

An Experiment with Unilateral Humanitarianism

By Joel R. Charny, Vice President for Policy, Refugees International | June 26, 2003

Operation Iraqi Freedom, the invasion and occupation of Iraq by the U.S. and its coalition partners, embodies a new approach to post-conflict humanitarian action. This approach unifies security, governance, humanitarian response, and reconstruction under the control of the Department of Defense. Humanitarian action is unilateral in character and linked inextricably to the U.S. security agenda in the context of the global war on terrorism. The UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations, traditionally the coordinators and implementers of humanitarian assistance and post-conflict reconstruction programs, are expected to play supportive roles within an effort managed by the Pentagon.

While public attention has focused on the Iraq war as the expression of the Bush administration's new national security policy of pre-emptive self-defense, there has been virtually no public discussion of the far-reaching implications of the administration's new approach to humanitarian assistance and post-conflict reconstruction. These implications include:

- Militarizing humanitarian assistance to a degree not seen since the founding of the UN and the expansion of the capacity and impact of global nongovernmental organizations.
- Giving the military responsibility for diplomatic, political, and humanitarian tasks that it is unqualified to perform effectively.
- Minimizing the contributions of donor governments and independent agencies, since most foreign governments, UN agencies, and NGOs are reluctant to collaborate with the U.S. military, thus vastly increasing the financial and administrative burden on the United States.

The extent to which this approach constitutes a new U.S. doctrine, widely applicable to humanitarian emergencies in the post-9/11 world, is unclear. NGO discussions with Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Collins, who runs the Pentagon's Stabilization Office and who has been the main Defense interlocutor with the NGO community, suggest that at the very least the Department of Defense will be in the lead in humanitarian operations in emergencies involving the U.S. military. Dr. Collins told NGO representatives after the start of the war that the placement of the management of humanitarian and reconstruction work in post-conflict Iraq within the Pentagon reflected an assessment of lessons learned from recent post-conflict reconstruction efforts. The primary lesson, according to Dr. Collins, is that lack of clarity on who held overall authority and the difficulties of coordinating diverse actors—government leaders, peace-

keeping forces, UN agencies and personnel, and the commanders of belligerent forces—plagued the efforts in Kosovo and Afghanistan. The Pentagon's conclusion was that a single command of all aspects of the post-conflict response was essential, and who better to exercise this authority than the Department of Defense?

This approach represents a radical break from the multi-lateral character of post-conflict efforts over the past decade in places such as Cambodia, East Timor, the Balkans, and Afghanistan. While the record of these operations is mixed, with only East Timor being an unequivocal success, UN leadership on balance has been positive, especially in establishing the legitimacy of the emerging post-conflict political authority. In Afghanistan, the UN demonstrated that it could work on political issues within the framework of a U.S.-led military campaign. The UN Secretary General's Special Representative, Lakhdar Brahimi, brilliantly managed the post-Taliban political consultation process that resulted in the creation of the internationally recognized Afghan government led by Hamid Karzai. Unilateral political management by the U.S. would not necessarily have resulted in the same outcome.

The early results of this approach in Iraq have not been promising. The Pentagon's Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) excluded the UN and the NGOs from its pre-war planning on the grounds that its plans were part and parcel of the war effort and therefore had to be confidential. ORHA personnel were kept waiting in Kuwait on security grounds for several weeks after the destruction of the Iraqi government. When ORHA personnel finally did enter the country, they isolated themselves from the Iraqi people and established themselves in one of Saddam Hussein's palaces, in essence assuming the symbolic trappings of his rule. With no policing capacity and the military unable to establish law



and order, ORHA has been slow to restore basic services and perform what was supposed to be its top objective, establishing a legitimate Iraqi authority that could govern locally as a national political dialogue was being prepared.

Indeed, one of the ironies of the experience in Iraq to date is that the engagement of the Pentagon in humanitarian management has not been matched by a similar commitment to apply military assets to the task of establishing security for Iraqi civilians to enable them to go about their daily lives. The U.S. failed to deploy military police, nor did it request its main coalition partner, Great Britain, to send its military police units to Iraq. The decision not to call on the British was especially puzzling, since its military police has a reputation for effectiveness in post-conflict environments such as that prevailing in Iraq. As a result, the lack of local-level security has plagued the reconstruction effort from the outset and has deeply disappointed Iraqis yearning for a sense of normalcy in their country.

Faced with the immensity of its task, ORHA is finally turning to the UN and the NGOs for assistance. According to Refugees International's representative in Iraq, recent meetings between ORHA and the NGOs in Baghdad have included requests to NGOs to organize the clearance of military debris, including damaged tanks, as part of their efforts to re-establish sanitation services in the capital. ORHA personnel have also approached NGOs about the possibility of their managing day-to-day operations in local hospitals. The United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq is finally established in Baghdad, and he is trying to define his responsibilities in relation to the recently appointed head of the U.S. occupation authority, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer.

The problem is that roles and responsibilities are being defined on an ad hoc basis throughout the country, in the face of immense practical difficulties, rather than having been planned collaboratively in advance. The damage of the failure to give the UN and the NGOs a leadership role in the post-conflict reconstruction process cannot be easily

repaired on the fly. The attempt to have the U.S. unilaterally manage the reconstruction process in Iraq has been so problematic that it is jeopardizing U.S. credibility as the occupying power with the Iraqi people.

The U.S. operational NGOs face real dilemmas in determining how to respond to unilateral humanitarianism. The largest U.S. NGOs accept and, indeed, depend on U.S. government funds to mount a large-scale humanitarian response. The very act of accepting U.S. funding in Iraq is a tacit endorsement of the unilateral U.S. approach, though to their credit, several of the most well-known members of the U.S. NGO community—notably CARE, Save the Children, and the International Rescue Committee—insisted that a phrase be added to their agreements with the government stating that they would engage with and report only to civilian agencies. These NGOs also joined other members of InterAction, the membership organization for U.S. NGOs involved in international relief and development work, in calling consistently and forcefully for coordination of the humanitarian and reconstruction effort in Iraq to be the UN's responsibility.

Iraq demonstrates that the new U.S. approach to humanitarian action is unsustainable. While the war was a military success, creating a peaceful and democratic Iraq is proving to be a challenge beyond the resources of the wealthiest and most powerful country on the planet. An honest post-operations analysis of the performance of ORHA, an analysis that NGOs and congressional leaders will insist on, will perhaps reduce the hubris of the Department of Defense and lead the administration back toward a more inclusive, multilateral approach that builds on the positive aspects of the nation-building efforts of the immediate post-cold war period.

(Joel R. Charny is vice president for policy with Refugees International (online at www.refugeesinternational.org), a Washington, DC-based humanitarian advocacy organization. He wrote this for Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org.)

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2003. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

"A Think Tank Without Walls"

Recommended citation:

Joel R. Charny, "The United States in Iraq: An Experiment with Unilateral Humanitarianism," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, June 26, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0306dodreconst.html>

