "A second reason for adopting new humanitarianism is that the nature of NGO work in Afghanistan is changing, and demands political acumen. Emergency response is being replaced by peace strengthening as a donor priority. Donors need organizations with ground presence to mobilize war-weary communities to resist the short-term false promises of warlords. More than ever, NGOs need to understand local politics and the actors that would happily manipulate or threaten them to achieve economic or military gain" (O'Brien, 2004a, p. 200-201).
- 3 From Annan (1997, para. 117), who also states "An integrated approach is particularly important in the field, where a lack of cohesion or differences among UN entities can be exploited by the parties ... In countries where large where large multi-disciplinary field operations are in place, the SRSR will ensure that the efforts of the different components of the system are mutually reinforcing."
- 4 Eide, E., Kaspersen, A., Kent, R., and von Hippel, K. (2005) *Report on Integrated Missions* Independent Study for the expanded UN ECHA care group. United Nations, New York, p. 44.
- 5 Under the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative launched in Stockholm in 2003, efforts have begun among donors and other stakeholders to reach a common definition of humanitarian action for the immediate purpose of tracking and reporting aid flows within the OECD/DAC. While this signals a positive shift in policy approaches, there are a number of challenges in measuring the realization of this goal. See Harmer *et al.* (2004).
- 6 'Annan calls for overhaul in security structure to better protect UN personnel,' UN News Service, 11 October 2004, [www.reliefweb.int](http://www.reliefweb.int).
- 7 This article uses voluntarily supplied information found in the 14 years between 1985 and 1998, a total of 375 deaths among civilian staffers of the United Nations and NGOs — a figure that includes UN peacekeepers, vehicle accidents and unspecified accidental deaths.
- 8 Data drawn from previous compilations, including Dennis King (2004), supplemented by ReliefWeb postings and other media sources. These preliminary figures do not include accidental deaths or injuries, or incidents involving personnel associated with

de-mining, election monitoring or voter registration, private contracting for reconstruction, or peacekeeping operations.

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