

**INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE-WORKING GROUP  
XLIII MEETING**

**Geneva, 14-15 November 2000**

**Some NGO Views on the Humanitarian Implications of Implementing the  
Brahimi Report.**

Introduction

Wars in the past decade have claimed an estimated five million lives, and have caused untold hardship for millions of civilians displaced and injured by conflict. More than at any time, these wars have violated civilians, not borders.

UN peacekeeping operations remain a vital element of the United Nations capacity to respond to threats to international peace and security. UN peacekeeping nurtures new democracies, lowers the global tide of refugees, and prevents small wars from growing into larger conflicts with much higher costs in terms of lives and resources.

The Brahimi Report (Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations) focuses in a balanced and practical way on those issues that influence the capacity of the UN to conduct peacekeeping operations. The report calls for improvements across the board, including doctrine, strategy, planning, decision-making, headquarters organisation and staffing levels, logistics, rapid deployment and public information. Brahimi's main lesson is that peacekeeping commitments should not outrun the political will to back deployments.

The report is an important step in strengthening the peace making, peace keeping, and peace building work (hereafter referred to collectively as peace operations) of the United Nations. As such, much of the report is concerned with internal organisation of UN institutions, particularly the Secretariat.

However, as the strengthening of peace operations has been a vital concern to the work of the humanitarian agencies, the implementation of such a report is bound to have an important impact on humanitarian response.

One of the most important problems that has confronted humanitarian response during the past decade has been the presence of political and security vacuums in complex emergencies. In a number of cases, humanitarian agencies have found themselves sucked into such vacuums where they have been unable to carry out their mission of responding to the needs of those affected by violence and war, but have been forced to carry out tasks for which they were ill-equipped. The Rwanda multi-donor study documents well such a situation.

Strengthening peace operations is certainly a necessary condition for reducing the political vacuum, but it is not sufficient for a strong political will is also required of governments if successful peace operations are to be carried out.

Context

Understanding the context of peace operations is crucial. The Brahimi report points out the need to create space in a conflict for peace operations, particularly peace building. Such a space is bound to overlap the humanitarian space that has been created by a humanitarian response. Peace making, peace keeping, and even peace building are will be occurring simultaneously with the humanitarian work of assisting and protecting those affected by the violence. The most recent examples of transitional administrations have shown the crucial need for ongoing humanitarian response, at least in the early stages of the transitions.

Actors involved in UN peace operations are likely to find themselves shoulder to shoulder with humanitarian actors, most of whom are probably not from the United Nations.

#### Some Gaps in the Brahimi report

While it may be necessary for the Report to focus on the UN and its agencies involved in peace operations, it reflects little on the inter-relationship of peace and humanitarian operations.

The Report's basic assumptions regarding humanitarian assistance and its relationship to peace operations is flawed and reflects a misunderstanding of humanitarian principles and their application by humanitarian organisations.

For example, the Report introduces a concept of impartiality which differs greatly from that used by the humanitarian community. It states:

"Impartiality for United Nations operations must therefore mean adherence to the principles of the Charter: where one party to a peace agreement clearly and incontrovertibly is violating its terms, continued equal treatment of all parties by the United Nations can in the best case result in ineffectiveness and in the worst may amount to complicity with evil."

Impartiality as it is understood by humanitarian organisations is something quite different, and is based on a stated obligation to deliver aid on the basis of need, "regardless of race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind." This is the language of the Red Cross and NGO Code of Conduct – the bedrock principles of humanitarian action. The Code goes further, to say that human suffering must be alleviated whenever it is found and priorities for that alleviation should be calculated only on the basis of need.

Whereas the UN may be required to oppose a party that is seen to be in breach of the Charter by the Security Council, this is not the case of the humanitarian agencies. The confusion around the term impartiality may have concrete effects on the security of humanitarian workers as they may be seen by parties to the conflict to be enemies.

The one-going debate among humanitarian agencies about using armed peace keeper escorts for humanitarian assistance highlights some of the dilemmas faced by independent agencies. There are also times when NGOs need to emphasise an image of impartiality for reasons of access and security, and are forced to distance themselves from the UN and it's co-ordination mechanisms.

In spite of cases where humanitarian personnel have been targeted, it cannot be stressed too much that there are many humanitarian situations where the security of field staff and their beneficiaries is closely linked to their identity as impartial humanitarians.

There also needs to be clarification of the relationship between humanitarian space and the space for peace operations.

The report envisages a monolithic structure, where the Head of the UN Mission has at his or her disposal all manner of tools and assets – military, political and diplomatic, humanitarian and developmental. The Report recognises that successful application of these assets is a tremendous challenge - particularly in the last decade, when peace operations and the “creation” of post-conflict situations have been undertaken in complex, volatile and high-risk environments. When ambiguities arise as is inevitable in such a relationship, the work of either side may not only be hampered, but again the security of field staff may be put in jeopardy.

Humanitarian action, however, cannot be considered among these appropriate tools. Provision of humanitarian assistance is undertaken based on principles of neutrality and impartiality and cannot be conflated with the efforts of a monolithic peace operation "to divert... political...agendas."

The lack of understanding of the relationship is particularly clear where the report describes the relationship between the SRSG and the Humanitarian Coordinator. Many humanitarian agencies would take issue with being coordinated by an HC who is under the orders of a political actor such as the SRSG.

The *raison d'etre* of humanitarian action is not the achievement of peace, and most certainly not the achievement of the enforced peace of the Security Council. As unattractive as this may seem, it is the fact that separates any peace operation from true humanitarian action. It is not humanitarian action when a force commander assuages a host community with the introduction of new resources – irrespective of the needs of that community within the larger population. It is not humanitarian action when a UN Humanitarian Coordinator, sitting as a senior cabinet member of a peace operation, plans activities that complement the mission's political objectives. It is most certainly not humanitarian action when a civilian population in need is denied assistance as a result of its location or perceived affiliations. Each of these scenarios is what the humanitarian community comes to expect when peace operations presume to have any humanitarian remit.

Much of NGO work in crisis areas is built around strong links to communities and a commitment to continue working, long after the peace operation has scaled down or gone home.

This longitudinal engagement, knowledge of communities, relative cost effectiveness, and in some cases specific areas of expertise all combine to place humanitarian NGOs centre-stage during efforts to sustain and then restore communities ravaged by war and crisis.

The UN, and specifically the staff of peace operations working in the field, must accept that NGOs can be present on that stage – but are not required to read from the same script as the peace operation. If that fact can be systematically acknowledged and if peace operations can

engage humanitarian NGOs with an understanding and acceptance of the humanitarian imperative, then there is considerable scope for fruitful collaboration.

Humanitarian NGOs and peace operations may find common ground in efforts to reintegrate ex-combatants into their home areas – or in reuniting child-soldiers with their families. Constructive co-existence of high quality peace operations and equally effective humanitarian activities can only be good for the people both undertakings ultimately aim to serve.

Thus the UN cannot assume that in peace operations, most of the international actors in the field belong to UN agencies. This issue is left unaddressed in the report. The diversity of humanitarian actors is recognised in the interagency approach of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Action. Unlike ECHA which shares a Secretariat with the IASC, the Executive Committee for Peace and Security has no institutional link with non-UN actors.

Even in the interagency humanitarian context, experience so far has shown that is difficult to systematically involve non-UN actors in planning processes, e.g. in drawing the comprehensive humanitarian action plans (CHAPs) for the CAPs. Yet with the strong presence of NGOs on the ground, their absence from the process can only weaken it. This is certainly true when they feel little ownership of the process.

Such a gap could even be more of a problem for peace operations. All of the planning and support of peace operations is to be done by a specific Integrated Mission Task Force made up exclusively of UN agency staff. Clearly, it is important to develop systematic interfaces between the UN and non-UN agencies involved or related to peace operations, particularly those doing humanitarian work.

Finally, humanitarian agencies have been concerned for a long time with the unequal distribution of humanitarian resources globally. This is particularly true when comparing responses to humanitarian crises in Europe and Africa. While the Brahimi report does highlight the problem of neglected crises and urges the "summoning up of creativity, imagination and will required to implement new and alternative solutions to those situations into which peace keepers should or should not go." Implementation plans are virtually silent about how this is to be done.

## Conclusion

The Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations is a commendable document which is forthright, balanced, and constructive. The Report recognises that the prevailing and underlying shortcomings of peace operations are rooted in the actions of member states.

However, in its implementation, more recognition is needed of the different mandates of peace operations and humanitarian response. Much work still needs to be done in understanding and developing the relationship between the two approaches.

SCHR

7 November 2000

