



Young Pakistani girls wait for distributions from Save the Children at Maira Camp, Pakistan, 16 January 2006. The US military participated in the Pakistani-led relief operations for victims of the devastating earthquakes that struck the region on 8 October. (Photo by TSgt Joseph McLean, USAF)

NGO-

Military Relations in Iraq and Afghanistan: Some Guidelines

Stability operations are a core US military mission that the Department of Defense (DoD) shall be prepared to conduct and support. They shall be given priority comparable to combat operations and be explicitly addressed and integrated across all DoD activities, including doctrine, organizations, training, education, exercises, material, leadership, personnel, facilities, and planning.

US DoD Directive 3000.05 Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations
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By Beth Ellen Cole and Emily Hsu

For every member of the US armed forces, understanding how to conduct stability operations is no longer a luxury but a necessity. This means that each member of the US armed forces needs to understand the multiple actors in their theater of operations, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The diversity of actors in these complex emergencies has created substantial confusion in operations on the ground, particularly between the military and the NGO community.¹ The absence of overarching guidelines



or a code of conduct between these two actors puts both parties at greater risk and jeopardizes the success of the overall mission.

The Challenges. States emerging from conflict where US forces are engaged in both combat and peacekeeping provide the perfect backdrop for opponents of the US government. Conventional targets have expanded from the US military to include any individual or organization remotely perceived to be supporting the goals of the US in stabilization missions.

Reflecting this trend, US NGOs involved in humanitarian and reconstruction activities are becoming greater

targets in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of these NGOs receive monetary support from the US government, principally through the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in Washington, DC, or receive voluntary contributions from the American public. This makes them potential targets for terrorists or “bad actors” in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

For NGOs across the board, the “humanitarian space” they traditionally have enjoyed to conduct humanitarian relief in less hostile environments is under attack. Many experts believe the concept of humanitarian space has shrunk or, perhaps, disappeared altogether in these insecure places. In Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, the US military, under the rubric of provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs), is involved in reconstruction activities traditionally executed by humanitarian relief organizations—activities such as building schools and clinics or delivering humanitarian relief.

The US Institute for Peace (USIP), Washington, DC, is working to resolve NGO-military issues and establish guidelines for NGO-military operations in the same regions of the world. USIP is an independent, nonpartisan, national institution established and funded by the US Congress. Its goals are to prevent and resolve violent international conflicts; promote post-conflict stability and democratic transformations; and increase peace-building capacity, tools and intellectual capital worldwide by empowering others with knowledge, skills and resources as well as by its direct involvement in peace-building efforts around the globe.

According to a report issued by USIP in 2005 on NGO-military relations in Afghanistan, “Civilian humanitarian assistance providers believe that they cannot allow their efforts to be perceived as part of the campaign plan of a belligerent force because the ‘humanitarian space’ they need to perform their work will be compromised, and the lives of relief workers and those they assist will be placed in jeopardy.”² A “bull’s-eye” adorns every individual or organization operating in these environments, whether it is conducting offensive, defensive or humanitarian and reconstruction operations.

Several other factors add to the confusion about US military and US civilian personnel. For example, many US contractors in Iraq are armed by the private security firms they work for,

which creates the false perception that all civilians on the ground act as instruments of US foreign policy, including foreign NGOs. Additionally, combatants are not easily recognizable to US servicemen by military uniforms and gear; insurgents can pose as members of the civilian community, even as representatives of NGOs.

Finally, these operations are called “stabilization and reconstruction” missions for a reason. The military is conducting nation-building and stabilization operations simultaneously, which creates added confusion as to the military’s precise role. US forces may be engaged in provincial reconstruction activities during the day and conduct offensive operations in the same province at night. Hence, insurgents may associate anyone who has a relationship with the military in the context of this dual role as collaborating with the “enemy.”

In many circumstances, an actor might think he is bearing instruments of peace, not war, such as water, food, bridge-building supplies and windows for schools; but each also can be viewed as having other motives. Herein lies the problem. The actors affect operations on the ground that affect the relationship between the NGOs and the military and, ultimately, affect the very people that each is trying to help—the local population.

Increased threats to US entities in the post-9/11 world and the simultaneous conduct of stabilization and reconstruction activities have compelled American actors to try to understand each other and seek new guidelines for operating in these challenging environments.

NGO-Military Working Group. On 8 March 2005, the heads of major US humanitarian organizations and US civilian and military leaders met at USIP to launch a discussion on the challenges posed by operations in combat and other non-permissive environments. A working group on civil-military relations in non-permissive environments facilitated by USIP was created as a result of this meeting. The working group focuses on NGO-military doctrine and best practices; information and communications; and training, education and planning.

The challenges in Afghanistan and Iraq led members of the working group to seek a deeper understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities in these environments. InterAction, the umbrella organization for many US



Photo by SSGT Ashley Brokop, USAF

Iraqi employees work to construct a water treatment facility in Baghdad, Iraq. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) funds this project and will send \$520 million toward water and sanitation projects that will benefit more than 11 million Iraqis. These projects will contribute a critical piece to the future potable water needs of the citizens of Baghdad.

NGOs, coordinated the nongovernmental delegation. The InterAction delegation includes agencies such as Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, Inc. (CARE), Catholic Relief Services, International Medical Corps, International Rescue Committee, Mercy Corps, Refugees International, Save the Children and World Vision. DoD representatives on the NGO-military working group include members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the State Department and USAID.

Months of dialogue allowed the members to address growing concerns about the roles of NGOs and the military in non-permissive environments and enabled the development and agreement of guidelines to minimize confusion and help clarify the roles of military and civilian personnel. After finalizing the guidelines later this year, the working group will act as a forum for implementing the guidelines and for discussing and resolving concerns that will arise in various operations.

The working group also will continue to promote understanding in civil-military relations by improving doctrine, training and education for both military and NGO civilian personnel. That understanding

can be parlayed to influence the operations of every serviceman and nongovernmental humanitarian worker—a worker who also risks his life serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The NGO Perspective. The NGOs in the working group shared the core principles that guide their work. They urged that pre-deployment education and training of all military personnel include three basic sources to help servicemen understand the operations of NGOs in complex environments: “Civil-Military in Complex Emergencies” by the Interagency Standing Committee, 2004; “The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief” by the International Federation of Red Cross, 1994; and “Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response,” The Sphere Project Handbook, 2004.³ (The endnote provides the online locations of these three sources for pre-deployment training.)

The following are excerpts from the NGO-military working group’s July 2005 briefing paper in reference to the documents.⁴

1. Civil-Military in Complex Emergencies. “Humanitarians derive their motivation from the humanitarian imperative. This imperative reflects the right of those affected to protection and assistance—as enshrined in international humanitarian law (IHL) and, in particular, the Fourth Geneva Convention and the Additional Protocols. The ‘right’ to protection and assistance (immunity from attack) is based upon the noncombatant status of civilian populations.

“Anything that serves to obscure the distinction between combatant and non-combatant groups undermines the right of noncombatants to protection under IHL and, thus, undermines the ability of humanitarian agencies to safely and effectively access populations in need. Security of humanitarian action rests upon trust and acceptance by relevant parties.

“We all recognize the importance of perception, regardless of the actual reality. Inaccurate perceptions can result in suspicion, mistrust and, potentially, attack of humanitarian workers. These have a detrimental impact on access to populations and security. Examples include extreme War on Terrorism (WOT) operations, [such as those in] Afghanistan and Iraq, but also Darfur.

“To deal with the problems that can arise through associations between

the military and humanitarian actors in conflict settings, the Interagency Standing Committee adopted in June 2004 the reference paper ‘Civil-Military Relationship in Complex Emergencies.’ The Interagency Standing Committee was established by the UN General Assembly in 1992 to coordinate responses to disasters. The members are the UN agencies that engage in disaster response, such as the World Food Program, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UN International Committee on Emergency Relief (UNICEF), and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance. In addition, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Organization for Migration and three NGO coalitions, including InterAction, participate in [Interagency Standing Committee] deliberations.”⁴

2. The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief. “The Code requires NGOs to respect the humanitarian imperative, which states that humanitarians must provide assistance wherever it is needed. It requires compliance with the principles of independence and neutrality. These stipulate that aid should be given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities must be calculated on the basis of need alone.

“Humanitarian assistance will not be given as a political or partisan act. Signatories will not act as instruments of the foreign policies of donor governments. They will never be used to gather information of a political, military or economically sensitive nature for governments or other bodies that may serve purposes other than those that are strictly humanitarian.”⁵

3. Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response. Finally, the NGOs urged the military representatives to observe The Sphere Project’s minimum standards in disaster response when providing aid in occupation and “last resort” scenarios. The Sphere Project is an initiative that began in 1997 by the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and a coalition of humanitarian NGOs.

Important information merged in the form of the 2004 Sphere Handbook. Core principals that govern humanitarian activities are enshrined in the charter—most notably the right of affected populations to protection and assistance.

Minimum standards for disaster assistance in five critical sectors are detailed in the handbook: water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter and health services.

The Military Perspective. The military representatives also strove to be understood during the discussions in the working group. The US armed forces are stretched thin and not looking for additional responsibilities. The military sees its primary role in the challenging transitional period from war to peace as providing security, not trying to take over the NGOs' missions.

In frank exchanges, government representatives stated that while they normally were not interested in doing humanitarian and reconstruction work that others could accomplish more effectively, sometimes operations to "win the hearts and minds" (or at least the cooperation) of the local population are conducted when ordered by responsible political authorities. The military wants to learn more about NGO needs and capacities and to establish better coordination mechanisms to minimize and manage the inherent difficulties in stabilization and reconstruction missions.

NGO-Military Guidelines. These deliberations led the representatives of the working group to begin drafting a set of guidelines. Perhaps nothing reflects more accurately the frank discussions and challenges of non-permissive environments than the guidelines themselves. While adherence to these recommendations for conduct is voluntary, the guidelines represent the first-ever agreed-upon statement between NGOs and the military to deal with non-permissive environments since the US entered Afghanistan and Iraq. Every US combatant command, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the Joint Staff, DoD lawyers and the NGO delegation all have thoroughly vetted the guidelines.

Both the NGOs and US armed forces will endeavor to adhere to these "rules of the road" but also recognize that certain circumstances may force actors to deviate from them. In these circumstances, the parties also have pledged to make every effort to explain why a deviation occurred so that transparency can be achieved to minimize distractions from the task of helping the population in need. The hope of the working group is that the guidelines will serve to help those in the field who interact on a daily basis.

While these principles emerged from discussions held by US NGOs and the US

military, the working group recognizes that there are many non-US actors in the field who face the same challenges. With a final review of the guidelines underway at the time of this publication, the working group plans to reach out to other international, regional and state military institutions and (or) organizations and respective NGOs to expand the dialogue.

Key parts of the voluntary guidelines, although subject to slight changes, are summarized in this article. Participants of the working group adopted the term "US armed forces" to describe the US military and "nongovernmental humanitarian organizations," or "NGHOs," to describe NGOs for purposes of the guidelines.

Separation of NGHOs and Military Activities. These guidelines are to ensure the local population does not have a false perception of the autonomy of the NGHO and military operations.

- To address the need to firmly separate the identities of combatants from noncombatants involved in relief activities, the participants agreed that military personnel should wear their uniforms to distinguish them from NGHOs and that the US armed forces should also refrain from displaying any logos that belong to NGHOs on their clothing, vehicles or equipment.

One incident in Afghanistan where US military personnel wore civilian clothing while conducting relief activities brought the issue of clear identification for the local population into sharp relief for the NGOs.

- NGHOs should follow a similar prescription and avoid wearing military-style clothing, although participants agreed this

does not extend to protective vests and helmets that are clearly distinguishable from military issued items.

- Participants agreed that any visits by US armed forces to NGHO facilities should be coordinated in advance and that NGHOs should be offered the opportunity to meet with US military personnel outside of military bases or other military installations. This was due to the heightened sensitivity of NGHOs' being seen as collaborating with combatants, which can lead to several more prescriptions.

- NGHOs (except liaison officers, or LNOs) should not ride in military transport or have facilities collocated with the military, and NGHO activities at military bases or with military forces outside the bases should be held to a minimum. Visits to military installations should be coordinated in advance.

- US armed forces are asked to refrain from describing NGHOs as "force multipliers" or "partners" or any other characterization that might lead to questions about the NGHOs' independence in the eyes of the local population. One phrase used by a senior US official that described NGHOs in Afghanistan as "force multipliers" struck a nerve because it implied that NGHOs operate as part of the US government. The specific phrase was prohibited in the draft guidelines.

- Under extreme circumstances, an NGHO might ask for military protection for its aid convoys or use logistics support that only the military can provide. NGHO personnel might seek help in evacuating from a hostile environment or for medical treatment.

- Both parties recognize that some NGHOs may choose to cooperate with the military; however, that cooperation



Representatives of the International Red Cross from Geneva, Switzerland, arrive at Kandahar International Airport, Afghanistan, to check on the well being of the al Qaeda and Taliban detainees being held there during Operation Enduring Freedom, 24 January 2002.

Photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Ted Banks, USN

should be carried out in a manner that does not jeopardize the independence of the NGHOC community as a whole.

- The participants agreed that the military should not interfere with NGHOC relief activities with parts of the local population that the military may view as “unfriendly.” This guideline affirms the core principle of humanitarian assistance—the right of affected populations to protection and assistance. Non-permissive environments, by definition, include both “friendly” and “unfriendly” elements.

Coordination of NGHOCs and the Military. The first set of guidelines attempt to clearly separate the activities of the NGHOCs and military. Yet some forms of coordination are required as well to minimize the risk of confusion in these settings and to deconflict military and humanitarian assistance programs. The NGHOCs and military agreed that some form of coordination is necessary before and during operations.

- In the planning phase, NGHOCs should send a small number of LNOs to meet with military personnel at the regional combatant commands and continue that representation through the conduct of an operation. For example, an LNO was sent to the US Central Command (CENTCOM) during the first six months of the war in Afghanistan. In addition, with an NGHOC serving in a coordination role, some form of mutual access to NGHOC and military assessments via a US government website or via an identified UN website is recommended.

- In the field, procedures for coordination are necessary also. NGO LNOs should be able to participate in unclassified military security briefings. To facilitate humanitarian assistance and the security of personnel engaged in these operations, information should be shared about security conditions, humanitarian activities and population movements, the locations of mines and unexploded ordnance, and other potential hazards to NGHOCs. In addition, NGHOCs should have access to information about medical facilities and evacuation plans.

- If USAID or the US State Department’s Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization are in the field, they potentially can serve as bridge institutions. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator, who already serves as a bridge between all NGHOCs and the host government, typically can fulfill this role. US armed forces and NGHOCs need

- **NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI):** www.ncciraq.org. NCCI is an independent initiative that coordinates neutral aid efforts in Iraq and provides a wide forum where NGOs can exchange information on humanitarian activities and policy decisions.
- **Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR):** www.acbar.org. ACBAR is an umbrella organization representing 97 NGOs from the national and international humanitarian, reconstruction and development community in Afghanistan.
- **Relief Web:** www.reliefweb.int. ReliefWeb is the global hub for time-critical humanitarian information on complex emergencies and natural disasters.
- **InterAction:** www.interaction.org. InterAction is the largest alliance of US-based international development and humanitarian NGOs.
- **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC):** www.icrc.org. ICRC is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of war and internal violence and to provide them assistance.

Selected Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) Conducting or Impacting Activities in Iraq and Afghanistan

organizations that can serve as bridges in these environments.

The absence of regular dialogue and information sharing clearly has hurt the goal of helping populations at both the field and strategic levels. At the strategic level, the working group on civil-military relations in non-permissive environments will continue both the dialogue and implementation of the guidelines.

The end product should be a greater understanding between the key actors who work in these complex environments and more effective assistance to the population with reduced risk to all involved. This is not something that will be accomplished overnight but will take the perseverance and patience of both the US armed forces and NGHOCs in Iraq, Afghanistan and future environments where they undoubtedly will work side by side.

Endnotes:

1. The US Institute of Peace (USIP) is publishing an update to its comprehensive *Guide for Participants in Peace, Stability and Relief Operations* in June 2007, online at www.usip.org.
2. “Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Military Relations with International and Nongovernmental Organizations in Afghanistan” by Michael J. Dziedzic and Colonel Michael K. Seidl (USIP Special Report, September 2005).
3. The Interagency Standing Committee’s reference paper, “Civil-Military Relationship in Complex Emergencies,” 28 June 2004, is online at <http://ochaonline.un.org/mcdu/guidelines>. The International Federation of the Red Cross’ “The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief,” 1994, is online at <http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/conduct/index.asp>. The Sphere Project Handbook, “Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response,” 2004, is online at <http://www.sphereproject.org>.
4. Unpublished InterAction briefing paper for the Civil-Military Working Group in Non-permissive Environments, July 2005.
5. Unpublished summary of the 27 July 2005 meeting of the Civil-Military Working Group in Non-permissive Environments, USIP.

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