

# Emergency coordination: a problem of humanitarian agencies or rather of politicians and generals?\*

by Peter Fuchs

The problem of coordination in humanitarian emergencies arising from conflicts is not a new subject. So many seminars, round tables, declarations and publications have tackled it. Most came to the logical conclusion that stronger coordination between the humanitarian agencies was necessary, that the money had to be spent in the most effective way, and that new coordination bodies had to be created to make sure that there was no waste of operational energy.

It makes sense of course to pursue and intensify these efforts. The end of the Cold War raised hopes for a more peaceful world and in the new climate of international relations tension between governments has indeed eased in several areas of conflict, but conflict has flared up in other parts of the world and again in former theatres of the Cold War. Manifold types of violent confrontations are today claiming a growing number of victims. These phenomena, which are an obvious threat to international peace and stability, plus the rapidly growing number of non-governmental organizations and the increasingly operational nature of the large international agencies, all call for tighter cooperation and stricter coordination.

The creation of cooperation mechanisms such as the meetings of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and its working groups, in which the ICRC takes an active part, or the Department for Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) within the UN system, or ECHO within the EU, offers new possibilities to discuss coordination.

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In addition, there is an increased awareness of the need for coordination among humanitarian agencies at field and headquarters levels. The ICRC not only consults regularly with operational UN bodies such as UNHCR, but also with the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and their Federation and with major NGOs. There is a permanent exchange of information and plans of action are widely discussed. Parts of programmes are handed over to other competent operational organizations. Humanitarian workers in the field work hand in hand.

Usually, the ICRC is the first organization on the spot because of its permanent presence in regions where tension prevails. If a conflict breaks out, the ICRC immediately strengthens its presence, intensifies the gathering of information, evaluates humanitarian emergency needs and launches its activities to protect and assist civilians, prisoners and the wounded. The ICRC shares information with the governments and the various humanitarian organizations that might step in, especially the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the UN agencies.

This constructive form of cooperation certainly deserves to be pursued and developed. It makes it possible to avoid duplication of effort or failure to respond, thanks to a distribution of tasks in accordance with the respective mandates of the different organizations concerned. But despite these efforts, some problems remain.

Only too often, following constructive discussions leading to the distribution of urgent tasks, the ICRC, together with certain non-governmental organizations whose courage I should like to commend, finds itself alone out in the field for long periods of time or, worse, it is left on its own when the UN and NGOs decide to withdraw.

Another problem is the pressure which is put on NGOs to act as instruments of donor policy, to concentrate on activities which are rewarded by a high national media profile and provide perfect visibility, thereby enhancing fund-raising possibilities and leaving for others less appealing and less visible tasks such as emergency rehabilitation and coping with the medium-term consequences of war.

While it is encouraging to see that humanitarian issues are higher on the agenda of the international community today, the trend towards "politicization" of humanitarian work does not favour respect for international humanitarian law. A more precise division of tasks and responsibilities is therefore essential between the humanitarian organizations that

are working to alleviate suffering and the political bodies whose duty it is to tackle the causes of conflict and to restore conditions for peace and stability, *inter alia* by military means.

Finally, beyond purely operational coordination, the humanitarian agencies, which are well placed to observe the consequences of war, should join forces to promote respect for international humanitarian law and act in a way which enhances it. The “code of conduct” promoted by the ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and adopted by some of the major NGOs is an important step in this direction.

Thanks to all these coordination efforts, considerable progress has been achieved in the field of operational coordination between the various humanitarian agencies. The existing mechanisms should be sufficient to overcome the remaining problems.

What worries me more today is the indiscriminate use of the word “humanitarian”, which is creating new problems of coordination. Much of today’s international response to a conflict is labelled “humanitarian”. There is a purely military intervention dubbed “humanitarian”, there are army units which are deployed for purely “humanitarian” work in a conflict region without participating in peace-keeping efforts; a “humanitarian group” should supervise the implementation of an embargo on a border. To me, this indiscriminate use of the word “humanitarian” seems to be an indication of increasing uncertainty as to the different roles and responsibilities within the international community, and this leads me to the fundamental question of whether the real problem of emergency coordination is still a problem of the humanitarian agencies or rather a problem of politicians and generals.

It is true that the changing environment of conflicts has become much more complex. The new conflicts often have little to do with the classic international or civil wars of the Cold War period, where a clearly defined number of parties were involved and a certain chain of command, both political and military, existed on each side. The new phenomena encountered today — the destruction of any social fabric, the complete disappearance of any form of authority except for that of guns, the denial of basic values and the increasing chaos and anarchy — are making conflicts more complex, the suffering of civilians ever more cruel, and humanitarian workers and the international community more helpless. Instead of having to deal with generally two parties to the conflict, each with its own strategic Cold War patron in the background, the ICRC today often has to negotiate with groups, clans, bandits, militias and weekend fighters.

The international regulating mechanisms are not yet adapted to these new situations.

The disappearance of the direct or indirect influence brought into play by the superpowers during the bipolarity of the Cold War leaves humanitarian agencies, but also politicians and generals, often without clear points of reference. And it seems to be difficult, sometimes even impossible, for governments to reach a realistic consensus on political and military options and actions. Even though UN resolutions are no longer blocked by the veto mechanisms so often applied during the Cold War, they are often not realistic and reflect a verbal consensus rather than a genuine readiness to intervene in a truly efficient manner.

In this increasing aimlessness, a result of the failure to reach a consensus on appropriate political or military reaction, humanitarian action provides a welcome focal point, a sense of purpose. This activism helps to decrease the pressure exerted on governments not only by the national and international media, but also by public opinion, which tend more and more to dictate today's agenda of political priorities and create a political need to act immediately. Since nobody contests the need for humanitarian aid, unlike political or military interventions, humanitarian action may serve "*ut aliquid fieri videatur*" — in order to give the impression that something is done.

But humanitarian action should be parallel to political or military action, not replace it. If humanitarian action is misused as an alternative instrument of politics, as an opportunistic extension of foreign policy, as a means of decreasing internal political pressure in one's own country, this same humanitarian action loses its "innocence", is no longer neutral and free of ulterior political motives. It will finally lose its very identity and even become a target for armed attacks.

As I said, army units are doing humanitarian work but refuse peace-keeping activities. Governments are stepping up their direct humanitarian activities through governmental operational bodies under their national flag. Humanitarian agencies are taking part in the so-called integrated approach.

This creates new coordination and identity problems during humanitarian emergencies.

Let us have a look at the integrated approach which is the guiding principle of the *Agenda for Peace*, that very stimulating and valid document by the United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali. This *Agenda* advocates a comprehensive approach including political, military and humanitarian activities which seems to make sense

in complex emergencies such as today's conflicts. Creating synergies between the different possibilities for action could indeed enhance the efficiency of the international community without considerably increasing the resources which have to be invested.

This approach is certainly correct in situations of conflict prevention. Preventive diplomacy, economic support, development, humanitarian aid and the deployment of military observers can indeed stabilize a given situation. Greater means should be invested in such preventive efforts, which are in any case cheaper than all the investments which have to be made in order to contain a conflict which has broken out, not to mention reconstruction and rehabilitation.

The same synergies can be created in the post-conflict phase where consolidation of peace, reconstruction and, if needed, a bridging humanitarian action in favour of the most needy are required.

But I think that the plan set out in the *Agenda for Peace* cannot be applied without difficulty during the acute phase of a conflict. In such a situation, humanitarian work concentrates on the acute symptoms produced by the crisis and may not tackle political or military problems. There is a clear need for an independent, neutral and impartial approach without any ulterior political motives in order to reach all the victims of the conflict on all sides, and to do so with the agreement of all parties. In such a situation, often only really independent, neutral and impartial organizations such as the ICRC can reach those in need. The States were completely aware of this necessity when they drew up and signed the Geneva Conventions which stipulate this neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian assistance.

“Neutral and impartial” — in the meantime, most of the humanitarian agencies use these words to define their identity. But the important question is not whether an organization really is or declares itself to be neutral and impartial. What counts is how that organization is *perceived* by the various parties involved in the conflict. UN agencies such as UNHCR are certainly neutral and their action is impartial. But since they operate under the same blue emblem as the UN blue helmets, using the same white cars with the blue flag protected by white armoured vehicles with the blue emblem, they are not necessarily *perceived* as being independent and neutral. If UN troops are seen as enemies by one or another protagonist, all those who work under the same flag and emblem risk being equated with them and also regarded as enemies. This perception of dependence and partiality jeopardizes humanitarian work in general and the safety of all humanitarian field workers.

The same is true for the latest efforts of some governments sending armed army units into conflict zones to do purely humanitarian work. This blurring of responsibilities hampers coordination efforts considerably. Troops are made for peace-keeping and peace enforcement, that is what they are expert at. Humanitarian work needs a different kind of expertise and should be done by humanitarian organizations.

In order to prevent a further dangerous weakening of real humanitarian action, which must remain independent, neutral and impartial, it is even more important to combat the growing tendency to label any political and military intervention as "humanitarian".

There is, of course, an important place for political and military action in a humanitarian emergency, especially in the anarchic and chaotic new conflicts. It would be impossible, and probably even undesirable, to dissociate humanitarian endeavour completely from political action.

Humanitarian work concentrates on the acute symptoms produced by crisis, but the crises themselves cannot be resolved without political or even military measures to tackle their underlying causes.

In chaotic situations of total insecurity, humanitarian work may depend on the creation of an environment which allows the deployment of humanitarian operations. A humanitarian space must be established by deploying UN troops in an early phase of the conflict, replacing absent police authorities and ensuring a minimum of security for humanitarian organizations to fulfil their mandates. But in order to do this, the UN Secretary-General should have a rapid reaction force at his disposal. Are the States ready to coordinate their efforts to this effect?

Again, military action should be clearly separated from humanitarian action. In the former Yugoslavia and in Somalia, it has unfortunately proved necessary to use armed escorts to protect humanitarian convoys. This, however, must remain a temporary and exceptional measure, and we must take care not to start thinking of it as an acceptable long-term solution. If we resign ourselves to these means, are we not in fact giving up all hope of persuading the belligerents to respect not only humanitarian work but above all defenceless civilians and prisoners? We must also demand and restore respect for protective emblems, especially those of the red cross and red crescent, which are so often disregarded.

Moreover, a clear distinction must be drawn between jurisdiction and humanitarian action. Although the ICRC and other humanitarian organizations are ready to take considerable risks in order to bring the victims assistance and protection, their role is not to act as judge and even less

as prosecutor. Their having such tasks would be seen as very dangerous by the parties to the conflict, which would do anything to avoid the presence of witnesses and would not allow access to those in need. However, we should be more than happy if the governments were to fulfil that role. This would discourage further violations of international law and, alongside other measures, would facilitate the restoration of dialogue and lasting peace.

Is emergency coordination a question for humanitarian agencies or rather for politicians and generals?

I think the answer is less complex than the new complex emergency situations. The major humanitarian agencies have reached a promising level of consultation and coordination with quite good results in the field. But today I feel that it is urgent to go beyond humanitarian coordination, to enhance consultation and effective coordination in the political and military approach. The respective responsibilities of humanitarian agencies, politicians and generals must be defined more clearly and complied with, and the political and financial support for both activities must be strengthened. This could create new synergies and clear responsibilities without confusion. Both are desperately needed to resolve today's emergency situations with their devastating effects and inhuman consequences.

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