

9.2.4 Civil society

Civil society is the primary engine for driving human rights protection. The strengthening of that civil society, often through its NGOs, is one of the most effective strategies to enable a UN operation to complete its objectives and leave. The ways in which NGOs and other civil organizations can be active partners in achieving the objectives of an HRO, has been dealt with in Chapter five on human rights partners.

What merits repeating here is the ultimate strategic objective, eg. sustainable human rights protection, and a UN and HRO tactical objective, eg. to withdraw leaving a functional human rights environment. Right from the beginning of an HRO, a "detailed plan for withdrawal should be an integral part of mission planning, especially with regard to providing continuity and ensuring skill transfer to domestic institutions."²¹⁰ HRO staff need to be fully aware of the 'human rights' individuals and organizations in the country, how to best defend them, how to facilitate their work, and how to hand over to them. These 'human rights' individuals and organizations are to be found in both the governmental and non governmental sectors.

The field presence of an HRO invariably raises the hopes of local individuals and organizations, and indirectly encourages them to report violations and dissent openly. If the initial promises of international support and protection do not materialize, much as happened in the first phase of MICIVIH, then repressive regimes or guerilla groups become emboldened. Assuming their actions will either be ignored or tacitly approved, they invariably renew, if not increase, their repression. For example, in the first phase of MICIVIH the "evacuation of the Mission was felt by Haitians to signal their abandonment by the international community, and it left at risk all those known to have been in contact with the observers" when "a wave of intensified repression was launched by the military".²¹¹

In ONUSAL, the HRO was heavily criticised by El Salvadorean and international NGOs for not putting enough effort into its relationship with NGOs. It did however achieve a degree of belated success in passing on skills to El Salvadorean civil society through the running of training/educational workshops, seeking international financial support for human rights programs, and publishing materials for local NGOs.

Using international NGOs is one of the more effective avenues for the UN to set about strengthening local civil society. Usually a number of international NGOs already have strong contracts in the country in question, and have already identified and are working with the more effective local partners. For example in Haiti, the US based National Coalition for Haitian Refugees organized a series of training sessions for representatives of Haitian grass-roots organizations, and MICIVIH has piggybacked on that training. As part of the sessions, MICIVIH provided speakers, including an operations staff member, to describes MICIVIH's mandate and operations. MICIVIH also provided materials such as illustrated Créole versions

²¹⁰ p.153, *Improvising History: A Critical Evaluation of the United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador*, Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, December 1995.

²¹¹ p.97, Ian Martin, *Paper versus Steel: The First Phase of the International Civilian Mission in Haiti*, in *Honoring Human Rights and Keeping the Peace*, Aspen Institute, op.cit.