

# Civil-military relations in Afghanistan

compiled by Tim Morris

*There is a considerable degree of confusion both among the humanitarian community and the Afghan population over the various military forces present in Afghanistan, particularly with regard to their respective mandates and humanitarian support/liaison operations.*

Unlike recent peacekeeping experiences in the Balkans, the civil-military relationship in Afghanistan is complicated by the fact that there are two distinct foreign military forces operating in the country.

The British-led, multinational International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) works under UN mandate in the Kabul area. Its troops operate in uniform. ISAF has a large CIMIC - civil and military co-operation - component and is undertaking relatively small-scale humanitarian support projects in and around Kabul.

The US-led coalition force has a presence in several regions of the country, is conducting offensive military operations in pursuit of various wanted individuals and is not operating under a UN mandate. It has a large civil-military element (the Combined Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force - CJCMOTF) that is currently implementing a \$5m humanitarian support programme throughout the country. Many coalition forces, including both those engaged in military operations and those engaged in humanitarian support activities, operate in civilian attire and carry weapons. The CJCMOTF has established Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Centres (CHLCs) in several major urban areas around the country. CHLC staff do not wear uniform and carry concealed and/or unconcealed weapons. CJCMOTF works closely with the Afghan Interim Administration (IA) and USAID (whose staff occasionally use US military forces for logistical support).

The current situation in Afghanistan continues a trend towards growing military involvement in humanitarian provision since the start of the 1990s. Military operations with humanitarian components have taken place in Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor and elsewhere. This trend has been watched with concern by NGOs since it raises fundamental questions about differences in approach by humanitarian actors and military actors.

The NGO Coordination Meeting convened by the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) in March 2002 expressed concern about the mixed military-humanitarian mandate of coalition forces and the use of civilian clothing and concealed weapons by both combatant and humanitarian support personnel. NGOs operating in Afghanistan are alarmed about the potential confusion created in the minds of Afghans by armed coalition soldiers taking part in civil affairs operations while dressing and operating similarly to NGO staff. Civilian-clad personnel not employed by the humanitarian community include not only US and coalition special operations forces but also personnel from the FBI, CIA and the US Drug Enforcement Administration. There is a real fear that humanitarian action may be seen as a front for intelligence gathering by coalition forces. The presence of non-uniformed, non-humanitarian personnel has led NGOs to review security procedures and undertake visibility campaigns. Staff, vehicles and facilities have had to be marked in an effort to ensure that local populations

do not mistake humanitarian agency staff and assets for those of similarly dressed non-humanitarian personnel using similar vehicles. The US military, which sets great value on the hearts-and-minds benefits of being seen to deliver humanitarian assistance, appears unconcerned about possible threats to the security of NGO personnel.

The UN's Humanitarian Coordinator is sympathetic to the NGOs' concerns and is attempting to maintain a clear separation between the UN humanitarian system and both ISAF and coalition forces. Unfortunately, UN input to CJCMOTF (and ISAF) humanitarian planning appears to be weak. CJCMOTF's only regular contact with the UN system is with the UN Joint Logistics Centre which is staffed primarily by logisticians and is not actively engaged in humanitarian assessment or programming activities.

It is far from certain that the current 'honeymoon' period for coalition and ISAF forces will continue. The US military itself recognises that its mission in Afghanistan is unlike any other. The fact that coalition forces are engaged in on-going offensive military operations will undoubtedly complicate its relationship with local populations, irrespective of how the 'carrot' component of its approach fares. If the coalition's relations with local communities take a turn for the worse, NGOs' association with those forces (whether real or perceived) may well have significant consequences for their ability to safely and effectively provide humanitarian and reconstruction assistance in the months and years ahead.

For the majority of NGOs in Afghanistan, the principles of humanity, independence and impartiality are cornerstones of their programmes. Application of these principles ensures acceptance and access to populations most at risk in circumstances that would prevent assistance and

support by other actors. In the past, NGOs have frequently been able to negotiate access to civilians on all sides of the conflict in Afghanistan and carry out vital humanitarian and lifesaving work. To support their independence and impartiality, NGOs endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy and believe that assistance should not be driven by the political interest of any particular donor. It is important to reaffirm the principles of *The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief* which seek to guard the standards of behaviour of NGOs, maintain independence and maximise the effectiveness and impact to which NGOs aspire.

International and national relief and development organisations have long experience and established networks in Afghanistan and are generally better placed to deliver effective assistance. Usually it is less appropriate for the military to directly implement humanitarian activities when humanitarian agencies are present and capable of delivering services.

The NGO Coordination Meeting recommended that:

- The military should focus on those activities in which they have specific competency: maintaining a secure environment in which humanitarian aid can be delivered; providing a reassuring security presence for both the local population and nascent government; training a new multi-ethnic and non-political national army; assisting and monitoring local forces in their efforts to maintain security and assisting in the disposal of unexploded ordnance, landmines and other armaments.
- If international military forces in Afghanistan do go beyond their security remit they should focus on projects where military engineering expertise could be usefully applied in repairing key infrastructure.
- International military forces should act at all times in such a way that a clear distinction is maintained between military and civilian actors.
- Military personnel involved in conducting civil affairs operations should be in uniform and clearly identifiable as soldiers at all times.
- Staff at the highest levels of political and military authorities should

understand and acknowledge the potential risk to aid workers (arising from confusion between military and NGO actors) and communicate this understanding down the chain of command.

- Transparency must be maintained in any military involvement in civil affairs operations. Soldiers (and intelligence officers) should in no case claim to be in Afghanistan as 'humanitarian workers'.

The US military has partially accommodated the concerns of the NGO community relating to uniforms. Civil military troops in Kabul and Mazar (but not elsewhere in Afghanistan) are now wearing uniforms.

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Material for this article was obtained from a statement released in March 2002 by the NGO Coordination Meeting convened by ACBAR: *The Need for a Clear Distinction between Humanitarian Programme and Military Activities in Afghanistan*. Although the statement was endorsed by many NGOs (members and non-members of ACBAR) it does not necessarily represent the views of all organisations working in Afghanistan. Email: [acbar@acbar-isb.org.pk](mailto:acbar@acbar-isb.org.pk)

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*The British Army's Parachute Regiment on patrol in Kabul, 2002.*

