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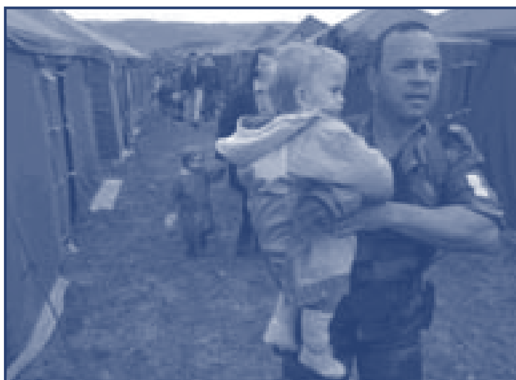

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The Role of a Humanitarian Organization in an International Security Operation - a Basis for Cooperation or a Basis for Separation?

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Presentation at the Opening of the Norwegian Atlantic Committee's 39th annual Leangkollen Conference, The Nobel Institute, 2 February 2004

The Atlantic Committee is asking a rhetorical question: is there a basis for cooperation or a basis for separation between humanitarian organizations and international security operations?

My short answer is that there is and should be a basis for both: Cooperation where appropriate – separation where appropriate. But to get anywhere near a common understanding of how to draw these crucial dividing lines we need arenas for dialogue and exchange of views. We take pride in having a culture for such dialogue in Norway. When it comes to security issues the Atlantic Committee and the annual Leangkollen conferences represent an important venue for such dialogue. Thank you for inviting the Norwegian Red Cross to address this audience.

The question put to me is topical, as exemplified by the unfolding of events in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the new global security context the agenda is widening. There may be fewer threats after the end of the Cold War. But as we adjust our mental maps to the age of globalization we discover an increased number of insecurities and we struggle to find ways of dealing with them.

Fewer threats but more insecurity: With growing insecurity follows a potential for confusion. We need to invest in a better clarification of concepts, roles and rules of engagement. We need to exchange views, perceptions and impressions. My contribution this morning will be to share with you some reflections from a Red Cross perspective.

In recent weeks and months the Red Cross movement has warned against the consequences of direct military involvement in the humanitarian arena. This is relevant in many national contexts, including the one here in Norway.

Our purpose has not been to address the decision to commit military troops to a specific conflict. There may be ample reasons to use military capacity for a broad variety of reasons, primarily for the promotion of security, law and order.

Our purpose has been to highlight potential consequences of mixing the divergent aims and principles of military forces and those of humanitarian organizations. At a first glance, seen from the position of those who plan military operations, our warning against this mix may seem like a game of words. But I believe there is much more to it, and let me explain why.

As a humanitarian organization our role is to side with the victims; the wounded, the vulnerable and all those suffering from the consequences of conflict. In a military conflict the Red Cross will know neither friend nor enemy, only victims as we strive to assist the long and all too often silent stream of people seeking food and shelter, trying to protect themselves from abuse, theft, rape, arrest or execution.

Our operational arena is the humanitarian space, ideally accepted by all parties to the conflict.

This is not a position we have just taken. It is position that we also have been given. 191 States are parties to the Geneva Conventions. These legal instruments establish that all those who do not – or no longer - participate in the fighting have the right to be protected and assisted. It goes for civilians, wounded and sick

enemy soldiers, and prisoners of war – regardless of which side of the conflict they belong to.

The States gave an independent organization the mandate to be the guardian of this law and to provide the victims of conflict with neutral and impartial protection and assistance. This organization is the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), a core body in the International Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, of which the Norwegian Red Cross is an active member.

My organization carries out delegated projects for the ICRC in situations of conflicts. When an armed conflict breaks out, ICRC's delegates visit prisoners of war. They assess living conditions and how prisoners are treated. They provide food, shelter and medical assistance to civilians.
They arrange for the exchange of news with their families and they exchange messages between dispersed family members and they organize family reunifications.

For the ICRC delegate, being exposed to risk, is not something new. The most widespread risk of working in areas of war, conflict and violence, has since the beginning been the possibility of being in the "wrong place at the wrong time". Many delegates have been paying the highest prize for their commitment.

Yet, for the Red Cross, the primary impact of the increasingly unpredictable nature of conflict has been in terms of security. In 2003, the ICRC was the victim of three deliberate attacks that claimed the lives of colleagues in Afghanistan and Iraq. The attacks north of Kandahar in March and south of Baghdad in July appear to be the result of a mistaken association of ICRC's presence with the broader international political and military action. The October car-bomb attack against the ICRC offices in Baghdad, however, was beyond doubt a direct and planned targeting of the Red Cross.

This targeted attack on the Red Cross puts in jeopardy the very opportunity to provide humanitarian assistance. These are the key conditions for delivering effectively on our mandate: We need to be in close proximity to the actual victims of conflict. We must be in a

position to deal with all sides and to remain on speaking terms with all parties to a conflict. And we must observe strict neutrality.

With these conditions in place the ICRC carries out its mandate by engaging in a permanent and sustained dialogue with the various belligerent authorities. This cooperation is the cornerstone of the ICRC's work in the field. Without it no humanitarian action is really possible.

Gaining access to the victims of conflict regardless of who they are and wherever they may be is a complex and risky task. The way we are perceived is crucial. It boils down to a matter of credibility.

We need to conduct ourselves in accordance with five crucial principles: impartiality, neutrality, independence, the consent of the parties to the conflict, and the basing of assistance on evaluated needs.

To us, these fundamental principles serve as working tools and safeguards against the politicization of humanitarian action. The respect of these principles is a key condition for maintaining a humanitarian space.

It is not an easy task. It is based on permanent negotiation and confidence-building, even before the conflict breaks out. Any violation of these five principles reduces the credibility of any humanitarian action in general and jeopardizes its long-term effectiveness. Once a humanitarian agency has antagonized one of the belligerents, it becomes incapable of carrying out the tasks required of an impartial humanitarian operation.

The ICRC has abided by these principles for decades. It has required patience and professionalism. Yet, the sustained efforts of the ICRC have helped carve out a humanitarian space that has gained broad respect and acceptance and helped alleviate the suffering of thousands upon thousands of vulnerable people.

Our recent concern for the integrity of humanitarian action is directly related to what can be seen as a pressure on this humanitarian space.

The president of the ICRC, Mr Jakob Kellenberger, recently observed that the most striking feature of recent conflicts is the renewed polarization between conflicting parties. This polarization is taking place between states engaged in the "fight against terrorism" and a number of radical non-state actors that violently oppose them, increasingly relying on non-conventional and indiscriminate methods in doing so.

In this polarized environment some voice the view that all actors, humanitarian organisations included, should take sides. You are either 'with us or against us'. There is 'good against evil' and 'right against wrong'. Impartiality and neutrality have a meagre place in these equations. In a polarized world such notions may even be met with increasing suspicion. Carrying a humanitarian flag of neutrality and impartiality can be taken to mean that you are 'on the other side', whoever you are talking to.

This confusion has many features, but let me mention just two:

On the one hand radical groups tend to reject humanitarian action because they see any effort to alleviate the suffering of civilians as an attempt to re-establish order. By doing this the humanitarian effort may be seen as a furthering of the cause of the West and its allies. Groups intending to create chaos as a means of reaching an ultimate political or military goal may do anything to disrupt such humanitarian work.

On the other hand we see how humanitarian action is portrayed as a part of a political and military strategy against terrorist activities. Last year one US general was quoted saying that the humanitarian organizations could 'do the job' in a specific part of Afghanistan. Seen from the field, such statements make the humanitarian agency involved extremely vulnerable. The humanitarian space is shrinking.

The need to safeguard impartiality and neutrality of humanitarian action is not new.

When the community of States adopted the Geneva Conventions they did so precisely because they saw the need for impartial and neutral protection and assistance of victims of conflict. They decided to give a specific mandate to ICRC to assist and protect such victims, and they did so because they recognized the impossibility for governments and their armed forces to act impartially and neutrally when humanitarian action is required.

Regrettably, we now observe that strategic and tactical interests too often prevail over these ideas. Too often we witness conflicts where the distinction between political and military action and humanitarian action is blurred.

Humanitarian assistance is more and more often combined with political and economic leverage. The notion of humanitarian action too often becomes a wrapping paper – or rather a benign focal point in situations where politicians nationally or internationally seek to gain acceptance for a contribution that is military in its nature. Labelling the intervention in humanitarian terms may help ease the marketing of military engagement. Promoting the humanitarian character of military operations may give a more positive image when governments commit their armed forces to international security operations.

You may say that this is a partisan view from a humanitarian organization. But it is not. We have been joined in our warning against this growing confusion by an increasing number of military representatives. Within military ranks there is increased awareness of the specific nature of humanitarian action. Officers and regular troops argue that a soldier should dedicate himself to his primary role. This is indeed a challenging role, with key functions well beyond military acts of combat or self defence. I fully acknowledge that military troops may exercise their function in a way that helps alleviate the suffering of the civilian population. They do so when they promote security, when they re-establish order and when they build or repair key infrastructure.

But let us agree: An army, even when it is sent to a theatre of operations with the best of intentions, remains branded by politics. Armed forces engaged in conflict can hardly be neutral. They can hardly be impartial. And we cannot blame them for being biased, and even less so in the polarized state of recent conflicts. In fact, it is a political tool.

The concept of humanitarian assistance, however, as coined in the Geneva Conventions, is that it is both possible and desirable to separate humanitarian concerns from political and military concerns. Yet we frequently observe a trend towards an integrated approach to crisis management where the military is engaging directly in civilian and humanitarian tasks.

We need to acknowledge the price we may be paying by letting this happen unchallenged. If humanitarian efforts become integrated into a political process they become politicized. Humanitarian action should not be manipulated to influence the course of a conflict. If it is diverted from its true purpose by political interest it can even prolong the conflict. It is not designed to address the causes of crises or to resolve conflict but to protect human dignity and to save lives.

Humanitarian action should rather move in parallel with a political and possibly military process aimed at addressing the underlying causes of conflict and the efforts aimed at achieving a political settlement. It should not become a tool designed to mask the absence of resolve to take appropriate political action, or to compensate for its inadequacy. The provision of humanitarian assistance must not be linked to progress in political negotiations, or to other political objectives. This would ultimately lead to an unacceptable distinction between “good” or “deserving” and “bad”

or "undeserving" victims.

Poul Nielson, the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, fears that humanitarian aid is in jeopardy of becoming another instrument in the handling of foreign policy. In a recent speech he warned against turning humanitarian aid into a tool for political crisis management. Nielson said: "Humanitarian aid is humanitarian aid. Humanitarian aid has no place within the fight against terrorism: humanitarian aid's only fight is that against poverty, insecurity, human suffering and lack of dignity."

Our main concern regarding the use of military resources for humanitarian tasks is the risk of weakening the concept of impartial humanitarian action in the eyes of the belligerents. Military involvement in humanitarian action can have a "contagious" effect on civilian humanitarian activities. Any association with military missions or other political processes — real or perceived — is likely to affect the way in which the population perceives the neutrality of the civilian humanitarian workers. Mixing mandates risks turning humanitarian workers into perceived enemy agents and thus jeopardizing their personal safety.

One may then ask: What happens if the situation on the ground makes it almost impossible for humanitarian organizations to operate, as has become the case in Iraq? May the strict separation of military and humanitarian roles and mandates lead us to ignore the need of the civilian population?

Nothing of what I have said should be taken to limit the obligations which do exist under international law for state authorities and their armed forces to assist the civilian population in armed conflict. The extent of these obligations is defined by law and resolutions applicable in a given situation. An occupying power for example, has a number of obligations under the fourth Geneva Convention. In situations where a UN mandated multinational military peace support mission is deployed, the UN resolution may impose assistance tasks on the force in addition to the political and military tasks. The drafting process of the resolution is crucial and humanitarian

organizations and states should get involved at an early stage to have the various mandates as clearly defined as possible.

It would be absurd and inappropriate to claim that the military cannot support humanitarian operations. When it is a matter of saving lives, a pragmatic approach must be taken. It is not inconceivable that in certain situations the military may even be in a better position than the ICRC to carry out certain humanitarian tasks, when an area is simply too dangerous for humanitarian organizations to work in.

But let us not forget that these situations are not frequent. The ICRC delegate, only carrying the Red Cross emblem to protect her, has traditionally gained access to belligerents and victims in the most extreme of conflicts. Based on this access, she has been able to help alleviate suffering and preserve the humanitarian space. This happens as we speak in dozens of armed conflicts and situations of violence where the international community has little or no strategic, economic or political interests at all and where there is no multinational military presence.

The greatest contribution which the military can make to humanitarian action is to restore order and security. Other invaluable services include security and logistics in connection with the release, transfer and repatriation of prisoners, the search for missing people, mine awareness programmes and mapping, marking and clearing of mines and other unexploded ordnance.

But for most other humanitarian purposes, military assets should be requested only as a last resort when no comparable civilian alternative exists. In ICRC terms, humanitarian assistance to victims of conflict includes so much more than visible assistance activities like provision of food and rehabilitation of schools. The protection of individuals is also at stake, including complex operations like the visiting of prisoners of war, the exchanging of news between families that have been dispersed, the search for people that have gone missing or the dissemination of knowledge and respect for international humanitarian law to guerrilla soldiers. These activities

can at times be far more valuable than bringing onto the theatre a large number of trucks, helicopters and engineers.

Let me sum up: When political and military leaders consider deploying military assets for explicit humanitarian purposes, they should ask themselves: Should this humanitarian space be left to the humanitarian organizations? Will the military assets be deployed in areas where humanitarian organizations truly cannot work? Is it in the interests of the victims? Will it endanger civilians?

And finally: What is the underlying motive behind the deployment – is it primarily humanitarian? If not – if the logic is more to contribute to stabilization and security – should it not be stated very clearly that this is the key purpose of the mission?

Most importantly, when armed forces carry out humanitarian tasks, they must be clear on the fact that they are military. Military and humanitarian actors must be distinguishable not only in substance but also in appearance. It is a worrying sign when military teams carry out assistance programmes in areas where war is still going on, dressed in civilian clothes and driving white civilian cars.

In conclusion: This is a debate about words – and it is a debate about reality. Both debates are of great importance. The words we use influence our perception of reality. Seminars such as this one can help us bridge some of the gaps. I would also take the opportunity to welcome the recent initiative taken by the Norwegian Government to address the security situation of humanitarian assistance. In Geneva last December, State Secretary Vidar Helgesen hosted a first round table discussion on this issue, inviting a variety of government and Red Cross representatives. Mr Helgesen stressed: "Governments must do their part in dealing with impediments to humanitarian assistance and seek to assist in establishing a security environment that can ensure the provision of humanitarian aid."

I would then add: An important condition is to help preserving the roles and mandates of military and humanitarian missions as clear and distinct as possible.

Let me end by repeating my answer to today's question: We need both cooperation and separation between humanitarian organizations and international security operations.

In the face of armed violence and conflict a complementary two-pronged approach, with two principal objectives, is required. The first objective is to deal with the root causes of the crisis; in other words to search for a political and military settlement. The second is to alleviate the people's suffering because of the crisis.

In this framework, political, military and humanitarian players should cooperate, while maintaining respect for their respective responsibilities, mandates and competence - rather than creating confusion by mixing the roles.

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