



VOICE (*Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies*) is a network representing some 84 European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwide. Seeking to involve its members in information, training, advocacy and lobbying, VOICE is the main NGO interlocutor with the EU on emergency aid, relief, rehabilitation and disaster preparedness and promotes the values of humanitarian NGOs.

## **VOICE position on civil-military relations in humanitarian action**

### **Recommendations to the European Union**

- May 2009 -

VOICE (*Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies*) is a network representing 85 European NGOs active in humanitarian aid worldwide. **VOICE Working Group on EU civil-military relations** involves leading humanitarian NGOs among DG ECHO partners from across the European Union. The following recommendations are based on their collective work.

Relations between civilian and military/combatants constitute a critical issue to humanitarian NGOs. Military/combatants and humanitarian actors often share operating environments, like in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Central African Republic, and so forth. Humanitarian NGOs are confronted by manifold challenges in their relations with different military/combatant actors, including international peacekeeping forces, state and non-state armed forces, armed groups and combatants. Combining and/or confusing the mandates of humanitarian and military/combatants, may have severe consequences, and considerably hinder access to vulnerable and/or remote populations in conflict settings.

Humanitarian NGOs in VOICE stress the importance of community-based strategies and working with local partners to increase acceptance by local population. Humanitarian workers and programmes may be placed at risk if local populations or warring parties perceive ties between military and/or combatants with humanitarian workers.

In a crisis/disaster response the independence and civilian nature of humanitarian assistance must be emphasised at all times. In accordance with international legal instruments and guidelines<sup>1</sup>, humanitarian actors are to maintain a clear distinction from military/combatant actors in their identities and actions as per their recognised roles and mandates.

The European Union re-emphasised the commitment to principled humanitarian action in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid (December 2007). VOICE calls for the implementation of this joint policy statement by European Commission, European Parliament, and the 27 EU Member States in order to ensure the access and space for independent humanitarian action. Given this commitment by the European Commission and the Member States, VOICE calls for the following:

#### **Policy recommendations:**

##### **The nature of humanitarian aid**

- Humanitarian action has no other objective than to save lives and to relieve and prevent human suffering. Thus, the principles and recommendations set out in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid must be implemented, commonly understood and promoted by NGOs and politicians, and must be respected by military/combatants.
- Humanitarian action is not an instrument of conflict resolution or crisis management or a tool for fighting terrorism as established clearly in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid.
- Humanitarian assistance is always provided on the basis of the needs of those affected by any emergency, taking into account the local capacity already in place to meet those needs.
- Relief assistance provided by military/combatants cannot be defined as “humanitarian action” as military/combatants by definition are not neutral and are often political instruments.

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<sup>1</sup> Refugee Conventions, International Humanitarian Law, human rights laws, MCDA and Oslo Guidelines, IASC reference paper on Civil-military relationship in complex emergencies, and SCHR position paper on Humanitarian-military relations in the provision of humanitarian assistance

### **Respect for humanitarian principles**

- EU member states with military forces operating in humanitarian environments must ensure that it is understood that the foundation of all humanitarian action is to respect the principles of humanity, neutrality, independence and impartiality in all circumstances.
- Humanitarian assistance is aimed at alleviating human suffering; it is given in an impartial manner without regard to gender, race, religion, or political affiliation. Therefore, the involvement of the military (which is by definition the extension of governmental and political priorities) in a relief operation represents a danger, as political or military objectives could influence how humanitarian needs are prioritised, programmed, delivered and met, as well as how those relief operations are received by beneficiaries.
- Humanitarian coordination must remain under civilian auspices and is aimed at achieving humanitarian objectives for vulnerable populations.

### **Respect of roles and mandates**

- All actors in conflict situations must respect International Humanitarian Law.
- The independence of political and military decision-making and humanitarian action must be preserved at all times both at the operational and policy levels.
- Politicians and military/combatants must comply with the existing international rules and regulations and respect that humanitarian action cannot be part of a military or politically-motivated operation.
- In natural disaster settings, the use of military assets as a last resort for humanitarian operations must be under civilian control, thus avoiding any association between humanitarian aid and a military or political objective which could hinder the overall humanitarian efforts.

### **Operational recommendations**

- Military personnel and assets must be clearly identified and distinguishable as such. Humanitarian aid workers and their assets must also be clearly visible and distinguishable as such. This is to avoid the risk of confusion that may endanger the local population and humanitarian actors.
- The use of armed escorts in the humanitarian action is to be avoided. Humanitarian aid organisations must refuse to transport military personnel or weapons. Transportation for medical purposes remains the sole exception.
- Military/combatants and humanitarian aid organisations are to ensure that the humanitarian service locations, including medical sites and refugee and internally displaced persons camps, remain non-military sanctuaries.
- Humanitarian aid workers should not undergo integrated missions and/or projects with military/combatants under any circumstances. Conversely, military/combatants, the European Commission and Member States of the European Union should not pressure humanitarian actors and organisations to enter these types of integrated missions and/or projects.
- Humanitarian aid organisations should reject any position of subordination to the authority of military/combatants. Humanitarian aid organisations must not implement tasks on behalf of the military nor represent or implement their policies. Military/combatants, the European Commission and Member States of the European Union should never require humanitarian actors and organisations to be subordinate to military/combatant structures.
- Coordination between humanitarian actors and military/combatants should be avoided. Dialogue may be needed at the operational level, strictly provided that it poses no security issue, particularly for beneficiaries and local partners, and that it is necessary to save lives, protect and promote humanitarian principles, avoid competition and minimise inconsistency.