

However, it must be added that the focus of the military involved in disaster relief has been on the delivery of aid and the implementation of services in the technical areas of health, water and sanitation, distribution and shelter. As a result, the debate between humanitarian organisations and military actors has almost exclusively revolved around questions concerning coordination and a division of labour in delivering relief items.

In this debate, the military have often justified their involvement by pointing to the lack of capacity of traditional humanitarian actors. Whereas this lack of capacity may exist in large-scale, sudden emergencies involving large population flows, it must be stressed that the large majority of the humanitarian needs around the globe are found in politically unstable or insecure areas. These needs are not the direct result of a technical capacity problem of the humanitarian agencies but are due to the lack of continued access for humanitarian aid, which is far too often a political problem. In many of those situations, the military will be unable to solve this problem. In fact, it is very likely that there will be no military in those situations because of the lack of political will to get involved. It is, therefore, only in exceptional situations that the traditional humanitarian organisations are faced with a capacity problem.⁴

Many humanitarian organisations have pointed out that military involvement in humanitarian aid has blurred humanitarian principles, such as neutrality, impartiality and independence. Similarly, humanitarian organisations have accused the military of lack of expertise and reducing humanitarian action to a merely technical act. Both types of actors have not hesitated to stereotype each other, in particular in relation to their different cultures, motivations, working methods, and management.

While it may be too early to speak of an emerging consensus in this debate, a reflection of several years of debate within the humanitarian NGO community offers the following points:

- the number of situations, not including natural disasters, in which military forces will be able to perform humanitarian tasks is extremely limited;
- the military forces that will carry out these tasks must be under civilian coordination, in order to ensure that they act in support of the humanitarian organisation(s);
- military involvement will have an added-value if they concentrate on tasks that normally cannot be carried out by humanitarian organisations, including air-movement control at airports, heavy logistics, road repair, and de-mining.

A more meaningful role for the military

Fostering security in refugee areas is a complex, political issue given the relation to state sovereignty, the questions of mandate and use of force, and the security factor. However, if the military wants to have a more meaningful role in humanitarian action, so that effective use is made of the complementarity of mandates, it should undertake tasks that only the military can perform. To refer to Fiona Terry, it should provide protection from violence to refugee and displaced populations, as this is a task that humanitarian organisations are unable to assume.

From the humanitarian perspective, several conditions should apply if military forces become

⁴ The '90s saw three situations, not being natural disasters, where aid agencies did not have sufficient capacity and the military was able, both practically and politically, to provide support: Northern Iraq in April 1991, Eastern Zaire in July 1994, and Kosovo in April 1999.