

# The humanitarian use of the military

by Rupert Wieloch

As the humanitarian role of the armed forces has evolved, discussion has focused around three separate categories: military support to emergency or disaster relief efforts, the problematic notion of humanitarian intervention and the provision of humanitarian assistance during combat operations. The first category is the least contentious and describes recent British experiences in places like Mozambique and Montserrat. In these types of humanitarian disaster relief operations, the UK military acts as a sub-contractor to the wider foreign relief effort through the Department for International Development (DFID). The military is deployed for a specific task within a permissive environment which allows us to adopt a benign force posture.

During the past two years we have worked with DFID to develop a planning process framework which can be adapted for the particular circumstances of natural or man-made disasters. This process involves dialogue between the stricken state, the British Embassy or High Commission staff (who conduct an assessment of the disaster), DFID's Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department (CHAD), the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and British Forces HQ staff responsible for deploying the troops required to conduct the operation. Key planning considerations include:

- the ability to deploy quickly once the decision has been taken to support the international relief effort
- multifunctional coordination with such other actors as the UN, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and other NGOs
- sensitivity in conveying casualty information and disseminating coherent messages to the media
- a coherent exit strategy to avoid premature withdrawal or, just as undesirable, over-dependency on the military
- the amount and availability of host nation support which will affect the size and make-up of the deployed force.

These planning considerations and characteristics have now been consolidated in an unclassified pamphlet published by the Joint Doctrine and Concepts Centre (JDCC)<sup>1</sup>. Although primarily aimed at a military readership, it may be useful for civilians involved in humanitarian operations and is available free of charge.<sup>2</sup>

## Humanitarian interventions

The use of force for humanitarian intervention is, for many people, contentious both from a legal and moral perspective.<sup>3</sup> Much has been written on this subject and countless seminars have been held since the perceived failures of the international community to prevent genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica in the mid-nineties. From the military perspective, we fully acknowledge the need for civilian control of armed forces and the important role of the UN in providing legitimacy for our actions but, nevertheless, also recognise that we work to a different ethical principle from the humanitarian community. Using medical terminology, our fundamental position is based on beneficence, encapsulated by the term 'force for good'. However, this can cause tensions when we work with some NGOs, especially those founded on the basis of non-maleficence, or 'do no harm'. For military personnel, the conviction that our purpose is morally and ethically sound has a direct bearing on good morale and is encapsulated in our capstone military publications.

Whatever the philosophical differences, we agree that the military must stick to the rule of law. In 2002 the General Officer Commanding, Northern Ireland, described the reasons why this is so important to us, including: "common humanity"; "practicality" or what he called "the law of unintended long-term consequences"; the standards applied in the contemporary operational environment by "organisations and bodies prowling the touch line watching for every infringement of the rules"; and "a matter of history". In this last respect, the

effect of the way we work on future generations of military personnel is crucially important. None of us wishes to be held up by journalists or human rights bodies as pariahs. Nor do we wish to land in court facing lawyers seeking compensation for their clients or to be held responsible for the unnecessary death of innocents. However, from an individual perspective, the most important reason is the first: for, as the GOC said, "remorse is no doubt an uncomfortable companion as one passes through life..."<sup>4</sup>.

## Humanitarian assistance

As far as provision of humanitarian assistance in a less benign environment is concerned, the military recognises that the provision of relief is principally a function of humanitarian and development agencies. However, there may be circumstances, especially during combat, when these agencies are unable to deliver aid or where there may be a shortfall. This was the case during my first tour to Bosnia, when all but one of the aid agencies withdrew from my tactical area of operations due to the deteriorating security situation. As a result, there was a need to fill the gap for about six weeks and my unit was drawn into humanitarian assistance tasks in order to save lives. Other more recent examples include: the military organisation of refugee camps during the Kosovo crisis, the response to the earthquake in Afghanistan in 2002 and the British Army's work to destroy anti-personnel land mines in Sierra Leone and elsewhere.

While there is no such thing as a standard operation, the key tenets covered in our Humanitarian/Disaster Relief Operations pamphlet are likely to be applicable. We suggest that military forces engaged in such activities should, whenever possible, take advice and overall direction from a coordinating civilian authority or humanitarian agency and should hand over responsibility for the humanitarian task at the earliest opportunity. When the international community

decides to take action, there is a need for integrated joint operations which provide mechanisms for all the civilian and military actors in complex geopolitical environments to tackle the underlying causes of conflict.

British Forces have a great deal of experience of peace support operations. We have learned that a wide range of actors is involved and that we, the military, cannot act in isolation. The UK military approach emphasises the need for a comprehensive campaign plan, which identifies the means of achieving the desired effect or acceptable steady state agreed by the international community. Such a plan requires action to enforce the rule of law (via functioning judiciary and civilian police), revive education, encourage restoration of commerce and reconstruction, disseminate information and promote good governance. These activity lines should move forward together. It can be counter-productive if one speeds ahead at the expense of the others as this may be exploited by those who resort to violence and by opportunists, who profit from insecurity.

## CIMIC

A key enabler to facilitate mission success is Civil Military Cooperation, which we see as a process rather than an activity. Through formal and informal mechanisms, CIMIC provides an opportunity for civilian organisations to raise the awareness of military personnel responsible for delivering the secure conditions required for individuals to pursue their own goals and for ordinary day-to-day business to be conducted safely. Much progress has been made in recent years. In conjunction with DFID, we have assisted the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) to develop the recently published Guidelines On The Use Of Military And Civil Defence Assets To Support UN Humanitarian Activities In Complex Emergencies ('MCDA Guidelines').<sup>5</sup> The UK Ministry of Defence has published its first CIMIC policy and we are developing a new capability to be called the Joint CIMIC Group which will take account of lessons identified from Afghanistan and other theatres of war. This will

take forward the task of providing an interface for dialogue on operations for what we call 'Minimum Barrier People', the high calibre people who can operate in a complex, multidisciplinary environment, making things happen in the absence of strategic direction.

In conclusion, NGOs who still deny that troops can do anything humanitarian at all are in danger of perpetuating ill-informed and out-of-date opinions. There have been major developments in the way the UK military approaches its deployments since the Strategic Defence Review of 1998. In the light of our recent operations, and with the assistance of a wide range of contributors, we have refined our thinking about the humanitarian use of the armed forces. We are working now towards a wider understanding of the issues and concerns surrounding this role so that we will be better prepared for the next time we are required to undertake this sort of mission, wherever that may be.

**Rupert Wieloch has spent 25 years in the British Army. He was a spokesperson for the Army Board in the UK during the Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone interventions. Lieutenant-Colonel Wieloch recently left the Joint Doctrine and Concepts Centre, where he was a strategic advisor, and is now Chief Press Information Officer, NATO Stabilisation Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Email: [rupert.wieloch@sfor.nato.int](mailto:rupert.wieloch@sfor.nato.int)**

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1. A UK Ministry of Defence think-tank established as part of the UK's Strategic Defence Review.
2. 'Humanitarian/Disaster Relief Operations', available free of charge from DSDCL 3d, Defence Storage and Distribution Centre, Mwrwg Road, Llangennech, Carmarthen, South Wales SA14 8YP, UK. Tel: +44 (0)1544 822347. Fax: +44 (0)1544 822515.
3. It should be noted that the expression 'humanitarian intervention' is not used in British military doctrine and the notion never stemmed from the military but from publications such as *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention*, published under the auspices of the ICRC in 1998.
4. Address by the General Officer Commanding, Northern Ireland to the Royal United Services Institute conference on 'Morality in Asymmetric War and Intervention Operations', 20 September 2002.
5. See: [www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/UNID/6005B9C845DDBD0DC1256D520029ED39](http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/UNID/6005B9C845DDBD0DC1256D520029ED39)



*Humanitarian distribution in Basra, Iraq*