

# A Moment of Truth for the Humanitarian Enterprise

by Larry Minear | July 9, 2003

No crisis is wholly unique. However the task of protecting and assisting people in Iraq confronts the international humanitarian enterprise with challenges differing in degree, if not in kind, from earlier high-profile crises. Not only nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), particularly those based in the U.S., but also the humanitarian apparatus of the United Nations face vexing dilemmas.

In the run-up to the Iraq war and since, the professional association of U.S. relief and development groups, InterAction, held a score of meetings with Pentagon officials to establish the terms of NGO engagement in Iraq. Would NGOs be permitted inside the country by the U.S.-led occupying forces? How would their work be coordinated? Would the UN be allowed to exercise its normal coordination function, as NGOs had urged? Would aid groups relate, as in normal crisis settings, to the U.S. Agency for International Development and the State Department, or instead to the Pentagon, which was in charge in the Iraq theater?

During the limited contingency planning that took place before the Iraq war, NGOs emphasized key principles, such as civilian control of humanitarian operations, neutrality, proportionality, and independence. However, as U.S. officials offered funds, NGOs became, as they put it, more “pragmatic.” “We would wish for as clean and straight a civilian chain of command as possible,” Save the Children’s President Charles MacCormack told a reporter. “But we want to be there to do the job we know how to do.”<sup>1</sup> Reviewing the negotiations and the early outcomes, one analyst reached the logical conclusion that “to work in Iraq and other countries the U.S. government deems vital to its interests, NGOs will have to either redefine how much operational independence they need, or stay home.”<sup>2</sup>

Staying home is not a comfortable option for groups committed to the humanitarian imperative. Why should they not be active wherever there is need, particularly when U.S. government funds are made available by the U.S. Congress and taxpayers for the protection of life and the relief of suffering? Yet invoking the humanitarian imperative does not resolve all the perplexing ethical NGO dilemmas. After all, the imperative gives way in settings of grave insecurity, when NGO activities become too perilous for staff or beneficiaries. And what is the relevance of the imperative in scores of crises where a given agency is not involved? If you don’t provide humanitarian succor everywhere, on what basis do you provide it anywhere?

“Sitting out” a crisis such as Iraq or Afghanistan has major institutional drawbacks. Lack of involvement affects not only the world’s perceptions of an aid agency. It also limits agency revenues that underwrite overall costs of administration, fundraising, and program operations. In the competitive world of NGOs, there is no assurance that the agency which, for the best of reasons, lowers its profile and moderates its reach will soon recapture foregone market share. Not being an active player on the ground may also limit potential agency influence on U.S. policy and on media coverage of a crisis.

But U.S. NGO participation in the Iraqs, Afghanistans, and Kosovos of the day carries risks.<sup>3</sup>



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They include the greater complexity of programming in settings of high political profile, the distortions of proportionate responses to need around the world, and the likelihood that U.S. attention span and resources will be more short-lived than the problems that cry out for redress. Involvement also carries more hidden dangers. Accepting U.S. government funds in Iraq, for example, may call into question the neutrality of a given agency's program in other settings such as the Philippines and Indonesia, where NGOs are working in areas of political tension and U.S. military presence. American agencies, which bear a special burden by virtue of their nationality, will need to think more closely and deeply before allowing the world's hyperpower and the self-styled leader of the international anti-terrorist crusade to define their imperatives for them.<sup>4</sup>

To their credit, some U.S. NGOs are beginning to assess the implications for them of the more unconstrained and unabashed assertion of American political, economic, and military power around the world. "Our whole enterprise is already under siege," comments one agency head. "The way the administration is conducting humanitarian assistance in Iraq and Afghanistan is creating new challenges." The traditional approach, characterized by partnerships, transparency, and a strong multilateral component, are "no longer on offer by the U.S. government." Reviewing the bidding, another CEO asks, "Should we clearly draw the line?" The issue is anything but hypothetical. Several U.S. NGOs that accepted initial U.S. government funds for work in Iraq have already decided against applying for additional resources. Yet as the NGOs contemplate giving the "N" in NGO more profile, U.S. officials in recent weeks have become more insistent on the "G."<sup>5</sup>

Recent developments represent a moment of truth for UN humanitarian action as well. International staff from agencies such as the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNICEF, and the World Food Program were withdrawn from Iraq for security reasons just before the first bombs fell on Baghdad, returning only six weeks later after the

worst of the fighting had subsided. Reflecting afterwards about whether they should have stayed in Iraq throughout the war, as did expatriate staff of the International Committee of the Red Cross, some UN officials expressed the view that they should have contested even more vigorously the expulsion order they received from the UN's security apparatus. Even those who believe that the possible existence of weapons of mass destruction made their departure legitimate now express the view that the UN should have factored into its pullout decision the likely difficulties at the hands of the U.S. occupying authorities of getting back in.

Consigned by the U.S. to limbo for several critical months, UN aid officials described themselves as caught "between cooptation and irrelevance." One can sympathize with the UN's humanitarian apparatus without accepting its passivity or its hand-wringing. This is not the first time that the UN has failed to find creative ways to meet human need in political thickets. For years it was equally conspicuous by its absence in Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and East Timor. If the UN is worried about cooptation, why does it station UN liaison personnel in U.S. military command centers such as Tampa or Kuwait City? If the UN is worried about irrelevance, let it address the recurrent problem of protecting the independence of its humanitarian agencies from the political cross-currents of the Security Council, which in this instance delayed UN reengagement while sorting out a political impasse among its members. This is hardly the first crisis in living memory in which high politics in the Security Council has undermined the responsiveness of the UN's workhorse aid agencies.

To its credit, the UN has taken some steps to reassert its humanitarian bona fides. It issued in April, and updated in May, guidance specifying that "A clear distinction must be retained at all times between the functions and roles of UN humanitarian personnel and those of the military and civilian representatives of the Occupying Power." UN field staff have received quite specific do's and don't's to follow in interacting with U.S. troops and U.S. government

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aid personnel.<sup>6</sup> This is a definite improvement over the situation in Afghanistan, where the activities of the U.S.-led military coalition became blurred with civilian humanitarian work.

In short, to color the world's humanitarian enterprise red-white-and-blue is to accept as a given the politicization of aid work by U.S. NGOs and United Nations aid agencies. Yet why should the global humanitarian imperative follow the American flag, even in the age of the hyperpower? There is a large, variegated, and creative world of operational non-governmental groups out there, many of which are not American or, if American, have non-American sister agencies. And the UN itself has other constituent Member States beyond that represented by Washington, not to say promises to keep to would-be beneficiaries in strategic backwaters around the world.

The Iraq crisis has thrown an overdue spotlight on the soft underbelly of the humanitarian enterprise. For NGOs, it is time to reexamine what it means to be genuinely nongovernmental. For the UN's humanitarian apparatus, it is time to insulate life-saving and life-protecting operations from global political crosscurrents. Only then will the international humanitarian enterprise be able to perform effectively its altogether critical tasks.

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*(Larry Minear <larry.minear@tufts.edu> is the director of the Humanitarianism and War Project at Tufts University. He is also a political analyst with Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org).)*

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> David Bank, "Iraq-Aid Groups Accept Oversight From Pentagon," *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2003.
- <sup>2</sup> Doug Merlino, "Aid Agencies Make Faustian Bargain," Alertnet.org, May 30, 2003
- <sup>3</sup> For an examination of the dilemmas of work in Afghanistan, see the Epilogue in Larry Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise: Dilemmas and Discoveries* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian, 2002),
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, Larry Minear, "Agencies should resist being taken for granted in Iraq." Reuters Alertnet. 2003.  
<http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/577630.htm> (Jan. 17, 2003)
- <sup>5</sup> For a recap of discussions among NGOs on this theme, see "NGO Policy Dialogues" at [hwproject.tufts.edu](http://hwproject.tufts.edu), particularly numbers VI, X, XI, and XIII on Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq.
- <sup>6</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "General guidance for interaction between United Nations personnel and military and civilian representatives of the occupying power in Iraq," May 8, 2003 ([www.reliefweb.int](http://www.reliefweb.int))

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