

IV PHYSICAL SECURITY AND THE NEUTRALITY/IMPARTIALITY DILEMMA

- (i) **This logic should work in a relatively benign environment, but it gets progressively more difficult as the security situation deteriorates.** If both peacekeepers and humanitarians decide to remain despite the risk, the question arises as to whether the latter should look to the former for protection, for example, by providing armed guards for compounds, armed escorts for convoys or to police refugee camps. This subject generates controversy in the humanitarian community, which tends to seek every possible alternative to taking advantage of military protection. There are three main reasons for this. The first is that the military are only present in a few situations where security is a problem, therefore practices have to be evolved which can work whether they are present or not. The second is the fear that accepting military support will leave an agency even more vulnerable when the military withdraws. Finally, there is the perceived loss of impartiality and neutrality that it is assumed will follow.
- (ii) **While the principles of neutrality and impartiality are important guides, they must be applied with common sense and respect for operational realities.** It is argued that if a relief organisation accepts protection from a military force it becomes associated with that force in the eyes of local warring factions and therefore loses its claim both to neutrality and also probably to impartiality, although a peacekeeping force has much the same interest in remaining both neutral and impartial. In Complex Emergencies, however, it is doubtful whether either the humanitarian organisations or the peacekeepers can achieve their objectives without compromising the ideals of impartiality and neutrality because there will generally be at least one faction that will consider them a threat of some sort. Some argue that most relief organisations, with the exception of ICRC which has a particular status in this respect, should abandon the principles of neutrality and impartiality because the restrictions they impose outweigh any diminishing benefits. However, the potential benefits are considerable and not to be dismissed lightly. Humanitarian coordinators must weigh up each situation and consider all available options to enhance security, including peacekeepers whenever they are available. There are many precedents for successful collaboration in this respect to offset the few highly publicised failures.⁵ The key is frequent discussion of the problem with the aim of finding an agreed way ahead rather than having one side impose a solution on the other. Much will also depend on the standing of a force, and even of particular units in it, with local factions.
- (iii) **If a force's mission is to enforce an agreement, such as a ceasefire, and one of the parties involved is violating the agreement noticeably more than the other, then they must bring pressure to bear, and if necessary take action against, the violator.** Remaining neutral should not mean turning a blind eye to this kind of activity. Similarly for relief organisations, one side of a dispute may be more in need of assistance than the other. Being impartial does not mean distributing equal amounts of relief to both sides.