Insecure environments: the missing piece?

by Matthew Benson

While current reforms address a number of key issues affecting civilians in conflict, they do not address other, arguably more pressing, issues facing the humanitarian community – such as the provision of humanitarian assistance in insecure environments.

The perceived politicisation of humanitarian assistance – resulting from deterioration of the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence – has led to the targeting of national and international humanitarian personnel and their local partners and may also be contributing to physical insecurity for the very beneficiaries that humanitarians seek to assist.

In today's globalised world, poorly practised humanitarianism risks becoming a liability to all humanitarian actors. Humanitarians ought collectively to take the necessary steps to allow for the continued provision of principled humanitarian assistance to intended beneficiaries in even the most insecure of environments.

Humanitarian action is often synonymous with conflict

environments involving some degree of personal risk for humanitarian staff. Today the stakes may be higher than they have been. Attacks on local and international staff and partners of humanitarian actors have increased. Since 1997 the number of major acts of violence (killings, kidnappings and armed attacks resulting in serious injury) committed against aid workers has nearly doubled.[1] Risks may in certain instances be extending to the beneficiaries of assistance. In Iraq analysts have voiced concerns that intended beneficiaries' association with humanitarian actors may increase their physical insecurity and/or lead to their refusal of humanitarian assistance.

A common response to the lack of access is the adoption of Remote Management Operations (RMOs). These are hardly new. RMOs have been implemented by humanitarians under different guises – 'long arm programming', 'remote control', 'remote support', 'partnership', 'cross-border', 'one-off operations', 'hit and run operations', 'aid on the run', 'give and go operations' or 'windows of opportunity' – in Afghanistan, Biafra, Chechnya, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan and elsewhere. Typically ad hoc, RMOs involve the relocation of international staff to safe areas away from the area of operation, leaving operational responsibilities to national staff or local partners (who are perceived – often without evidence – to enjoy more local acceptance than expatriates). As the article by UNHCR's Andrew Harper and José Riera in FMR's Iraq special issue makes clear,[2] RMOs are not a panacea to the challenges faced in insecure environments. Nevertheless, plausible alternatives to RMOs may include the adoption of what some might call a 'bunker mentality', where security restrictions hamper humanitarians from implementing the work the public expects them to do.

While remote management allows for continued service provision, the ability to remain accountable to intended beneficiaries and donors is in many instances compromised. Dangers for national staff and local partners are great and they

are exposed to greater risk than their international counterparts.

The concern voiced by some humanitarian actors, particularly those from outside the UN, that current approaches to enhanced coordination and leadership may lead to the politicisation of humanitarian assistance must also be addressed in the context of insecure environments. This may require a collective re-examination of the shared utility of approaches such as the Cluster Approach and Integrated Missions, which some humanitarian agencies fear may serve to intensify the politicisation of aid and compound threats to safe humanitarian action.

We need a collective examination of threats to principled humanitarianism in insecure environments and to begin searching for innovative solutions. In insecure environments no individual UN agency or local/international NGO is an island and the conduct of some humanitarian actors may have unavoidable repercussions for all 'humanitarian' agencies in the area of operation. Every humanitarian actor has a responsibility to the beneficiaries they seek to assist to search for common solutions to shared challenges. The recent departure of ICRC and MSF from the humanitarian reform discussion table is a cause for concern.

Those engaged in shaping the humanitarian reform process must:

- examine how to extend protection to intended beneficiaries as well as national and international staff

- draft contingency plans for remote management in countries such as Pakistan and Zimbabwe which are likely to suffer chronic turbulence

- address the concern voiced by some non-UN humanitarian actors that the Cluster Approach and integrated missions may politicise humanitarian assistance[3]

- take care before embarking on high-profile activities which could jeopardise the security of all humanitarian actors – such as branding of humanitarian operations in combat zones

and collaboration on advocacy campaigns in insecure areas

- consider the ethics of transferring security risks from expatriate staff to national staff or local NGOs and provide them with more security training

- consider the human resource implications of dependence on remote management: care must be taken to ensure that national staff have the leadership skills and acquire the necessary training and self-reliance to make difficult decisions in response to the rapidly changing operational realities in insecure environments

- consult closely with donors and beneficiaries to ensure they understand the challenges associated with implementation of RMOs in insecure environments

- relentlessly negotiate and maintain humanitarian space: this may require a collective examination of the relationships humanitarians establish and maintain with non-state actors, state authorities, military actors and peacekeeping operations.

The diversity that enhances the humanitarian sector must not be allowed to lead to rancorous divisions. The humanitarian reform process is taking place in a troubled international context. The loud calls for a more robust UN engagement in Iraq, the world's most insecure environment, highlight the urgent need for humanitarian reformers to take proactive steps towards the collective development of innovative approaches to coordination and leadership in insecure environments.

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1. Adele Harmer, Katherine Haver and Abby Stoddard, 'Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: Trends in Policy and Operations', Humanitarian Policy Group Report 23, September 2006. www.odi.org.uk/hpg/ aid_insecure_environments.html See id21 summary at: www.id21.org/zinter/id21zinter.exe?a=0&i=s10bas1g1& u=46fa287e

2. 'Iraq's displacement crisis: the search for solutions' www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/Iraq/04.pdf

3. See preceding article by Eric Stobbaerts, Sarah Martin and Katherine Derderian.