

“The Role of the Military in Providing Security and Protection to Refugees - Some Humanitarian NGO Views” Key note address by Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop, Coordinator of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), for the “Seminar to Examine the Role of the Military in Refugee Camp Security” Enysham Hall, Oxford, 10 –12 July.

"But the most serious shortcoming of military involvement in relief operations of the last decade does not concern what they do, but what they not do. Protection from violence is the most vital need of refugee and displaced populations today, and is a task that humanitarian organisations are unable to assume. Yet most military forces have been deployed with a 'humanitarian' mandate aimed at protecting or providing relief. This gives governments an image of 'doing something' to appease public outcry, while avoiding engagement in potentially dangerous or protracted conflicts." MSF Research Director Fiona Terry in *The Lancet* Vol. 357, Number 9266 (5 May 2001), pp. 1431-1432.

It should be made clear from the outset that there is no consensus among NGOs on what role the military should play in humanitarian action. At the same time, however, there is not much evidence of humanitarian NGOs' thinking on the role of the military in providing security and protection to refugees. The present conceptualisation of the relationship between humanitarian organisations and military actors has an almost exclusive focus on a division of labour in the delivery of aid, based on the experiences in the large-scale emergencies of the last decade, i.e. the former Yugoslavia, Central Africa, and Kosovo.

Humanitarian NGOs and humanitarian principles

In explaining the views of NGOs on the role of the military in humanitarian action, a closer look should be taken at the community of humanitarian NGOs. The world of NGOs is often viewed with suspicion and as complex, given the different acronyms, their logos and emblems visibly displayed on their four-wheel drives and tents, and, most importantly, their various missions and programmes. The performance of NGOs is said to be mixed: many are characterized as do-gooders who are driven more by their ideals than they are professionals at work.

A closer look at this complex community, however, shows that many NGOs have established credible reputations, based on years of experience, while having different working methods and representing different groups in society. In differentiating among NGOs, one can discern NGOs that work through and with local partners or those that are directly operational themselves. Another division would be along the specific areas of expertise, for example, healthcare, water and sanitation, education and distribution of food. Yet another division between NGOs is based on their specific target populations, including refugees and internally displaced persons, children or elderly.

In providing humanitarian assistance, NGOs are expected to share the same fundamental humanitarian principles and values. In the early '90s, the Red Cross and NGOs sat together and