

Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum: July 8, 2003
***Relations Between International NGO's and the Military in Reconstruction
and Peacekeeping***

**Notes from the comments of Robert Macpherson, Nancy Lindborg
& Major General William L. Nash**

Robert Macpherson began his remarks by noting the deep rift that exists between the U.S. military and civilian aid organizations. While both parties have engaged in efforts to decrease their cultural differences in order to find better ways to collaborate with each other, the military and international NGOs are further apart than ever and the split is growing.

Mr. Macpherson explained that while the U.S. was loath to exercise military power after Vietnam, there was a change in attitude after the Gulf War and the perception of the U.S. military differed from 1990 onward. During the 1990's, civilian actors and military forces worked toward the common goal of global stability and prosperity in areas of severe conflicts such as the Balkans, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Yet in spite of the great prosperity that the professional military has brought to the U.S., it has distanced the military from mainstream society, resulting in a new relationship between the public and the military. Mr. Macpherson argued that while we are talking about the projection of military power, instead of talking about civil-military relations, we should be talking about civil-U.S. government relation. The U.S. military is led by a civilian government and therefore it will do what that government wants.

Mr. Macpherson illustrated how civil-military tensions exist at the strategic level but not at the tactical level. For example, both parties are willing to collaborate in sharing medical facilities, building shelters, and supplying relief packages to help people in need on the ground. The military will provide emergency assistance to NGOs and NGOs are able to use military resources such as the PX. While this type of integration does take place, it still does not address the cultural gulf between the military and NGOs where different perspectives in conflict situations have created significant tension between these two actors. For example, the military looks at an area with the intent to shape the "battlefield" to achieve victory. NGOs are viewed as one small part of the larger picture. The military has also prioritized the containment of terrorism over issues that NGO communities are more concerned with. NGOs are sometimes bothered by this military mindset and one aspect of Mr. Macpherson's work is to inculcate within CARE how the military thinks about different regions.

Mr. Macpherson explained that part of the frustration expressed by civil aid organizations toward the U.S. military is due to the military's operational mechanisms in peacekeeping. Since 1975, the military has been performing tasks under the direction of its supervisor, the U.S. civilian government. When the military is involved in civil affairs and is moving around within a country, the military wears civilian clothes. This has an impact on the perspective of the general population, who then equate the military with civilian actors. To the local people, all foreigners appear to be humanitarian workers.

Mr. Macpherson warned of the danger to aid workers of collaborating with or being perceived to be too close to the U.S. military. Mr. Macpherson described his personal experience in Somalia where U.S. military assistance in building clinics and supplying emergency-relief materials had the effect of lessening the credibility of a local Somali doctor. This close association with the U.S. armed forces put NGO aid workers in jeopardy as well, and undermined their neutrality and credibility as international humanitarian organizations.

In order to maintain their independence, civilian aid organizations tend to distance themselves from the military. This is also due in part to NGO's fear of being co-opted by the military forces. Mr. Macpherson explained that again, this fear comes from a sense of distrust toward the military, mostly caused by cultural bias.

Mr. Macpherson concluded his remarks by reiterating the challenge posed to humanitarian organizations to maintain their impartiality and independence of action while acting in coordination with a military structure. Mr. Macpherson also questioned why faith-based organizations, and even the Europeans, do not seem to face the same challenges. Nevertheless, the issue will remain and Mr. Macpherson welcomed all efforts to bridge the gap between civil organizations and the military.

Nancy Lindborg explained that ineffective civil-military cooperation in peace building activities results from lack of communication and mutual understanding. Breakdown of continued dialogue on civil-military coordination in peace building activities, especially in the wake of Afghanistan and Iraq, has generated misperceptions on both sides. Ms. Lindborg agreed with Mr. Macpherson that the tension that exists between the military and aid organizations in peacekeeping operations is largely related to policies that are directed by the U.S. government. To bridge these cultural differences and address policy concerns, it is crucial to convene a series of dialogues that bring together diverse actors in peacebuilding work. Ms. Lindborg emphasized that significant efforts have been undertaken to enhance the civil-military interface through workshops and dialogues. However, the limited resources of NGOs make it very challenging for them to keep up with the military and political turnover also challenges established communication between the two parties.

Ms. Lindborg stated that it is vital for humanitarian organizations to help the military and the government to understand the main principles of international NGOs. Policy guidelines were introduced under the leadership of InterAction's Disaster Response Committee (DRC) in an attempt to increase the military's understanding of civil humanitarian organizations. These guidelines, which are part of the humanitarian charter, emphasize the importance of NGO's impartiality and independence. NGOs need to be independent, impartial, and have access to those in need. Neutrality is essential for civilian aid organizations in order to perform their activities on the ground.

Ms. Lindborg explained that the use of language is also a cause of tension. When the military takes on the language of humanitarianism, it can undermine the role of NGOs. In addition, NGO's sometimes find that the military misuses certain vocabulary that represents the central concept of humanitarian work. This tends to generate mistrust and misunderstanding. In

turn, NGOs are often perceived by the military as pesky, and demanding of access to resources. NGOs are not always clear in communicating their role and Ms. Lindborg stated that this is something NGOs must address.

Ms. Lindborg also emphasized the importance of neutrality. There is value in having independent humanitarian actors and it is important that they not be viewed as force multipliers or simply as part of an overall, integrated plan. The basic premise under which NGO's operate, that "a hungry child knows no politics", requires this independence. Neutrality is also necessary for security. For example, in Iraq, if you are identified with the military you are a target. In Afghanistan, military officers working on civil affairs wore civilian clothes that blurred the lines between the two. This resulted in a lack of clarity between military workers and civilian aid workers, and endangered NGOs working on the ground. It is essential for humanitarian relief workers to be accepted by the communities in which they are working. Ms. Lindborg fears that the breakdown in this understanding comes at higher political levels.

Ms. Lindborg argued that the security gap in areas where civilian aid organizations are operating must be addressed. In places where violent conflicts occur on a daily basis, it is enormously challenging for aid workers and their respective organizations to perform their tasks without peacekeeping forces that can provide relative security and safety. These are the most dangerous times for civilian aid workers in the past fifteen years. This threat derives from potential ties to western efforts in areas where NGOs are operating. Ms. Lindborg stated that only the military can address this security gap. However, in Afghanistan, the military often engages in humanitarian services instead of patrolling crucial security areas. The military's over-engagement in disaster relief activities often jeopardizes international aid workers and infuriates NGO field staff because the military is taking on work that humanitarian organizations can already do. Therefore, it is important to address the role of the military in assisting humanitarian work while also addressing security needs in peacebuilding.

Ms. Lindborg closed by emphasizing the need to increase mutual understanding and improve the current lack of communication. As enhanced cooperation between NGOs and the military is paramount, both communities should actively engage in dialogue that will help them to better understand each other.

Major General William L. Nash stated that despite significant dialogue efforts undertaken by civilian relief organizations and the military, overcoming cultural bias, negative perceptions of each other, and ideological differences is extremely difficult in a short period of time.

General Nash agreed with Mr. Macpherson and Ms. Lindborg that tensions lie at the policy level. The issue is political, and not civil-military. In working with the military, one has to recognize that it is a hierarchal, political environment, and in each area of the military there is a different hierarchy. Ameliorating an uneasy relationship between the military and civilian aid organizations requires the development of policy to address this issue at the national level. We need to overcome "bad planning, ideological bravado, and inadequate assumptions".

General Nash explained that the definition of the civil-military relationship differs depending on the stage of the conflict. The military's perception of conflict areas changes at various stages of war, which affects its relationship with NGOs on the ground. Soldiers in war have priorities in mind that are tough to shift. For example, the military tends to put more emphasis on restoration of regional security and stability by patrolling and engaging in possible confrontation with enemies. Yet, after gaining victory as an occupational force, it sees its presence as helping reconstruct areas and improving the lives of the local people. The role of the military in post-war peacekeeping and the role of the military after victory as an occupying power are two very different categories.

General Nash addressed the example of soldiers wearing civilian clothes in Afghanistan, explaining that this decision was made as a result of complaints made against the military after Bosnia for acting too much like soldiers and riding through the city in tanks. This is an example where people lobbied for the military to do more humanitarian work and pressured them to do more "hearts and mind" work. Now, people are complaining about soldiers in civilian clothes. Nevertheless, General Nash warned that any focus for the military other than security is risky. The military can do other things, but it works best at coordination and logistical support. The military knows how to do their work and they will supply critical force protection.

General Nash argued that the role of NGOs is as unclear as the military's in many conflict-ridden areas, as witnessed in the Balkans during the late 1990's. If humanitarian organizations expect the military to clearly define its role, NGOs also need to re-think and clearly define their roles and missions. General Nash explained that the military's engagement in disaster-relief activities could be understood if one acknowledges its abundant resources that can effectively perform various tasks in an emergency. For example, the military can provide trucks and equipment that can function more effectively than those used by civilian relief agencies. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for the military to avoid providing its services to those in need.

General Nash concluded by declaring that soldiers are just as happy as others when they help those in need by building bridges and clinics. This message reflects that a better understanding of each other is a crucial step to bridging the cultural gap between the two parties and increasing collaboration in peacekeeping.