

**FOCUS:**  
Humanitarian NGOs  
in a changing world

*From the VOICE Secretariat*

Today, humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have to work in an increasingly complex and (politically) changing environment. Complex emergencies, NGO perception by local populations, security and legal constraints, humanitarian reforms, relations with the military, instrumentalisation of aid, to mention but a few, are all aspects that constitute continuous challenges to humanitarian NGOs.

In such conditions, European humanitarian NGOs need to be flexible, whilst simultaneously respecting the humanitarian principles and implementing life-saving missions. This edition of VOICE OUT LOUD focuses on the various dilemmas stemming from this context. It introduces the issue of how professional NGOs address the complex environment they work in today and which constantly challenges their mandate.

Other humanitarian issues are also addressed, such as the catastrophic health situation in the DR Congo and the EU decision to suspend its direct aid to the Palestinian territories. Finally, the reader will find a short overview of some of the main activities of the VOICE network over the last months.

VOICE OUT LOUD is intended to contribute to the understanding of the professional reality of humanitarian NGOs. It is addressed to the European decision makers and other stakeholders of the humanitarian community, while giving an insight into relevant humanitarian issues, relying upon the experience and input of VOICE members.

**VOICE**

VOICE stands for Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies. It is a network representing some 90 European non-governmental organisations (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 European Union on emergency aid, relief, rehabilitation and disaster preparedness. As a European network, it represents and promotes the values and specificities of humanitarian NGOs, in collaboration with other humanitarian actors. Based in Brussels, VOICE has been active since 1992.

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## ENTERING INTO DIALOGUE WITH ISLAMIC NGOs

### EDITORIAL

 **In the present context of the fight against international terrorism - and of the new "crusaders" seeking a "clash of civilisations" - a lack of dialogue between western and Islamic humanitarian NGOs could have a very negative impact, including at the political level.**

Up until now, there has been insufficient reflection on their relationship and, as a consequence, dialogue has been nearly non-existent. And yet, numbers and activities of Islamic NGOs are increasing. It is time for the western humanitarian world to actively reflect on its relationship with Islamic NGOs.

Here are some preliminary remarks which may lead to initiating this dialogue.


- Approaching Islamic NGOs must be done without preconception, whilst simultaneously remaining lucid and realist. These organisations are varied in their nature and objectives. Some are merely henchmen of Osama Bin Laden but many are sincerely motivated. These latter NGOs must be identified and dialogue must be engaged with them. For it is useless and dangerous to demonise them all. To do so would only provide an easy way out for Western NGOs to not reflect on this relationship.
- Like many western humanitarian Christian-based NGOs, Islamic NGOs are based on religious faith. The Islamic believer considers acts of solidarity as an obligation, and several texts within the Koran define these activities. Just as one should not mistrust Christian NGOs just because they are Christian, equally Islamic organisations should not suffer such a general prejudice. However, one condition must be made. Faith should only be the basis upon which an organisation's motivations are established, and should by no means be a pretext for discriminatory action whereby Islamic believers are the sole recipients of aid. From this point of view, it would be preferable that, following an initial dialogue, Islamic NGOs adhere to the Code of Conduct.
- Western NGOs have to actively work on their positions and statements, so as to ensure that these do not provide opportunities for accusation by the Muslim community, which has frequently presented the organisations as ideologically tainted with secular values and materialism.
- Western military humanitarian actors are an obstacle to this dialogue, as they are perceived by many Muslim believers as aggressors against their community ("ummah").

These remarks can serve as a first stimulation in order to start engaging without any further delay in the dialogue with the Islamic NGOs.

**Paul Grossrieder**  
President of VOICE

## HOW TO PRESERVE HUMANITARIAN NGOs' IDENTITY IN COMPLEX CRISES?

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 **Complexity and instability of new conflict areas, increased visibility of confessional NGOs, military-humanitarian confusion, and more criticism from our own societies towards humanitarian action, recently forced NGOs and particularly international NGOs to think deeply about the way they are perceived and the principles they are driven by.**

Humanitarian NGOs need to preserve their specific identity when working in a complex context. Let us look at Sudan. Humanitarian intervention in this country has a long history and cannot be seen as if it were totally disconnected from the complex political situation that fuels its conflict situation.

In this very huge and very complex country, war between the northern and southern parts just ended in January 2005, after more than 20 years of a bloody conflict. With the signature of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in January 2005, it became more obvious to the international community that Sudan's conflicts were not strangers one to another. If the issues raised by successive rebel groups were not addressed at once as countrywide issues, new conflicts could burst out like the yet unsolved Darfur crisis.

Today, the Darfur region, in West Sudan, hosts one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. Since February 2003, the conflict in Darfur has claimed at least 300,000 lives, affected 3.5 million people and more than 2 million people have been displaced, representing one third of the Darfuri population. Fragmentation of the conflict and atomisation of Sudanese local powers, notably amongst the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA) and Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), imposed harsh security constraints to humanitarian actors in the field. It also impedes proper humanitarian access to neglected, and mostly rural, populations. For several weeks now, violence has been escalating across Darfur, touching the entire region and its people. The division amongst the region's key rebel alliances, the surfacing of community and intertribal tensions, and the recent breach of the border with Chad have had disastrous consequences for internally displaced persons (IDPs), exposing them directly to conflict and depriving them of humanitarian aid.

In order to provide an adequate response to the humanitarian needs of the Sudanese population and to achieve particularly the goal of impartiality, Médecins Du Monde (MDM) has chosen to elaborate its various interventions into a global Sudan project. A flexible geopolitical context analysis and an approach focused on promoting the right to access to healthcare are the two major guidelines for shaping MDM medical intervention in Sudan.

 **IMPARTIALITY IN PRACTICE**

In volatile contexts such as Sudan, the way by which NGOs are delivering assistance can be rapidly perceived as a partisan manoeuvre. Impartiality implies to provide assistance where needs are, independently from any other consideration. As do independence and universality, impartiality belongs to the fundamental principles of humanitarian action. It means that assistance is only provided on the basis of the greatest needs. However, a pertinent understanding of the surrounding environment is also needed, rendering necessary a constant contextual analysis.

In Sudan, MDM works with Muslim populations in Darfur and as well as with Christian populations in South Sudan. This improves MDM's understanding of Sudan's medical and political context, but also allows MDM to take advantage of its experience in Darfur when working in the Southern States (and vice versa) towards a more thematic program building approach. However, explanation of our programs to increase our acceptance is also very important because an imbalance (or at least its perception) in our programs could result in very deleterious effects on the field. We must keep in mind that perception can represent either an objective parameter (from NGOs' point of view), or a subjective parameter (from the beneficiaries' point of view).

MDM resumed its operations in Sudan in 2003. First established in Malakal, capital of Upper Nile State in Southern Sudan, MDM is now also present in South Darfur since July 2004, setting up a primary health care centre in Kalma camp, the largest camp of Darfur, with approximately 100,000 IDPs living there in harsh conditions. During 2005, the combined efforts of the local and international organisations present at the camp stabilised the sanitary conditions, even if malnutrition amongst children under five years still persists.

Impartiality can sometimes be difficult to reach because of field constraints. For example, implementation of mobile clinics in Darfur is a risky and difficult task, particularly if one of the goals is to work in "patchy" areas, where governmental forces, various rebels' factions and Arab militias have overlapping territories. In any case, MDM has rolled out primary care services (with an expatriate team made up of a doctor, nurse and midwife, working in collaboration with medical Sudanese personnel) to remote areas in North Nyala, reaching the forgotten population of Thur, Nyama and Tarongtara in the Jebel Mara. The work will serve around 40,000 people, both residents and displaced people from varied ethnic backgrounds, nomadic and settled.

*'Impartiality can sometimes be difficult to reach because of field constraints.'*

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 SECURITY IN COMPLEX CRISIS

Impartiality does not mean neutrality, both in terms of advocacy and testimony. In Sudan, and particularly in Darfur, MDM intends to be present where medical needs are, but does condemn massive exactions and violations of International Humanitarian Law perpetrated in this area. Indeed, insecurity inside, but mostly around, camps represents now a constant threat for populations. The most vulnerable displaced people, notably women, are faced not only with ongoing instability and little hope of returning home, but often find themselves victims of violence. Women victims of violence, and notably those raped during the Janjaweed's attacks, suffer widely from physical and psychological secondary effects.

Security constitutes usually a great concern for humanitarian actors, particularly in "grey areas", because conflict-induced casualties are often associated with their temporary or definitive withdrawal from the field. Therefore, security constraints should not be considered only as an operational problem. It represents also both a sociological and political issue for each NGO on the field, addressing the question of an independent humanitarian action, and how its own identity is perceived by other actors (local and national powers, civil populations, armed groups, other NGOs).

From Sudan to Colombia, from DR Congo to Chechnya, millions of people are still killed, wounded, raped and forced to flee violence. For these IDPs and refugees, protection stakes are huge, particularly in forgotten crises. Often in primary and direct contact with these people, both victims and witnesses of war crimes or crimes against humanity, medical NGOs face a very sensitive dilemma. Indeed, how to conciliate humanitarian teams' safety on the field with a protection strategy for these vulnerable populations, without promoting impunity? These are major ethical and operational issues we urgently need to explore more in depth.

The concept of "security" for NGOs in complex crises needs a comprehensive approach. It could be divided into terms of perception, protection, acceptance with a stronger involvement of local population, dynamic contextualization of programs, constant vigilance, and adaptability, in order to be fully integrated to the NGO's identity. Our strategy in MDM would then be more to promote the relationship with the "other", and avoiding, as much as possible, normative strategies. In this complex humanitarian field with many and varied actors, the "security" stake has a direct link to our ability to keep an independent humanitarian space, a medical action close to the field, and a preserved will to testimony.

 THE REDUCTION OF HUMANITARIAN SPACE

A fact usually described in many areas of complex crisis, and particularly in Darfur, is the constant reduction of humanitarian space. This decrease can be seen as the result, whether intentional or not, of combined factors. Firstly, the "Organization of Humanitarian and Voluntary Work Act 2006", adopted recently by the government of Sudan (GoS), restricts significantly NGOs' ability to freely choose their personnel, subordinating this choice to the HAC (Humanitarian Affairs Commission)'s will. Secondly, as threats and attacks by armed groups (governmental or not) significantly increased around refugees and IDPs camps and in remote areas these last months, local populations and NGOs have had to limit, for evident security constraints, their moves. Lastly, announced funding shortfalls by most UN agencies, combined with some major donors' will to cut by half their funding to national and international NGOs, could have, indeed, a disastrous impact. Leading to increased displacements of people towards already overcrowded IDPs camps, it would also worsen the humanitarian situation of rural populations in Darfur, which are already largely forgotten.

Darfur's near future seems to be closely linked to the international community's will and ability to overcome internal struggles in rebel movements, to tackle at an appropriate level the humanitarian needs of populations and to fight the impunity and the unaccountability of the government of Omar El-Beshir for its continuous and deadly support to the Janjaweed's militia.

Implementation of impartiality in humanitarian programs is sometimes difficult to reach, particularly during complex crises and emergencies, where many actors are present and populations often forgotten. Pragmatism is necessary to ensure security on the field but our actions should also be driven by a proper assessment of the medical needs and by a comprehensive understanding of the environment.

Medical assistance and protection of vulnerable populations are MDM's two main objectives, giving a strong legitimacy to our testimony, advocacy and lobbying. To preserve their identity in front of complex and moving environments, NGOs, and particularly medical NGOs, should be able to define precisely their own values but also to be, operationally speaking, very flexible. Through its presence in Sudan, and particularly in remote places, MDM intends to put into concrete action what its slogan proclaims: "We care for those people who the world is forgetting bit by bit".


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*'To preserve their identity in front of complex and moving environments, NGOs should be able to define precisely their own values (...)'*



## PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF NGOs: WHEN YOU REPRESENT THE ENEMY

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 It was indeed a wake-up call for DanChurchAid (DCA), a Danish faith-based NGO, when the Cartoon Crisis erupted. DCA has long-term experience in working with the volatile situation in the Middle East - and with crises such as Darfur, Kosovo and Rwanda. But you are not necessarily credited on merit when angry mobs attack or burn down offices -or threaten your employees.

On February 5<sup>th</sup> 2006, DCA wrote to its partners all over the world that "we believe that freedom of expression must be handled with responsibility and respect for other people's feelings". DCA underlined that freedom of expression is a basic right of the Danish Constitution. But that does not mean that one has to agree with everything that is published or said or aired. DCA expressed its deep regret that Muslims around the world have been hurt by the drawings printed in the newspaper: "We understand why such drawings are considered offensive and find the original idea of the newspaper to produce them an unwise and unnecessary action, which could only contribute to further polarisation in our country and internationally."

 CRISIS SOLVING IS MORE THAN SECURITY

Still, this does not prevent mobs from attacking offices or cars marked with the DCA logo. It does not guarantee the safety of our volunteers accompanying life-saving ambulances on the West Bank. It does not ensure that aid workers helping the victims of the earthquake in Pakistan will not receive death threats or be forced into temporary relocations.

During the most intense periods last February, DCA had daily reports on security for staff all over the world. A Security Task Force was established at DCA headquarters, receiving daily reports from staff abroad. Stationing of staff in Sudan was postponed and unfortunately a team of volunteers to Palestine had to be called off.

But a crisis like the Cartoon Crisis cannot be dealt with as merely a matter of security. The main emphasis has to be put on local problem solving. However, in addition to the length of time it takes for such local problem solving to take place, there is also the fact that extremists (on both sides) are utilizing the conflict for their own political and divisive purposes. In this context, NGOs simply do not get a chance to communicate or dialogue with these extreme forces. Taking these elements into account, it would be very difficult for a new NGO to manoeuvre in a highly inflammable environment like the present one. It would not have the alliances, the long-term partners, the credibility and the record to make sure that its message comes across to the right audience.

 CARICATURES IN DENMARK AND ABROAD

DCA has a very good relationship with the Danish Pakistani community in Denmark. One example was a joint fund-raising campaign in October and November 2005 for the victims of the earthquake. Here, people from the Danish-Pakistani community chose to support the DCA fund-raising, based on the general credibility of DCA in Denmark and of our partner in Pakistan, Church World Service.

When DCA carried out in March our annual fund-raising campaign organised by church parishes, several people from this community chose to go on the streets to fund-raise. Of course, we did our best to make sure that this event and the fund-raisers were broadcast on Danish TV to convey this message of peaceful respect and humanitarianism. Parts of the Danish media had conveyed a very negative and one-sided image of Danish Muslims, in fact like a caricature portraying Muslims as backward, belligerent and unfit for modern society!

It was important for DCA to do advocacy on their behalf in relation to Danish society. In this context, we were also working to defuse the conflict considering that the media campaign had an impact on the picture of Denmark that Danish Muslims were communicating back to relatives in their countries of origin.

DCA was also instrumental in promoting dialogue and debate on Palestinian TV, facilitating a prime time debate with Danish representatives of civil society. For more than 50 years, DCA has been in dialogue and co-operation with Palestinian Christians and civil society. Therefore, the obvious thing to do was to continue this dialogue and even strengthen it at this moment of time.

We are aware that such an effort will not change things and perceptions from day-to-day. But it is vital to supply the information that will enable mainstream and moderate forces to go against extremist positions.

The suggestions and input of our Palestinian partners into this dialogue are of course vital. But that goes for Denmark as well as for Palestine. We could envisage dialogue activities in Palestine as well as in Denmark. In both contexts, there is a need for dialogue that can promote understanding, tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

The cartoon crisis is a very different one as it originates from events in Europe - and not from reality on the ground in a developing country. This means that we are not only trying to calm down and marginalize radical elements abroad but also in Denmark.

*'When public discourse is in the hands of demagogues, any organisation could risk being categorised solely by its national affiliation.'*

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*'The only way to move ahead within this muddled environment is to make sure that activities are deeply rooted within the local population.'*

 THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL PARTNERS

Compared to NGOs that are to a large extent self-implementing, DCA relies heavily on our local partners. In many contexts, you will not see the DCA logo very much - even in "high-profile" emergencies.

In Pakistan, however, we had to temporarily withdraw even our liaison officer, Usman Adam who is a Dane of Pakistani descent. "People came from the outside and tried to take advantage of the situation for political purposes," he said. "But the victims of the earthquake were very unhappy about this." Of course, the relief work has continued with local people, and Usman is returning to Pakistan once again as we write this.

A lesson that should be learnt from this crisis, however, is that NGOs are not necessarily attacked based on their own actions and merits. When public discourse is in the hands of demagogues, any organisation could risk being categorised solely by its national affiliation.

This means that NGOs are not necessarily seen as representatives of civil society and humanitarianism but rather as Danes (waging war in Iraq) or missionary Christians (converting souls in Pakistan) or as capitalists (smoothing the way ahead for corporate interest). The only way to move ahead within this muddled environment is to make sure that activities are deeply rooted within the local population.

 WHEN RELIGION BECOMES A TOOL FOR EXTREMISTS

In DCA's experience, religion is very often abused for political purposes; this goes for Kosovo and the wars of the Balkans, as well as for fundamentalist regimes, be they Christian or Muslim.

But here we had - right on our Danish doorstep - a heated debate about a series of cartoons. In autumn when the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten chose to publish the cartoons, many Danes saw them as a somewhat primitive and insensitive provocation. But still, as everybody knows, we live in a country where freedom of expression does not by law forbid the publication of such drawings. In addition, the separation of powers in Denmark also prevents the Prime Minister and the government from controlling the media.

Now, almost six months later, the debate is continuing. Some have tried to read the situation as an expression of the Samuel Huntington "Clash of Civilisations" paradigm. This is a useful concept for promoting confrontation, but not for dialogue and mutual understanding.

One of the very important issues has been to promote dialogue and an understanding of conflict that does not simply write off clashes of interest over oil, land or water as a "religious war". Where religious affiliations become decisive for conflicts, they are very often utilised by extremists in their bid for power.

Obviously, if you are a Palestinian Muslim trying to fend for your life in Gaza, you would not necessarily know the finer distinctions in Danish political life - that the publication of cartoons seen as ridiculing the Prophet is not an expression of official Danish politics and that many Christians in Denmark distance themselves from this kind of provocation.

 COOPERATING WITH THE 'UNKNOWN OTHER'

"Religious conflicts are a reality that societies all over the world have to live with," says Rifat Kassis, the international coordinator of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). Rifat Kassis has for a long time been a member of the Partner Core Group of DCA. And he has always been the first to point out that peace is essential to all religions. "Even if we focus on Christianity, we should not think that our religion is the only peaceful one," he said at the Fifth World Social Forum in Brazil. Kassis stressed that improved mutual understanding would prevent fear of the unknown, therefore contributing towards a culture of peace. In believing that the "unknown other" becomes the feared enemy, Kassis said, "If you don't know any Arabs, you could get the idea from certain media that every Arab is a terrorist."

At the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in February this year, Dr. Muzadi who is the President of the 40 million-strong Islamic organisation, Nahdat al-Ulama, sent a message of peace to the world's Christians. He underlined that conflict is merely benefiting extremist groups that are relatively small. But he also stressed the fact that "there must be some non-religious causes behind all this that have influenced religious communities".


The DCA General Secretary had the opportunity to discuss the Cartoon Crisis with Dr. Muzadi where we both stressed the need for dialogue. We hope this can be a first step towards calming down reactions around the world where they have spiralled out of control.

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## NGO IDENTITY AND INSTRUMENTALISATION OF HUMANITARIAN AID

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 Every humanitarian mission harbours the danger that aid workers will become instruments of non-humanitarian purposes, and that aid supplies will be misused to satisfy particular interests. Humanitarian actors are, of course, well aware of these dangers and make efforts to eliminate possibilities for misusing aid. But in many areas such misuse and instrumentalisation of aid is difficult to prevent - in donor countries as well as in crisis regions.

Northern Ethiopia - 1983-1985: Hundreds of thousands of people died in a disastrous famine. Contrary to initial assumptions, the shortage of food in this case was not the result of drought, failed harvests or agricultural mismanagement. It was the consequence as well as the aim of the cynical policies of those in power in Addis Ababa. In order to deprive their opponents of the North from their basis of existence, they pursued a "scorched earth" policy, using military force to produce a famine that would wear down the opposition and depopulate the areas they controlled. Hunger became a weapon of war. Even the international food aid provided in response to this emergency became an effective weapon and a tool in the government's political and military plans. "Food distribution centers became traps, attracting populations to a central location at which many were forcibly recruited into the army. Aid was the bait and the presence of international NGOs gave the program an element of legitimacy and security; some NGOs even assisted in the deportation process, espousing the government rationale about preventing future famines."<sup>1</sup>

The Ethiopian famine in the mid-80s - being probably one of the most striking examples - heads a list of examples showing how international aid organisations are misused to satisfy particular interests.

As a result of their public credibility and the attention they received in the media in the last decade, international humanitarian organisations continually face the risk of being misused as a source of legitimacy and justification for claims to power. Local rulers who become negotiating partners of humanitarian organisations owing to their military potential, their influence or their know-how, can make use of such contacts as a welcome platform to strengthen their leadership role, give their policies international publicity and demonstrate their claims to power.

Sometimes, emergency aid activities are used directly to attain political goals. In the Bosnian War, Serbian militias - by stepping up their attacks and preventing humanitarian aid in areas where Bosnian Muslims have long resided - presented humanitarian organisations with the choice of either withdrawing from that region and leaving people behind or evacuating them to a safer area designated for them in the plans drawn up by the militia. By sticking to their goal of saving lives,

pursuing their aim of alleviating suffering and being faithful to their vision and mission, those organisations who chose the second option became unwilling accomplices in the "ethnic cleansing" activities instigated by the Serbian political leaders.

Humanitarian organisations are used just as shamelessly by rulers who recklessly pursue their own political aims, for example by waging private wars, investing horrendous sums in expensive military technologies or languishing in luxury while ignoring the condition of the people they rule. Such leaders rely on international aid organisations to fill the gap. Those aid workers who put life-saving above all political considerations inevitably turn into stopgaps, eventually absolving these rulers of their responsibilities and paving the way for their resources to be further used for private fancies.

### THE ABUSE OF EMERGENCY AID

Every humanitarian mission harbours the danger of aid workers being used as instruments for non-humanitarian purposes. But let's not turn our focus only on the South. Instead of finger pointing southern leaders for abusing humanitarian aid and considering its instrumentalisation a mainly "southern phenomenon", it might be at least as useful to have a very close look on how emergency aid is used by political bodies in Europe for other than humanitarian purposes.

The credo according to which humanitarian aid has to be distributed only on the basis of need - a dogma for the overwhelming majority of humanitarian organisations - is increasingly being ignored by political leaders. The pursuit of "coherence" - blending political, military and humanitarian actions in order to increase the effectiveness of official foreign policy - has put humanitarian aid at risk. Seemingly unproblematic at first sight, this blending risks subordinating humanitarian issues to political, economic or military considerations, i.e. emergency aid will only be provided if certain conditions that serve the interest of the donor country in a given region are met. Thus humanitarian aid becomes a tool for rewarding favoured governments, "buying" political support, combating terrorism or stemming the tide of migration. Emergency aid risks losing its aura of impartiality; access to affected populations as well as security for aid workers and beneficiaries are at stake.

Humanitarian aid however is not only increasingly used as a tool, but also as a substitute for foreign policy. "The rich get diplomats, the poor aid workers"<sup>2</sup>. Especially in those regions of the world which the industrialized countries do not consider strategically important, emergency aid is often used as a substitute for political action. When the political will to intervene in a crisis region is lacking, humanitarian engagements are often a welcome cover that Western governments can use to conceal

*'The pursuit of "coherence" - blending political, military and humanitarian actions - has put humanitarian aid at risk.'*

1. Terry, Fiona, 2002: *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action. Ithaca, London. p. 48-49.*



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*‘Humanitarian engagements are often a welcome cover that Western governments can use to conceal their own inaction.’*

their own inaction and satisfy public expectations. At the time of the Bosnian War, western politicians chose the “humanitarian” exit to the political impasse. As political differences and military incapacities prevented European states to put an end to the killing and displacements in Bosnia, they decided to undertake relief activities, to care for the wounded, shelter the forcibly displaced and feed the hungry instead of ensuring security and putting an end to forced displacement.

Under some circumstances, emergency aid can also serve the economic interests of industrialized countries e.g. by being used to reduce agricultural surpluses and support domestic producers. Although the supplies needed in a crisis zone can often be obtained in the region itself, many state aid agencies prefer to purchase domestic surpluses and give them to aid organisations for distribution. Domestic producers are thus subsidized covertly in the name of humanitarianism while local producers are subject to the ensuing local price drop and unable to sell their products. Local economy is undermined; a passive mentality of acceptance is fostered.

Although many of these forms of instrumentalisation can be curbed, they cannot always be fully prevented. The resultant dilemma is obvious. Should humanitarian action be continued if it encourages irresponsible policies in the South and in the North or causes ongoing damage to local economies? By breaking off a humanitarian engagement, it is possible to prevent such forms of misuse - but at the cost of abandoning those in need.

Every humanitarian organisation has to find its own way of handling this quandary. Every organisation has to do its own examination of conscience and define how to deal with such challenges without betraying its identity.

 COPING WITH THE DILEMMA OF INSTRUMENTALISATION

In the publication “Humanitarian Challenges - The Political Dilemmas of Emergency Aid”<sup>3</sup>, Caritas Luxembourg and Caritas Switzerland define how they tackle this dilemma. Based on the central values of the Catholic social teaching - justice, human dignity, and solidarity - Caritas pursues three overall aims in its humanitarian engagement, i.e. the alleviation of suffering, the promotion of peace and justice and the facilitating of sustainable development. These aims are the normative foundation that guides the operational activities in the field. In order to make these abstract aims tangible, Caritas Luxembourg and Switzerland translate them into concrete guidelines, which are binding for their humanitarian activities and which ensure the continuity and the reliability that are essential to professional humanitarian work with a focus on values.

In the face of increased instrumentalisation of emergency aid, Caritas Luxembourg and

Switzerland commit themselves to pursuing only humanitarian aims in their engagement and to being accountable only to their beneficiaries, their donors and partners without serving non-humanitarian interests of third parties. In order to guarantee the independence of their emergency work, they make every effort to finance their engagements from as many different sources as possible. If there is a reason to believe that one of its programmes is used for non-humanitarian purposes, they take immediate steps to prevent further misuse. If grave forms of misuse persist, they commit themselves to suspend or break off their activities.

The Caritas Luxembourg and Caritas Switzerland staff is bound by these principles of action. However, the political, moral, and practical challenges in the humanitarian field cannot be met with simple, dogmatic application of standards. Continuity and adherence to principles in the humanitarian context cannot dissolve into blind conformity to principles. Being confronted by dilemmas such as the instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid, it is impossible to do justice to all the values and principles of the organisations simultaneously. Therefore, Caritas Luxembourg and Caritas Switzerland continually find themselves compelled to ignore the rules, precisely in order to live up to the meaning and the spirit of their own principles and values. Non-compliance with basic principles of action however is only reasonable, acceptable and legitimate if - relying on the principle of proportionality - a deviation from a guideline is necessary, likely to succeed and if it brings considerably greater benefits than harm. Every deviation from a basic principle has to be justified in writing, political difficult decisions are taken at the headquarters. Observance of principles of action and deviation from them are continually monitored by both organisations. The compilation of a catalogue of concrete principles of action - relating i.a. to the instrumentalisation of emergency aid - as well as the adoption of the principle of proportionality thus enables Caritas Luxembourg and Caritas Switzerland to have a clear-cut policy, continuity and reliability in their work without losing themselves in declarations of intent far away from the reality on the ground.

This is one possible way to cope with the dilemma of instrumentalisation and all those other challenges the changing working context has brought upon humanitarian workers in the past 15 years. There surely are other ways. It is up to every humanitarian organisation to take a stance according to its identity and convictions...and to call upon political leaders to respect those principles essential to any humanitarian engagement.

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[www.caritas.lu](http://www.caritas.lu)


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# HUMANITARIAN LEGITIMACY AND THE REALITIES ON THE GROUND OF COOPERATION WITH THE MILITARY

THE ISSUE - HUMANITARIAN NGOs IN A CHANGING WORLD

*“Humanitarian work” of the military is poles apart from the work of the NGOs, yet both are being done in the name of humanitarianism.’*

 In a natural, rapid onset disaster, where there is a huge humanitarian imperative, NGOs are more prepared to work with militaries in the relief effort than in complex emergencies where the role of the military may already be controversial. Militaries can play a crucial role as they have many logistic assets, are on constant standby ready to respond, have clear command and control procedures, which aids communication, and co-ordination. Deployment is constantly practised through exercises and training. But how does NGO cooperation with the military translate into practice when working on the ground?

After the devastating tsunami on 26<sup>th</sup> Dec 2004, some 290,000 people were dead or missing and over 1 million displaced across 12 countries (Forced Migration Review<sup>1</sup>). In response, 6.8\$ billion was pledged, and hundreds of national and international NGOs, many different United Nations agencies and military troops from 35 nations around the world sprung into action. OCHA's Civil Military Co-ordination Section estimates that 35 countries contributed over 35,000 troops to the disaster, 75 helicopters, 41 ships and 43 fixed-wing aircraft.

In the Maldives, one of the tsunami affected countries, following bilateral negotiations, the Maldivian Government was able to use the Pakistan military boat and helicopter (already in the capital, ready for an exercise) by the end of the first day. A reconnaissance trip established damage on nearby islands. The Bangladesh, Indian and US militaries arrived after similar negotiations. In the first weeks they carried out search and rescue, evacuation of some islands, distribution of food, water, some medical services and began the construction of the Internally Displaced People's (IDP) temporary shelters.

The Maldives military and government galvanised all help available to them, using both the UN and NGOs as well as the National Security Service to provide the logistics for the relief and rehabilitation. They also formed the National Disaster Management Centre, a focus for co-ordination. These structures, plus officials working around the clock, achieved a spectacular result - temporarily housing most of the displaced by May 2005. In this case, the role of the military was effective and clearly under instruction from the civilian government. The Maldives military then handed the long-term rehabilitation to the UN and NGOs having learnt “to leave while the audience is still clapping” - a strategy that worked well, raising the profile and importance of military assistance.

So was this a typical response to a big disaster? Well no. In Pakistan, after the earthquake in October 2005, the authoritarian military state controlled the relief and recovery, using no civilian personnel in its Federal Relief Committee, to oversee the relief process, frustrating national and

international NGOs alike. According to ICG<sup>2</sup>, the Pakistani military in the first few days acted more as if it was at war than in a disaster, worrying about military casualties before civilians and securing the Line of Control with India. Military were dressed in fatigues with weapons, rather than equipped with spades to help dig out survivors.

In Iraq in 2003, another recent, but this time man-made disaster, the UN and NGOs flooded into the country. Soon after came the bombing of the UN building - and the subsequent withdrawal of the UN and NGOs. The Military (under the Oslo and MCDA Guidelines<sup>3</sup>) are permitted to play a role in the delivery of relief, but only as a last resort. As the situation was deemed too insecure, increasingly the army has become both the military force and the “humanitarians” to deliver community programmes. The Iraqi government is argued to be unable to look after its own citizens and the mandate of the international military is de facto extended and strengthened.

However, this situation of “last resort” has now lasted for over two years. Is this the way future wars will be fought? Are the military learning skills for new wars and “peace building” activities afterwards? Will this leave NGOs without a role in those environments where security threats are very real for NGO staff? Or have the military understood the theory of Civil Military Cooperation (CIMIC<sup>4</sup>) and understood that there can never be true community consultation and an end to conflict as long as the UN and NGOs are kept out, prolonging the war in Iraq even longer? Are humanitarian NGOs prepared to work in these environments - even if it might involve a re-visiting of the NGO principles, or working with armed escorts?

## THE (CHANGING) NATURES OF NGOs AND THE MILITARY

Responses of the military and NGOs differ according to the circumstances. Has it always been this way? NGOs, international organisations and agencies have traditionally been the sole providers of humanitarian aid. The Red Cross and Red Crescent movement founded 137 years ago, was the first humanitarian organisation. Henry Dunant, the founder, created the Geneva Conventions to create a distinction between non-combatants (civilians, sick and wounded and prisoners) and combatants. Humanitarians act using the principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality.

NGOs are legally recognised in Art.71 of the UN Charter. NGO staff are also recognised as protected persons in an armed conflict and work within International Humanitarian Law, Refugee and Human Rights Law. The NGOs work with the poorest people, assessing and helping the local population, according to need. Delivery of aid is seen as a right and access to reach people in need is negotiable.

Over the years, NGOs have also developed many standards in aid, demonstrating the NGOs' level of

1. FMR Special Issue, July 2005.

2. International Crisis Group Asia Briefing 46 - Pakistan: political impact of the earthquake. 15th March 2006.

3. The Oslo Guidelines address the use of military and civil defence assets (MCDA) in disaster relief following natural, technological and environmental emergencies in times of peace. The MCDA Guidelines concern the support to UN humanitarian activities in complex emergencies.

4. Civil-military Cooperation are all actions and measures that concern the organized relationship between the military and civilian entities and individuals.

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awareness and increasing levels of professionalism. Methodology is based on participation of communities affected; empowerment and the idea of "do no harm". NGOs are audited, and evaluated. They are accountable to their organisations, their donors and most importantly the beneficiaries who receive aid.

The military on the other hand have traditionally been used to fight other armies, which were clearly identified through their uniforms as military forces on the battlefields. Civilians were often able to escape from the terror. However, the warfare being played out today, between the US (and its supporters) in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan is fought more usually against non-state militias who move amongst the population usually without any particular uniform. Fighting, bombings, shootings is often amid the local population (completely contradictory to Dunant's dream). Holy sites, houses, hospitals, embassies, could be bombed. The military, in order to win these new battles, have changed their battlefield tactics, to fit. The British military in Iraq walk the streets in small patrols, talking to the local populations, to build up trust. They have also become "humanitarians" giving out relief - but for very different reasons than the NGOs.

The military methodology is aimed at winning "hearts and minds" of the local population. The desire for receiving information, vital for military operations, is created through giving of "humanitarian aid". The coercion of a community is achieved through awarding "good communities" with the construction of schools, clinics and distribution of footballs. This aid giving and liaison with the community helps to act as a morale booster for troops - and also, helps with their own force protection. These humanitarian tasks maybe one of many tasks alongside security patrols and reconnaissance missions.

 CIVIL-MILITARY COOPERATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

The military are present in a conflict zone because of their government's policies. Legitimacy is given to the military through their mandate from their national parliament or the UN, which outline political objectives to be achieved.

The British military has developed (and increasingly other militaries too) a Civil- Military Co-operation (CIMIC) doctrine<sup>5</sup>, guiding military behaviour.


CIMIC is a key part of the military strategy. The military do not base their CIMIC work on the needs of the community; they do not comply with humanitarian standards set down by NGOs and cannot work with humanitarian values of impartiality and neutrality. This "humanitarian work" of the military is poles apart from the work of the NGOs, yet both are being done in the name of humanitarianism.

The blurring of roles and encroachment of the

military into the humanitarian space (the traditional area of the NGOs) has become an annoyance to many staff within NGOs. NGOs have become sensitive due to politicisation of aid and are aware of the diversion of humanitarian funding from donors, the huge cost of involving forces (usually much more expensive than NGOs) and the appropriateness of military. As a result ,many NGOs have tried to distance themselves from the military.

However, a shakedown has been achieved, with some unofficial lines of co-operation. Through the development of CIMIC doctrine, NGOs have been increasingly left to deliver humanitarian aid and the military have taken the larger logistical projects such as road building projects, bridge building, and security, tasks that NGOs do not do, but which are often much needed. Peace negotiations (for example Aceh and Sri Lanka after the tsunami), security and International Humanitarian Law have all become areas of middle ground and potential possibilities for all actors. Along with this has been the deployment of military and civilian OCHA CIMIC Liaison officers, which has given better chances of liaison, co-operation and communication between both groups.

SOME THOUGHTS

 When looking at this civil-military cooperation, here are some reflections for NGOs to consider:

- NGOs should ensure that they stay in the debates, continue to research and refine their policies and practices, to keep ahead of the game and ahead of the military.
- NGOs need to improve their co-ordination, building stronger alliances to have a stronger voice. Now that the NGOs are a multi million pound business, they most definitely have a powerful collective voice!
- NGOs need to develop their policy positions on working with or collaborating with the military. What do they think should be the role of the military? What is acceptable to the NGOs and what is not? They must provide their staff with clearer guidelines for interaction with the military.
- NGOs need to engage in the CIMIC concept.
- There is a need for NGOs to have a better understanding of the military, enhanced through training with key emergency personnel to ensure ways of working are appropriate and effective.
- NGOs may have to revisit the original Red Cross principles and see whether they are still as relevant in 2006 as when they were first developed. Do the principles still apply to the volatile environment in which the NGOs now work - or are they needed more than ever?

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*'The blurring of roles and encroachment of the military into the humanitarian space (...) has become an annoyance to many staff within NGOs.'*


5. Joint Doctrine and Concepts Centre developed the Joint Warfare Publication 3-50 in 2001.





## NGO IDENTITY AND THE UN HUMANITARIAN REFORM

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 **When Jan Egeland, the UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator, commissioned the Humanitarian Response Review (HRR) late 2004, it was as a result of the recognition that humanitarian response often does not meet the basic requirements of the affected populations timely and that the response can vary considerably from crisis to crisis. Published in August 2005, the HRR recommended the establishment of a "cluster approach" in certain sectors of the global humanitarian response to fill the gaps and ensure improved humanitarian response.**

By the end of 2005, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC<sup>1</sup>) had identified nine priority areas and assigned mainly UN agencies as 'cluster leads' with responsibilities for ensuring a timely, comprehensive and coordinated humanitarian response. UNHCR, for example, has taken on the responsibility for three clusters with particular relevance for internally displaced persons (IDPs): protection, camp coordination and management, and emergency shelter. Lead agencies do not have to implement all activities within their clusters themselves; they can call on other agencies and NGOs with the necessary expertise and resources. But as "provider of last resort" - a key innovation of the cluster approach - they are required to make every effort to ensure that there are no gaps and will be held accountable accordingly. The cluster approach is currently being tested in Liberia, the DR Congo, Uganda and Pakistan.

The cluster approach has been supported by most UN agencies, donor governments and NGOs. However, there have also been concerns, voiced in particular by the NGO consortia and other non-UN bodies represented in the IASC. While some see a stronger UN role in humanitarian coordination as a threat to their identity as independent organisations, others say the process of developing the cluster approach has been too hasty and UN-driven, thereby not allowing enough participation by non-UN actors, in particular southern-based NGOs. However, even though the process may not have been perfect, its outcome represents a real opportunity for finally inserting a level of predictability and accountability into the humanitarian response system.

### ROLE OF NGOS

NGOs should play an active role in the roll-out of the clusters. The cluster approach can only work properly if the clusters can draw on the expertise and capacity of the NGO community. In addition, the NGOs' watchdog role is needed to reinforce the new accountability mechanisms. It is only if NGOs participate constructively that they can influence the process so that it takes into account their concerns.

Active participation in the cluster process does not preclude NGOs from maintaining their specific identity and independence. Rather, becoming part of the cluster coordination and taking on responsibilities within an agreed cluster strategy opens up access to decision-making and may be the best way for NGOs to serve their beneficiaries in the most efficient and effective manner. Early experiences and reports from the field seem to indicate that NGOs can indeed shape their roles and the collective humanitarian strategy if they choose to participate actively. At least one UN agency, UNHCR, has strongly encouraged NGOs to engage in the cluster process, not just as implementers, but as genuine partners who can contribute to the development of plans and strategies and commit themselves to take on concrete responsibilities regarding the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

### CHALLENGES

For NGOs to be able to fully participate in the implementation of the cluster approach, the procedures and criteria for NGO involvement need to be clarified without delay. At the same time, NGOs will have to make an effort to familiarise themselves with the cluster set-up and identify opportunities for participation. Since most of the discussions so far have taken place at the headquarters level, there continues to be a lack of information, not only among field-based NGOs, but also among other actors. Awareness-raising about the functioning of the cluster approach will be necessary for NGOs to be able to navigate through the sometimes bewildering maze of clusters and working groups. International NGOs can play an important role in establishing bridges to national and local NGOs and other civil society actors, and facilitating their input or direct participation. A meeting between the heads of IASC member organisations and major NGOs scheduled for July is hoped to produce concrete ideas for enhanced and improved cooperation between NGOs and the UN.

The cluster approach represents a major reform of the humanitarian response system that, if implemented, has the potential to make a real difference for the millions of people in need of assistance and protection who have so far been neglected by the international community. Strong NGO involvement is needed to make the new approach work. If NGOs engage themselves actively and constructively, they will be considered as credible and equal partners. Only then will they be able to fully use their expertise and operational weight to influence decision-making processes in the best interest of their beneficiaries.

**Elisabeth Rasmussen**

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and Head of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre


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*'The cluster approach can only work properly if the clusters can draw on the expertise and capacity of the NGO community.'*

1. The IASC is the forum for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance, involving the key UN and non-UN humanitarian partners.

## WHEN LEGISLATIONS ON NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS HAMPER HUMANITARIAN AID

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 Last year, the European Commission - fearing that non governmental organisations (NGOs) could be misused "for terrorism financing" - has recommended the establishment of a Code of Conduct for NGOs and non-profit organisations. The objective of this Code would be to increase the transparency and accountability standards for the non-profit sector in the EU. This first attempt to regulate NGOs at an EU level is being done with the focus on security and terrorism prevention and this could have a very damaging effect on the entire humanitarian community.

*'Should [national] authorities hamper the delivery of humanitarian aid through legal or administrative restrictions, they would not (...) comply with their obligations under IHL.'*

Issuing legislation on (international) NGOs is a normal State prerogative but it can also be a controversial issue. When legal State control over NGOs is getting tighter, what impact does this have on the mandate and the commitment of humanitarian NGOs to provide assistance to population in need? In principle, the role of authorities to regulate the public space is legitimate. NGOs and non-profit organisations must operate within a legal framework, which sets the rules for their official registration, the general definition of their activities, the legality of their funding, and more generally the respect of the legislation in the country in which they are active.

However, legal texts may include such restricting provisions that they have serious repercussions on humanitarian aid activities, reducing them in such a way that NGOs have difficulties in accessing the population and in operating within the parameters of the humanitarian principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality.

In Nepal, the Code of Conduct for NGOs operating in the country has been strengthened by a Code of Conduct from the Social Welfare Council, issued in November 2005 with the intent of controlling human rights organisations. The Code directs NGOs to use their resources in the areas as specified by the government and makes it mandatory for them to make their assistance transparent. Last February, the Burmese government released a first set of "Cooperation Guidelines" for humanitarian operations. This document contains several serious restrictions on the way aid NGOs would be expected to operate. For instance, organisations would be forced to choose national staff from lists provided by Ministries and international field workers would have to be accompanied by a government official during in-country visits. The Russian Government has adopted a new Federal Law on Non-Governmental and Non-for-profit Organisations. Signed by President Putin early 2006, this law is to come into force in the spring. It contains overly complicated administrative and fiscal requests for the registration procedure of NGOs and will highly increase State control and surveillance over their activities.

The above countries are facing humanitarian crises. In Nepal, ten years of fighting between the Government forces and Maoist rebels have claimed more than 13,000 lives and forced thousands more to flee their homes. In Burma/Myanmar, in addition to hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons, poverty, lack of food, poor infrastructure and inadequate education are deeply affecting people's coping mechanisms, particularly in the border regions. In Russia, ten years after the first conflict in Chechnya started, living conditions in Northern Caucasus have deteriorated and despite official statements, Chechnya is still in a conflict situation.

In these contexts - as in many others, like in Sri Lanka where new regulations and procedures introduced since the tsunami have in fact created an additional layer of relationships between NGOs and the Government -, the delivery of humanitarian aid through international and local NGOs is crucial in order to respond to the basic needs of the civilian population.

According to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) (in particular Art. 27 of the fourth Geneva Convention), civilian population is entitled to humanitarian relief. The authorities of the countries in which operations are carried out are responsible for removing artificial administrative burden and ensuring the security of humanitarian staff. This is in line with the humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality, which base the provision of humanitarian assistance according to the Geneva Conventions. Should these authorities hamper the delivery of humanitarian aid through legal or administrative restrictions, they would not meet these requirements and thus not comply with their obligations under IHL. In December 2005, the Council of the European Union (EU) adopted EU Guidelines on promoting compliance with IHL, which aim to address IHL compliance by third States. It must be hoped that the EU will use the means of action included in the Guidelines.


Humanitarian aid NGOs are transparent in their activities and respect the legislation in the countries in which they operate. The core of their mandate is to help alleviate the suffering of populations by providing aid and Governmental actors have an obligation to provide access to their population. This obligation implies the lifting of any legal (and physical) restrictions which affect the working conditions for humanitarian organisations and the access to the needy civilian population.

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## ESSENTIAL PUBLIC SERVICES AT RISK IN THE WEST BANK AND GAZA

A VIEW ON THE EU

 **At the time of writing, the European Commission has suspended its direct aid to the Hamas-led Palestinian government. Although this suspension of EU payments should not directly affect humanitarian aid sent to non-governmental organisations or to UN relief agencies in the Palestinian territories, this decision is affecting the capacity of public sector institutions under the Palestinian Authority (PA) to deliver essential social services to vulnerable Palestinians. This may possibly increase humanitarian needs.**

Poor Palestinian families in the West Bank and particularly in Gaza, where 65% of the population lives under the poverty line, face severe economic hardship, having exhausted their range of coping strategies. Large numbers of these poor and vulnerable Palestinians are dependent on basic services provided by the PA including health, education and water.

While thousands are finding it increasingly difficult to meet their basic humanitarian needs, the PA responsible for delivering basic social services faces a fiscal crisis and possible economic ruin. The EU is the biggest donor to the PA, with Member States and the European Commission putting aside around €500 million a year since 2003. Thus its recent decision to halt aid is critical. The capacity of the PA public sector institutions to operate will seriously deteriorate and services will no doubt be affected. Unless these institutions find a rapid solution to their current financing crisis, thousands of Palestinians will struggle to meet their basic needs. A solution to this political impasse must be found as quickly as possible, so as to prevent an accelerated increase in the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian people.

In the ten years since the Oslo Agreement, the international community has invested heavily in establishing and building the capacity of public sector institutions capable of delivering essential social services to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. These investments have been largely successful in building a professional civil service capable of setting policies, managing and administering the delivery of essential services in sectors such as health, education and water. In the health sector, the Ministry of Health (MOH) - with the assistance of International donors, UN, NGOs and the World Bank - has emerged as the central authority in setting health policies and protocols, managing a national health insurance scheme, as well as financing and administering the delivery of a wide range of health services. These services include basic preventative services, vaccinations programs, pre- and postnatal care, as well as emergency services. The MOH also plays a central role in the governance and coordination of public

health activities with private providers, NGOs and international partners through their technical and administrative offices. Currently, no alternative viable institutional capacity exists. Without external financial and material assistance, as well as access to critical tax revenue, the MOH faces an uncertain future. It will be unable to pay health workers, obtain medicines and basic equipment critical to providing basic services. This has been implicitly recognized by the international community with respect to the trans-border health issue of Avian Flu, where an exception has been made in providing material support to and coordination with the MOH.

There has been some discussion around the UN and NGOs offering an alternative mechanism for the provision of essential services. This would be contrary to recent international aims and a sharp reversal of years of sustained institutional investment. The UN and NGOs can intervene in the case of a humanitarian imperative. However, they cannot fulfil the core public sector responsibilities of institutions such as the MOH by setting up parallel mechanisms. This would both undermine those institutions and bring them into direct conflict with the public sector. More practically, the UN and NGOs do not have the capacity to coordinate, manage and administer the wide range of health services in the context of West Bank and Gaza, only the capacity to complement and support existing public sector structures as in the case of a humanitarian crisis.

It is therefore imperative that all parties find a viable solution to the current fiscal and material crisis faced by Palestinian public sector institutions delivering basic social services. The many dedicated civil service professionals providing critical support to thousands of vulnerable Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza should be supported at this time. The risks of doing otherwise are to undermine the very institutions capable of meeting the basic needs of the Palestinian population and of alleviating their growing humanitarian needs at a time of increasing impoverishment.


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*'Unless  
[the Palestinian  
Authority finds]  
a rapid solution  
to [its] current  
financing crisis,  
thousands  
of Palestinians will  
struggle to meet  
their basic needs.'*

## THE CONGO CRISIS: THE FORGOTTEN EMERGENCY

### FIELD FOCUS

*'To date, the international community's commitment to ensuring the security of eastern Congo has however fallen well short of what is required.'*

 Last year, the UN stated that the Democratic Republic of Congo was surpassing Darfur as the world's deadliest emergency, while a Reuter's poll was naming the situation in the Congo the top "forgotten emergency". In spite of recurring alarming statements and reports, there is little global awareness of the magnitude of the Congo crisis and the response of the international community remains woefully out of proportion.

**"Africa's First World War"** - Raging since 1998, the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has involved seven nations. It began as a struggle for political power, later exacerbated by fights over natural resources. Ongoing armed conflict in the East has left the country in a state of humanitarian crisis with extremely limited infrastructure and means to support the very basic health, food, water, sanitation and education needs of the population. Currently, a total of over 2.2 million people are displaced in the country and 340,000 have fled the DRC as refugees.

**A Public Health Catastrophe** - The International Rescue Committee (IRC) carried out a mortality survey in the DRC<sup>1</sup>, which showed that approximately 1,200 people die every day in excess of normal mortality - the equivalent of two Asian tsunamis per year. Two of the most important findings were information on the causes of death, and the strong link between insecurity and deaths from non-violent causes. Remarkably, less than 2% of deaths were caused by violent acts, while over 56% of deaths were due to the combined effects of common infections, such as malaria, pneumonia, diarrhoea and measles, plus malnutrition.

A majority of deaths due to non-violent causes is a well-known feature of modern-day conflicts. Most of these causes are easily preventable and treatable by basic public health and medical interventions. They are called indirect causes, because they arise from the enormous social disruption that accompanies conflict. In the presence of on-going insecurity, most health services cease functioning, food production frequently halts, markets no longer operate, access to clean water is hampered and populations are displaced - too often into overcrowded, unsanitary settlements, with poor shelter and limited access to essential services. These settings are ripe for the spread of infectious diseases and malnutrition. As usual, it is children who are the most prone to these public health threats - in the survey, almost half of the deaths were in the under-five age category.

Data from the survey indicate that when security is assured, death rates plummet. In the eastern half of the country, those health zones which recorded violent deaths had an average mortality rate of 3.0

deaths/1,000/month - twice the widely-reported average rate for sub-Saharan Africa of 1.5, and more than twice the rate of 1.2 recorded in pre-war DRC. But the average death rate for the six health zones in which no violent deaths were documented was 1.7 - 43% lower, almost equal to the African norm. The doubling of the rate in the insecure zones crosses a threshold that, by convention, indicates a dire emergency.

The association between insecurity and deaths from non-violent causes was also borne out by a statistical test called regression analysis. If the effects of violence are statistically removed, the analysis suggests that the average mortality rate in the violent eastern half of the country would fall to 1.7 - identical to that documented in non-violent zones. This strong association is no better demonstrated than in the health zone of Kisangani-Ville. When surveyed in 2002, during a period of heightened insecurity, the mortality rate was an astounding 6.2. Since then, United Nations peacekeepers have arrived in Kisangani-Ville, effectively putting an end to the war-related violence. Two years later, the mortality rate had declined to a normal level of 1.4.

**Need for security** - The most compelling conclusion from these analyses is largely self-evident - a major investment in humanitarian support and in security is needed. The improved security could save tens of thousands of lives per month, by limiting the number of deaths due to violent acts, but most importantly through a dramatic reduction in deaths due to indirect causes. To date, the international community's commitment to ensuring the security of eastern Congo has however fallen well short of what is required. Although additional troops have been authorised, the UN peacekeeping mission in the Congo, MONUC, lacks sufficient means, equipment and political backing to fulfil its mandate. National security and police forces are still not in a position to enforce law and order. As one of the largest international donors in the region, it must be hoped that the European Union will give the necessary support to deal with these security concerns.

Refugee repatriation, return of internally displaced persons, national and local elections, key legislation, and security reform cannot be undertaken meaningfully in an environment in which civilians fear for their lives. Hundreds of thousands of Congolese will continue to die unnecessarily unless the Congolese transitional government, the United Nations, and members of the Security Council become resolute and launch a major new effort to establish security.

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1. See "Mortality in the Democratic republic of Congo: a nationwide survey", Coghlan B., Brennan R.J., Ngoy P., et al., *Lancet* 2006, 367:44-51.

## HUMANITARIAN ISSUES AT EU LEVEL

### VOICE AT WORK

- ★ Over the last six months, VOICE has pursued its **close dialogue with the European Commission** (EC). For the first time, the network together with its member organisations presented their views on the partnership with DG Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) at the annual ECHO partner conference. Over 200 humanitarian NGOs received the NGO dossier which compiles these views. VOICE's President also established the dialogue with both EC Commissioner Louis Michel, responsible for Development and Humanitarian Aid, and Mr. Antonio Cavaco, Director General of ECHO.
- ★ With the facilitation of the VOICE secretariat, ECHO NGO partners, organised in the FPA (**Framework Partnership Agreement**) Watch Group, have been collecting and compiling their experiences with the procurement rules of the EC. The consultation process with ECHO is ongoing. Meetings have taken place in order to find solutions which take into account both the difficult working conditions for NGOs in the field and the rules of the EC. For a large number of NGOs, these rules have led to an increased administrative burden. Many have therefore actively participated in the elaboration of the 2006 work programme for the FPA Watch Group.
- ★ The VOICE network is committed to the promotion of the humanitarian principles. In March 2006, VOICE sent a **statement** out to EU decision makers in order to draw their attention to the negative impact the new Russian Federal Law on NGOs could have for vulnerable populations dependent on humanitarian aid in the Northern Caucasus. The Cabinet of EC External Relations Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner replied, stating that the EU will be closely monitoring how the law will be implemented. (see also page 13)
- ★ VOICE - through its Board - has been strengthening its links with the **International Committee of the Red Cross** (ICRC). During an informal exchange at senior ICRC management level last February, challenging humanitarian topics such as the need for diversity among civilian humanitarian actors, the future of the humanitarian space, civil military relations and EU crisis management were discussed.
- ★ In the framework of the project **Enhancing the Network - Improving management and network capacities for European Humanitarian NGOs**, VOICE has organised several practical training courses for ECHO NGO partners. These trainings have proven to be extremely popular, with a high demand for participation. This has also increased the interest in the network further. In February 2006, VOICE organised in London a roundtable on civil-military relations and civil protection, and on the conclusions of the UK EU Presidency. As in Paris last autumn, this event was a good opportunity for informal networking and exchange between the VOICE Board and members and the wider humanitarian NGO community in the UK.
- ★ Following up the Tsunami initiative organised jointly by the VOICE and CONCORD networks, the contact with the High Commissioner Special Representative for **Tsunami Recovery**, Mr. Bill Clinton, has been maintained. Almost 1,000 copies of the report produced jointly by both networks and documenting the added value of NGOs in the emergency and recovery phases, have been disseminated throughout Europe.
- ★ VOICE is currently preparing a new briefing paper, following up on an earlier briefing paper on **EU crisis management**. This paper will raise the question of the future of humanitarian aid for the EU - a highly relevant topic at a time when the EU is seeking to develop its crises capabilities in the aftermath of the Tsunami. The briefing will be available from the VOICE Secretariat before the summer.



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### VOICE out loud

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