

Since the end of the Cold War, it has become a truism to state that humanitarian NGOs/IGOs in the field face new and difficult challenges in securing the humanitarian space. In the weak state environment, gone is the assumption that host governments are willing or able to provide security for the populace, let alone ensure that humanitarian operations are able to proceed relatively unmolested. Given the obvious importance of this issue, it is the subject of both policymaking and intellectual activity. One such combined endeavour is the 1999 report, *Mean Times: Humanitarian Action in Complex Emergencies - Stark Choices, Cruel Dilemmas*, issued jointly by CARE Canada and the Program on Conflict Management and Negotiation at the University of Toronto. In their report, the authors propose as a solution that humanitarian organizations should consider relying on the growing private security industry.

The focus of this paper is to expand upon and critically evaluate the private security option through analysis of the current evolutionary state of commercial security and a consideration of the dilemmas this poses for humanitarianism both now and in the future. Defining first what it means to secure the humanitarian space, the paper then makes two arguments. One, interaction between private security companies (PSCs) and humanitarian organizations is nothing new. Two, current capabilities, business strategies, and perceptions of the private security industry coupled with the lack of an effective regulatory framework for non-state security simultaneously raise unique complications to securing the humanitarian space.

Securing the Humanitarian Space

In 1995, then-Secretary General of the United Nations Boutros Boutros-Ghali commented that securing the humanitarian space was "one of the most significant challenges facing the humanitarian community".¹ A basic definition for "humanitarian space" seems straightforward; "a consensual space for humanitarian actors to do their work".² However, the challenge for humanitarians is twofold. The first challenge is that securing the humanitarian space is a dynamic and multifaceted process made increasingly complex by the intra-state and violent context in which humanitarians now do much of their work. In revealing this dynamism, Larry Minear and Thomas G. Weiss suggest that the appropriate way to view this spatial metaphor is not as a walled room, but instead as an accordion.³ For them, the expansion and contraction takes place along three main interrelated lines: geographical, meaning that humanitarian activity is restrained by facts of physical geography and the limited means of humanitarian actors to overcome them; political, concerning the perceptions of local actors towards humanitarian activities, regardless of whether they are following the humanitarian ethic's characteristics of neutrality,

¹ Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Confronting New Challenges: Annual Report on the Work of the Organization (New York: United Nations, 1995), p. 172.

² Sean Greenaway and Andrew J. Harris, "Humanitarian Security: Challenges and Responses," paper presented at the Forging Peace Conference, 13-15 March 1998, Harvard University, p. 34, note 45.

³ Larry Minear and Thomas G. Weiss, Mercy Under Fire: War and the Global Humanitarian Community (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 38-45.