Uncertain Partners: NGOs and the Military

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The 1990s witnessed an explosion of Western military involvement in complex emergency operations requiring cooperation with relief agencies. Recent operations include a failed attempt to reconstitute viable central government in Somalia, return of democratically-elected government to Haiti, alleviation of human suffering in Rwanda and Zaire, operations to end conflict and support multi-ethnic government in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and an effort to stop ethnic terror in Kosovo. In these operations US and allied militaries, UN agencies and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have worked together to ameliorate the suffering caused by war and poor governance. Yet, despite this mounting experience, the military has failed to take advantage of the skills and capabilities of relief agencies. As a result, operations are often needlessly chaotic. At best, this chaos leads to a waste of time and effort; at worst, the cost is measured in lives and suffering.

The crisis in Rwanda illustrates the heavy price of failure. After the 1994 genocide and massive refugee flows, the US and allied militaries assisted relief workers aiding Hutu refugees in Zaire, Rwanda, and elsewhere in the region. Poor planning and coordination were the hallmark of both the military and relief operations. Military officers did not know the capabilities of various NGOs, ignoring their knowledge of sanitation, water purification, and other essentials. Over 100 NGOs were active, yet they did not inform the international community or one another of their activities or presence. Planes landed on airports with limited ramp space and insufficient fuel. Because of poor planning, non-priority cargo often landed before essential items, such as water treatment equipment. Thousands died each day due to a lack of clean water and proper sanitation.

Aside from these operational blunders, overall political direction was disastrous. No country took the lead, and the United Nations could not fill the void. France and the United States worked at cross-purposes. Even more damning, the relief actually aided the perpetrators of genocide, strengthening the Hutu interahamwe, who were responsible for the mass killings of Tutsis and Hutu moderates in Rwanda. Aid to these killers eventually led the civil war to re-ignite and consume Zaire as well.
Although Rwanda is an extreme example of what can go wrong, the problems of a lack of prior coordination, limited military familiarity with relief agencies and strategic and operational chaos are all too common in humanitarian emergencies. Relief officials often shy away from the question of how, and to what degree, the military can contribute to relief operations. Military officials, particularly in the United States, fear that by improving their capabilities they will be called on to carry out these missions rather than being able to devote themselves to what they consider their primary mission: warfighting.4

Military forces often do not take advantage of many of the capabilities the relief community has to offer. Coordination is plagued by a range of problems, particularly a lack of an established leadership structure or a clear division of labour. Even more daunting, both relief agencies and the military have highly-distinct organisational cultures and their time-horizons differ remarkably. On a more basic level, the two communities lack familiarity with the other. Relief agencies’ emphasis on neutrality and impartiality further inhibits cooperation. Relief agencies are also reluctant to plan systematically or share information, and are sceptical about the military’s true commitment to humanitarian relief.

Not all the above problems can be solved, but many can be reduced or overcome. Changing attitudes due to repeated interaction in recent years have softened much of the relief-agency suspicion of the military, improving the overall prospects for cooperation. For the military, a strategy to improve coordination would require a range of steps, including taking measures to assure familiarity, establishing an institutional presence focused on relief agencies, improving information sharing, supporting long-term planning and developing procedures to improve the flow of aid. The military must work with civilian agencies to implement these changes.

Given the magnitude of this topic and the relative dearth of analysis of many basic questions related to it, this essay focuses on the question of what the military can do to improve coordination with relief agencies. The obvious corollary of this question – what can relief agencies do at their end – is left for future work.

Military Tasks

Complex contingency operations – the cumbersome but official US government term to describe a subcategory of humanitarian operations – demand the coordination of multiple actors to perform difficult humanitarian tasks. The Clinton administration defined the term ‘complex contingency operations’ by examples:

... peace operations such as the peace accord implementation operation conducted by NATO in Bosnia (1995–present) and the humanitarian intervention in North Iraq called Operation Provide Comfort (1991); and foreign humanitarian assistance operations, such as Operation Support Hope in Central Africa (1994) and Operation Sea Angel in Bangladesh (1991).5

The term does not include smaller operations such as domestic disaster relief,
counter-terrorism, hostage rescue and non-combatant evacuation. Nor, at the other extreme, does it include international armed conflict.

Complex contingency operations are demanding. They often require balancing uncertain domestic support, differing allied goals, varying bureaucratic interests and other political factors, often for a considerable length of time. Moreover, they often require a response to man-made crises such as civil war or failed governance. The military will normally play (or should normally play) a supporting role during humanitarian crises, helping relief agencies provide assistance rather than taking the lead. The military should accomplish tasks unrelated to its core mission only when no civilian agency could do the job quickly enough or well enough under the circumstances. But exceptions can be the rule during the first phases of complex contingency operations, while the situation remains unstable and civilian agencies are not yet fully able to carry out their responsibilities.

Protecting relief supplies is a common, and often vital, task for the military. In a lawless environment, any armed group may attempt to plunder or divert relief supplies. Banditry is not the only threat. Belligerents often try to obstruct or divert humanitarian aid in order to deny aid to their enemies or reward their own supporters. In Somalia and the Sudan, several large relief organisations found that over 80% of food supplies were lost due to theft or misappropriation. To secure humanitarian assistance, the military may also have to secure warehouses, convoy routes, distribution points, airports and seaports.

Relief agencies, however, typically take a very different attitude towards diversions, banditry and graft than does the military, creating a potential source of friction. Major NGOs often ‘don’t want to shoot people for taking the food that they brought’.6 UNHCR makes this comment:

Because of the need to negotiate with armed groups for access to displaced people and other conflict-affected populations, aid agencies often implicitly accept that a proportion of their relief will go to the very groups which are waging the war.7

On this principle, relief agencies would avoid confrontation, which the military would routinely accept.

At times, the military may also protect relief workers in addition to relief supplies. Belligerents may try to disrupt the aid flow by attacking the aid providers or by intimidating them. In Angola, Burundi, Chechnya, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan and other countries, belligerents have attacked and murdered relief personnel.8 Securing NGO personnel can be exceptionally difficult because NGOs usually have to disperse their workers in order to accomplish their missions. For example, NGOs had 585 offices, residences, feeding centres, clinics and other facilities scattered throughout Mogadishu during Operation Restore Hope. NGOs refused to consolidate their activities because they wanted to maintain close contact with the local population.9

Another common reason to cooperate is when the military is tasked to assist refugees or internally displaced persons.10 In many instances, belligerents deliberately caused flows of refugees to exact revenge or to permanently conquer territory. Such refugee flows occurred as a result of conflicts in Bosnia,
Burundi, Croatia, Georgia, Kosovo and Rwanda. More common, but far more
difficult to document, are the presence of large number of internally displaced
people, who are often undercounted and whose condition is not known.
Military forces may help establish refugee camps, secure these camps and keep
order within them, and support return or resettlement of refugees.11

The military also is often required to enforce a negotiated peace or
charged with such vague instructions as ‘restoring order’ or ‘establishing a
secure environment’. Such missions require military forces to separate
belligerent forces and disarm formerly warring factions. In Bosnia, NATO
forces helped enforce arms limitations under the Dayton Agreement. In
Kosovo, they attempted to disarm the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) under
an agreement concluded with its leadership. Especially during the initial
phase of an operation, military forces cannot escape responsibility for
maintaining public order. On 20–21 December 1989, US forces quickly seized
Panama against sporadic, but occasionally fierce, resistance. But following
the invasion, looting and violence broke out in Panama City, requiring
military police to intervene.12

Coordination
Smooth coordination with NGOs is essential for rapidly distributing aid in the
early days of the crisis. In many developing countries, the problem of
distribution is particularly acute. Often, airfields are small and port facilities
limited. Roads are non-existent or in poor condition due to nature, war, or
both.13 Skilled workers are rare, communications equipment is often lacking or
obsolete, and material handling equipment for unloading is also often absent,
limited, or dilapidated. NGOs, however, are often skilled at finding available
transportation, identifying the right officials to bribe or pressure, exploiting
local family or religious networks and otherwise overcoming distribution
problems.

In addition to helping ensure the rapid flow of aid, relief agencies are highly
responsive to the needs of victims, and their input can make the assessment
process far more accurate.14 Because they are often in-country for many years,
relief agencies understand the sensitivities of the local culture and the
immediate needs of the populace. Catholic Relief Services, for example, has
been active in Rwanda for over 30 years and in the former Yugoslavia for over
50.15 They have language skills and personal links to the community through
friendship, personal origin, ethnicity and marriage. They may also know the
local security and political situation better than other observers. In addition,
relief agency officials often live next to the peoples in question and employ
large numbers of locals, giving them excellent local sources of information.
NGOs at times have access to individuals who, for whatever reasons, will not
talk to the military, or with whom the military does not wish to associate. At
times, relief agencies are in a place where the military has no presence.16 Even
when NGOs do not have an existing presence to draw on, they often respond
well before national governments do, and they can quickly move people and
small amounts of supplies to trouble spots. As one former American officer put it, ‘NGOs are more expeditionary than the Marine Corps’. In Somalia, Rwanda and elsewhere, several NGOs were often the first on the scene in the early days of the crises. Many NGOs can draw on existing development or missionary networks in a crisis.

Many NGOs offer expertise in a wide range of relief needs. Some NGOs specialise in sanitation, fighting disease, or providing food, and they employ personnel who have done these tasks for decades or more in a variety of countries. Leading NGOs and UN agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have valuable rules of thumb regarding the food and water needs of civilian populations: knowledge the military has for combat operations, but not for humanitarian missions. Equally important, NGOs are often experienced at providing food and medical care to huge numbers of people in crisis situations.

Since relief agencies stay on the scene long after an intervention, they are ideal partners for taking over the humanitarian aspects of the military’s mission. Once a crisis is stabilised, the military can pass on many, if not all, its tasks to humanitarian organisations or UN agencies. This provides an ‘exit strategy’, often a necessary political condition for humanitarian intervention. In Rwanda, for example, Western military forces took the lead in providing potable water to refugee camps, but over time the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) took over responsibility for overall coordination, while the WFP and UNICEF assumed control of food, water, and sanitation.

**Coordination Structures and Their Limits**

A large number of disparate actors are involved in providing humanitarian assistance, complicating efforts to improve coordination. These include the relief community, donor countries, host countries and regional organisations. At times, everyone and no one may seem to be in charge. Military forces may not receive entirely clear missions and be compelled to improvise, or the mission may change in disconcerting ways.

Within the US government, military participation in complex contingencies may be hampered by a slow or feeble interagency process. The departments and agencies of government – especially State, Defense, the US Agency for International Development, Justice, and the Central Intelligence Agency – must often work together in unaccustomed ways.

Poor as it may be, the US interagency process is a model of efficiency and clarity compared with the international aspects of coordination during complex contingency operations. At times, UN agencies take the lead; at other times the host nation provides leadership; at times an interested regional organisation (such as NATO or the Economic Community of West African States) heads the effort; and often the United States, Australia, or another interested power assumes de facto leadership. The division of labour among these actors is seldom spelled out clearly and leads to confusion, redundancy and many gaps.
The arrangements for Bosnia are so complex as to appear unworkable: the division of labour among NATO member countries, UN agencies, and other key actors is both ambiguous and overlapping.23

Coordination Across the United Nations
In general, coordination within the UN family of organisations is inherently difficult because specialised agencies are not subordinate to the Secretary-General and therefore not compelled to cooperate. On paper, the United Nations appears to have solved the problem of coordination by creating a new Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), but in fact, OCHA’s budget was slashed after other agencies rebelled in response to the threat it posed to their autonomy. It lacks the budget, personnel or bureaucratic authority to impose coordination.24

Moreover, in recent years a rival concept to OCHA has emerged, further complicating the picture. During the protracted Bosnia conflict, and more recently during the Kosovo crisis, the UNHCR has played the role of lead agency within the UN family. Such leadership was natural because massive flows of refugees dominated in both cases and played to the UNHCR’s specialty, but this de facto role supplants or disrupts the United Nations’ formally declared arrangements. The danger is that a lead agency will give priority to its own requirements at the expense of an overall effort.

UN organisations have other limitations that can detract from their usefulness. UNHCR and the WFP are more nimble than other UN organisations, but even they can be slow and bureaucratic, particularly compared with NGOs. In contrast to NGOs, UN agencies work primarily with host governments, even when these governments are repressive, incompetent or corrupt. To maintain good relations with the host government, UN organisations may serve groups favoured by the host government, rather than distribute aid according to need. In addition, the host government may misappropriate and profit from relief supplies. In the interests of transparency, UN organisations may share information with such states, even to the detriment of military operations.25

Coordination Among NGOs
NGO coordination is often particularly poor. The NGO community includes disparate actors, ranging from influential players such as CARE to small organisations, some created just to address the particular crisis. Each of these actors makes decisions independently. Particularly during the initial phase of a humanitarian crisis, each may pursue its own course of action, subject only to conditions that donors and host countries may impose.

NGOs have no formal arrangements to promote coordination at the operational level, either within a single NGO or across all NGOs. At strategic level, they have headquarters that generally advocate humanitarian action, raise funds for the organisation, and assure adherence to standards. At tactical level, they have field offices, which have day-to-day responsibility for
programmes. There is no intermediate level arrangement to promote coordination until after a Civil–Military Operations Centre – the operational body that facilitates NGO-military cooperation in the field – is established on the ground.

NGOs often do not coordinate well within their own organisations, leading to disruptions during relief operations. The concerns of NGO field officers often differ considerably from those of their home agencies. Not surprisingly, field officers focus on day-to-day operations; at the national level, however, NGOs are concerned with pleasing their donors and maintaining a positive image for the overall organisation.26

Despite a lack of formal structure, coordination is not completely absent. Although NGOs appear anarchic, they have informal webs that promote coordination, at least among organisations funded by a strong donor. For example, USAID expects that US-funded NGOs will consult among themselves to develop practical divisions of labour.27 Some larger NGOs also have central headquarters to promote coordination among their nationally based affiliates. In addition, many are members of professional organisations that do not coordinate operations but do promote professional standards and share information.28

These many informal coordination structures, however, do little to promote NGO–military cooperation before a deployment is underway or during the early days of an operation. Military and relief officials have no way of knowing one another’s personnel, capabilities, or intentions before a crisis unfolds, making advanced planning almost impossible. Only after a Civil–Military Operations Center is established is there an institutionalised way for the military and the relief community to coordinate procedures and priorities.

**Barriers to Better Coordination**

Differences in organisational culture are a formidable barrier to NGO–military coordination. Rather than being hierarchical, with a clear and orderly assignment of responsibility and authority, most NGOs are decentralised, and much debate can be required before a consensus-based decision is reached. Accustomed to this autonomy, many NGO personnel have little patience with military hierarchies. In addition, some NGO personnel are sceptical about the morality and efficacy of military force. They are accustomed to regarding the military as part of the problem and remain critical even while armed forces provide essential support. Nor are the values and lifestyles of many NGO employees always compatible with values prevalent in the military. The NGO community features church-based aid multinationals represented by nuns and sophisticated groups of highly qualified scientific, technical and medical professionals, but it also includes people whose values and lifestyles are in sharp contrast to those of military officers.29 Finally, NGOs often wonder why well-armed US military units emphasise force protection while working in areas where NGOs (and at times non-US Western military forces) have long operated without protection.
Because of these cultural differences, NGO and military officials often do not understand each other’s priorities or procedures and resent what they see as indifference on the other side.

These cultural differences, however, are often overstated and mask many similarities that make coordination easier. Like the military, NGO personnel are often highly idealistic, willing to dedicate their lives to helping others. Many NGO personnel are exceptionally brave, living and working in war zones where banditry and disease are common. NGO personnel, especially those in the field, are also focused on the mission and are willing to think creatively. Finally, like many military officers, NGO personnel are comfortable with foreign cultures and ideas and have an international perspective.

Concerns about Neutrality and Impartiality

NGOs rely on their neutrality to protect themselves. They want local authorities and warring parties to feel that NGO personnel are basically harmless, possibly even useful. In essence, these organisations stay safe by making themselves non-threatening; their weakness ‘protects’ them. The ICRC and many NGOs also embrace neutrality in their ideology. They seek to provide aid to all individuals, regardless of their political position or past activities.

Even though they may need an armed guard or a military escort in a particular situation, NGOs may fear that, in the long run, association with a military threatens their impartial image and thus endangers them. As Jean-Francois Vidal of Action Against Hunger noted, ‘Our protection is usually the perception people have of us. We are endangered when we appear close to the military.’ NGOs thus often guard against even the appearance of partiality by avoiding unnecessary contact with military staff. This concern, while understandable, hinders closer personal relations and the communication that often ensures smooth operations.

Preserving neutrality and impartiality, however, becomes difficult – and often impossible – when the United Nations or a member state such as the United States undertakes peace enforcement. As Joelle Tanguy, the Executive Director of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) noted:

I’m afraid that in the minds of Americans and Europeans, the military and the relief organisations are working on one side of the war together ... We’re all part of the same operation, but we can’t be. Independence is our main asset – to be able to walk into a war zone and act as independent relief workers.

In Somalia, for example, the United States and the UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) II attempted to apprehend the Somali warlord Mohammad Farah Aideed, thereby forfeiting impartiality, at least in the eyes of his supporters. NGOs feared that this loss of neutrality would impede their operations, leading belligerents to see them as allied with combatants. Their concern was justified: World Vision personnel were attacked by militia forces expressing their displeasure with the US-led enforcement.
Relief officials have more difficulty working with the US military than with those of smaller powers, such as Canada or Sweden, because the United States usually has a political agenda – or is seen as having one. Relief agencies often fear being seen as US pawns, even in cases like Rwanda, where the American concern was almost entirely humanitarian.

The NGO emphasis on impartiality and independence hinders long-term planning with military forces. Cooperation that requires a formal, public relationship, or seems to limit the autonomy of NGOs, will be resisted by many NGO leaders. This independence is often an asset, as it allows NGOs to operate where organisations tied to the US or other Western governments are not welcome, but it hinders coordination beyond *ad hoc* measures.

**Ambivalence About Sharing Information**

Information is not routinely shared. Military deployments and capabilities are often classified. Many NGO officials, in turn, see little need to volunteer information on their activities. In Rwanda, neither NGOs, the United Nations, nor the US military were aware of which NGOs were present and operating. Many NGOs do not register with any embassy or otherwise try to make their presence known. In Rwanda, Somalia and other crises, NGOs often simply appeared without making any arrangements to be received. No pre-established channels for contact exist between deploying forces and relevant relief agencies.

Although NGOs are open with information concerning the needs of suffering people, they are often reluctant to share information on other areas with the US military. Some NGO officials worry that the military seeks to collect information that goes well beyond the immediate crisis. NGOs are hesitant to provide information on personnel and staff. NGOs are often particularly reluctant to share information on the host government, fearing that it will compromise their access to crisis zones.

The information NGOs provide is at times skewed. Many relief personnel are new to the crisis area and know little about local conditions or actors beyond their immediate area of operation. Relief agencies also have a financial interest in dramatising a crisis: they know that day-to-day misery receives far less support than do sudden, heart-wrenching crises that grab media attention. Thus, they may play up suffering in order to gain funding for their less-glamorous activities.

**Varying Time Horizons**

Being on the scene after the military departs gives NGOs a different perspective on relief operations. NGOs cannot afford poor relations with locals, no matter how thuggish. They must weigh the benefits of short-term cooperation with the military against the possible negative consequences of long-term alienation. Although in the short-term, an NGO may be safer due to outside military protection, this may fatally compromise the organisation in the eyes of the locals after the military forces depart. Thus NGOs are often highly
reluctant to accept offers of security if they plan to continue operations in the
country in the long-term. Moreover, NGO officials have learned from past
experience that the US military in particular can depart quickly with little
warning.

NGOs are particularly sceptical of the US military’s focus on the ‘exit
strategy’. Because NGOs will remain in the country after the military has
departed, they do not share the military’s focus on accomplishing the tasks at
hand to facilitate an on-time departure. Often, they see this talk as proof that
the military is not committed to solving the problem thoroughly.

**Mutual Lack of Familiarity**

Although familiarity has grown in the last decade, military officers and NGO
officials often have little understanding of each other’s institutions and
operating procedures. At best, Western militaries have made sporadic and
even efforts to engage the relief community. Many military officials lack
understanding of the distinct hierarchies, charters and doctrines of relief
agencies, failing to recognise that what works with the International Rescue
Committee (IRC) will not work with the International Committee of the Red
Cross (ICRC).37 The military also fails to recognise key distinctions among
NGOs. Although there are thousands of organisations, the operational
capabilities of all but a few are highly limited. Despite the hundreds of NGOs
that may be active in a particular crisis, in general, only a few do most of the
heavy lifting – and these few are active in most crises around the world. The
Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE), World Vision,
MSF, Oxfam, Save the Children, Catholic Relief Services, Caritas and the
International Rescue Committee, to name several of the main ones, are the best
funded, best trained and most able.

The reason for this lack of knowledge is institutional. Over the past decade,
many officers have worked with relief agencies, but little effort has been made
by the military to retain this knowledge. In the US military, only civil affairs
officials routinely work with NGOs, and almost all these capabilities are in the
reserves. Obtaining knowledge before a crisis, when the reserves are less likely
to be deployed, is therefore difficult. Although local country teams bear some
responsibility for tracking NGO activities, in practice, local embassies are often
overextended and have little knowledge of aid agency activities.

This problem is compounded by a corresponding ignorance of the military
on the part of NGO officials. Military organisation, hierarchies and capa-
bilities are often understood through movies rather than through experience.
Even ICRC officials have little knowledge of the military or how it operates,
despite their regular presence in war zones. As a result, aid organisations
have often made unrealistic demands on the military. In Somalia, for
example, aid organisation personnel expected an almost instant deployment
of US personnel throughout Somalia after the decision to intervene was
announced.38 Similarly, some NGOs assume that the United States has superb
intelligence on any crisis. US officials’ claims that they did not know where
internally displaced people were or understand the local political situation were met with scepticism.\textsuperscript{39}

**Uncertainty About the Military’s Commitment**

Many NGOs are reluctant to invest in better coordination with the military unless they can see long-term benefits. Most NGOs are small organisations with limited resources. They hesitate to invest in exercises and planning, knowing that Western governments may not deploy military forces even if the crisis is severe. NGOs generally believe that any identity of interest between themselves and the US military, for instance, is likely to be limited and transitory.

**Improving Prospects for Cooperation**

Some of these problems, however, have lessened over the last decade. Negative stereotypes are waning, though they remain a factor that interferes with cooperation. In the past, many military officers viewed NGO workers as young, anti-military, self-righteous, incompetent and unappreciative of security needs.\textsuperscript{40} Jonathan Dworken notes, ‘Officers simply did not see women in their late-twenties with Birkenstock sandals and “Save the Whales” T-shirts as experts worthy of consultation.’\textsuperscript{41} However, there is evidence of changing attitudes on both sides. Almost all NGO personnel and military officials interviewed by the author noted their respect for each other and the need for consultation and cooperation. Most military officers who had worked with NGOs in crises noted their bravery and dedication and generally praised their professionalism. In recent years, a number of military officers have gone to work for major NGOs such as CARE, greatly increasing mutual understanding.

Repeated interaction during crises, and a decline in ideological tension due to the end of the Cold War, has helped reduce NGO suspicion of the military. NGO officials recognise that the military can often respond to a crisis quickly. In addition, NGO members recognise that the military has made, and is making, a genuine effort to improve its knowledge of NGOs and humanitarian relief problems in general. Several interlocutors interviewed by this author noted that NGO officials have far more respect for the military than they did just ten years ago.

Growing NGO concerns about their own security are also leading them to shed some of their concerns about closer ties to the military. Many NGOs report a lessening of respect for neutral parties present in a conflict, a breakdown of spoken and unspoken rules safeguarding helpers. A number of MSF doctors have been killed and its personnel and property have been targeted in Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia and Sierra Leone. Its volunteers work under serious threat in Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, Liberia, Chechnya, Rwanda and Congo. An MSF activity report notes that ‘worldwide conflicts in which the impartial provision of humanitarian aid is less and less respected are becoming more common.’\textsuperscript{42} Concerns about evacuation in a crisis also are prompting many NGOs to seek better military relations.\textsuperscript{43}
Conclusion

More effective provision of relief requires overcoming or minimising many of the problems that currently inhibit cooperation between the military and relief agencies. Many of these problems stem from cultural differences, the uncertain political commitment behind Western military intervention and other fundamental differences. Nevertheless, considerable progress can be made in improving familiarity, pre-planning and the flow of aid. Meeting these objectives requires institutional changes in the US and other militaries and revised procedures for humanitarian operations. At a minimum, military leaders should ensure that key personnel are familiar with those relief organisations that are essential to humanitarian operations. By hosting conferences, conducting exercises, providing briefings and offering courses at military educational institutes, the military can improve overall awareness of relief agency capabilities and concerns. At the same time, they should help these same organisations become more familiar with the military’s organisation and capabilities. Relevant organisations would include the UNHCR, the WFP, the ICRC and those NGOs that traditionally play a leading role in humanitarian operations, such as CARE, MSF and the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The military should focus on NGOs that are highly competent, broadly capable, and inclined to cooperate with the military. Examples include CARE, the IRC, and Save the Children. Most of them receive substantial support from the US government, including grants, contracts and in-kind transfers, and most of them work closely with OFDA to coordinate the US response to an emergency. Other Western militaries also should cultivate close relations with NGOs, in particular, those that receive substantial financial support from their governments. The German government, for example, works closely with the Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ). This synergy will enable allies and the NGOs with whom they have established relations to bring more to the table. NGOs’ willingness to accommodate military concerns will increase if donors encourage relief agencies to improve coordination.

Not all NGOs are open to better relations with the military. Some organisations, like MSF, while highly capable, are less disposed to cooperate. Although they often receive funding from Western governments, they prize their independence and may reject support from the military or criticise it in strong terms, even while accepting its support. The impressive capabilities and regular presence of these organisations should be acknowledged, but the military should not expect their systematic coordination.

Having identified key actors for more selective engagement, the military should take steps in advance of any crisis to improve relations and familiarity. These steps include establishing contact with key NGOs, inviting NGOs into the planning process, asking NGO officials to help design – not just participate in – exercises, and transporting key NGO personnel during crises. Engagement would speed response and increase efficiency during all phases of humanitarian crisis, but especially during the initial phase when delay might cost lives.44 The military should initiate actions to improve the rapid delivery of relief during the early days of a crisis. In general, the relief community
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provides aid more efficiently and more cheaply than the military and should be encouraged to carry out this task whenever possible. However, when a crisis is sudden and massive, relief agency capabilities are often not sufficient. Thus rapid military support, often through airlift, may become essential.

Institutionally, several changes are necessary to foster coordination and learning. To improve its ability to coordinate with NGOs, the United States’ various Unified Commands should designate a humanitarian affairs adviser to be responsible for pre-crisis liaison with relevant agencies in the United Nations family and NGOs in the command’s area of responsibility. This adviser should develop personal contact with NGOs, whose comparative lack of bureaucracy make their personnel more responsive to personal relationships than to institutional ties. All NGO officials interviewed by this author stressed the importance of personal relations – ‘We want someone in our rolodex to call,’ noted one aid official. The adviser should also track command personnel with experience in complex emergencies and know which individuals have relations with relief personnel. During crises, the adviser should be the command’s point of contact with NGOs, accompanying the initial deployments to help set up a Civilian–Military Operations Centre and otherwise ensure orderly NGO–military coordination.

To ensure long-term familiarity, establishing more institutions to promote familiarity and pre-crisis communication would help coordination during a crisis. The US Department of Defense currently sponsors a Centre of Excellence (COE) in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance, affiliated with US Pacific Command (USPACOM). Another was established in 1999 to work with US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM). The Centre of Excellence develops training materials, presents courses in humanitarian assistance and facilitates flows of information among international organisations, NGOs, government agencies and the military. Beyond these activities, the centre provides a source of expertise in humanitarian assistance that is constantly available to USPACOM. The other major unified commands, particularly US Europe Command (USEUCOM) – which is responsible for the Balkans and sub-Saharan Africa, where many complex contingencies may occur in the future – should consider supporting a partnership with the centres of excellence that currently work with USPACOM or USSOUTHCOM or develop their own such centres.

Although the military can significantly improve coordination with relief agencies, many of the solutions to the problems identified in this essay lie outside the military’s spheres of responsibility. In the American case, many fixes require actions across the US government, involving the services, the military commands, the joint staff, the Defense Department and civilian agencies. Efforts such as engaging NGOs and improving the flow of aid require not only cooperation between relief agencies and the military, but also among donor countries and host countries at high political levels.

As far as the United States is concerned, much will depend on the more fundamental question of whether intervention in complex emergencies is accepted as a central task for American military forces. The new administration
of President George W. Bush is sceptical about such interventions: during the presidential campaign the Bush team criticised the Clinton administration for committing US forces to ‘nation building’, and since becoming president, Bush has promised US military personnel that they would be returned to being ‘trained and prepared to fight and win war’. Whether or not the Bush administration’s determination to avoid complex emergencies will hold remains uncertain.

Some Western militaries, such as those of Canada and the Netherlands, focus largely on humanitarian operations. Until the United States elevates the importance of these operations, the resources necessary to organise, train and equip US forces for interventions in these crises, and the associated doctrinal developments, are likely to be inadequate. And, civilian agencies may not take the appropriate steps to improve their coordination with the military until the US commitment is more clear. Yet these constraints are not an excuse for inaction. However the political debate turns out, US and other Western military forces will inevitably be involved, together with NGOs, in responding to complex humanitarian emergencies. The military can improve its performance by recognising problems, advocating workable solutions and promoting these solutions before crises occur.
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Notes
1 According to US military joint doctrine, a non-government organisation (NGO) is ‘a transnational, nonprofit organisation of private citizens that maintains a consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Nongovernment organisations may be professional associations, foundations, multinational businesses, or simply groups with a common interest in humanitarian assistance (development and relief).’ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Interagency Coordination During Joint Operations*, Joint Publication 3-08, Volume II, Washington DC, 9 October 1996, pp. 1–15, footnote 3. A ‘private voluntary organisation’ (PVO) is an NGO that is properly registered with USAID. Tens of thousands of NGOs exist, and their numbers grow rapidly by the day.

2 This essay uses the term ‘relief agencies’ to refer to UN agencies (particularly the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), World Food Programme (WFP), and United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), NGOs and the International Commission of the Red Cross (ICRC), all of which are important providers of humanitarian relief. These organisations, however, are often quite distinct. This essay discusses the relevant attributes of these organisations as a whole or discreetly as appropriate.


4 Relevant works on humanitarian operations and intervention include Ben Barber, ‘Feeding Refugees, Or War?’ *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no.4 (July/August 1997), pp. 8–14; Richard K. Betts, ‘The Delusion of Impartial Intervention,’ *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 6 (November/December 1994), pp. 20–33; Jonathan Dworken, ‘Coordinating Relief Operations,’ *Joint Forces Quarterly* (Summer 1995) and Jonathan Dworken, *Improving Marine Coordination with Relief Organisations*.
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6 Authors’ interview with NGO official, December 1998.


8 UNHCR, State of the World’s Refugees, p. 48 and 132.


10 Refugees are persons who have fled across international borders, due either to conflict or to fear of persecution. Internally displaced persons have fled for similar reasons, but within the territory of a recognised state.


13 Ensuring a smooth flow of relief supplies is often complicated by host nation sensitivities or poor capabilities. Many African governments are not willing to set priorities for relief (or, at times, care little whether one segment of the population is hungry or in need). Few have advanced air traffic control capabilities. Often they try to block information about crises for political or bureaucratic reasons.

14 NGO and other relief agencies’ knowledge and capabilities, however,
should not be overstated. NGO logistics are highly flexible, but they cannot match the overwhelming capacity of the US military. Several NGO interlocutors and outside experts criticised NGOs’ assertions of expertise, claiming that they often did not understand the big picture or lacked in-depth knowledge.

15 Interview with Amy Hilleboe, Catholic Relief Services, March 1999.

16 The ICRC often must talk to warlords, guerrillas and terrorists in order to fulfill its charter related to the care of prisoners. In Rwanda and Somalia, the NGOs often had operations in place in areas where the military was not allowed on a regular basis due to force-protection concerns.

17 Interview with US military officer, February 1999.

18 NGOs, of course, do not respond rapidly to all crises. When a crisis is sudden and massive, NGO capabilities are often strained. Moreover, NGOs are not prepared for particular types of crises, such as environmental disasters (for example, the explosion of the Bhopal plant in India).

19 Interview with Lauren Landis, Save the Children, January 1999.


21 The major donor countries usually include the United States, major European countries (individually and through the European Union), and Japan.

22 See Pirnie, Civilians and Soldiers.

23 Indeed, they would be unworkable if the major powers did not share a common understanding of the goals and promote these goals in various venues, including the Security Council, the North Atlantic Council, the Peace Implementation Council, the OSCE and the Contact Group.

24 Interview with NGO and OCHA officials.

25 Interview with Maura O’Donohue, Catholic Medical Mission Board, March 1999.

26 Dworken, Improving Marine Coordination, p. 16.

27 Interview with Anita Menghetti, (OFDA), May 1999.

28 Examples include the US-based American Council for Voluntary International Aid (InterAction), the European-based Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergency (VOICE) and the International Council of Voluntary Organisations (ICVA).

29 In the early 1970s, one author described the counter-culture flavour of the NGO community as ‘a colorful collection of Woodstock grads, former Merry Pranksters and other assorted acid-heads, eco-freaks, save-the-whalers, doomsday mystics, poets and hangers-on’. Wade Rowland, The Plot to Save the World (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1973), p. 1. While the details of this description have dated, a certain sector of the NGO community retains its ‘alternative’ cast.

30 The ‘Code of Conduct for NGOs in Disaster Relief’ spearheaded by the ICRC, the Red Crescent, Save the Children, Oxfam, the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches lists the most important principles that should guide NGOs in disaster response. To the point of redundancy, the first four of these principles reiterate the goals of independence and autonomy.

31 Interview conducted in March 1999.


33 Seiple, The US Military/NGO
Relationship, p. 45. Interviews with relief officials corroborate this point.


Ibid, p. 150.

The ICRC, for its part, fears to be seen as spying – by both local parties and US officials – because its officials regularly meet with people on all sides of a conflict.


Interview with Annemarie Reilly, Catholic Relief Services, March 1999.


Interview with Annemarie Reilly, Catholic Relief Services, March 1999.

Selection of key NGOs for closer engagement is an expedient to focus the military’s effort. Selection should not imply that the command would favor selected NGOs or discriminate against NGOs that are not selected. The list should be open to constant revision.

Interview with Amy Helleboe, Catholic Relief Services, March 1999.

Congressional mandate established the COE in October 1994. It currently has 26 personnel, many seconded from other organisations including the Center for Disease Control (CDC), and an annual budget of $5 million. Center of Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance, Annual Report 1998 (Center of Excellence, Tripler Army Medical Center, Hawaii, 1998), p. 7.

Other commands have no need to duplicate services already performed by a COE and generally available to a wider community, such as training in disaster response and data management. But other commands could profit from a small agency (approximately 6–8 personnel) dedicated to improving humanitarian response within their area of responsibility. Analogous to COE, this agency might be DoD-funded but responsive to a larger community of interested parties, including not only the command but also key allies and academic institutions.

Pirnie, Civilians and Soldiers.