The Increasing Presence of Military Forces and the Independence of NGOs:  
The NGO Perspective

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Rafa warned that the confusion between humanitarians and the military was only fated to increase. First, the conundrums posed by the relationship between the military and the humanitarian actor were not new. In fact, humanitarian action as it was understood today, was born in the battle fields as an outgrowth of military action. Today, as military ‘peacekeeping’ forces were being presented as ‘humanitarian’ (rather than belligerent) actors, and then going on to intervene in partisan ways in conflict, the relationship was becoming ever more convoluted.

Certainly there are areas for common understanding between the military and the humanitarian realms. The first essential step was perhaps the recognition of divergent mandates. The military always had a political objective: their mandate for action came from governments. Humanitarian agencies, on the other hand, were committed to people in need and what he termed, the "urgent, inalienable right to humanitarian assistance." Rafa pointed out that even peacekeeping operations as mandated by the United Nations, were not impartial as understood within a humanitarian perspective: they had a clearly political mandate.

Although acknowledgement of mandate differences was a basic starting point, there was still much scope for the generation of confusion in how humanitarian and military actors actually carried out their tasks. Some of this was seeded in, and exacerbated by, the rhetoric frequently used by both camps. Human rights actors, for example, were wont to call for "humanitarian intervention" involving the use of military force. Vice versa, military operations usually declared that they contained 'civilian' components or civilian interface units.

The second basic principle that Rafa urged should be accepted was that there should be no direct relationship between military and humanitarian actors in the delivery of aid under normal circumstances. There were certainly some occasions where the scale of need was so large that assistance might be needed from the military. But use of the military aid should be distinguished from humanitarian aid and triggered only when there were no other options left in the field.

In some contexts, Rafa suggested, the use of armed escorts for humanitarian actors could be permissible - Somalia immediately sprung to mind. But once again, the decision to request military escorts should be made by humanitarian organisations themselves and it should be certified that the decision was based solely on need. It was important also, he said, that the decision to use escorts should not harbour any dangers to the independence and long-term sustainability of the aid delivery.

Information sharing was another area where there was a need for cooperation with the military. The issue of security risks and understanding community expectations often necessitated the exchange of data regarding security and the character of shared spaces.

Rafa then asked whether examining the history of war and past conflicts might provide some guidance in understanding the reality, and shaping the optimal contours, of the relationship between the humanitarian and the military actors in different situations.
• First, armed forces were not always perceived in the same manner by the local population in every context. In East Timor, for example, armed forces were considered 'liberators'; in Liberia, ECOMOG forces were characterized as 'invaders.'
• Second, the particular behaviour of the soldiers themselves was often a vital factor, e.g. the activities of UNITA in Angola.
• Third, the specific mandate of the force was relevant: was the force a peacekeeping or a peace-enforcing one? Did the force only attack legitimate targets? Did the force use a humanitarian or human rights argument as a mask for intervention? Rafa recounted how in Somalia in 1992, MSF had worked with the military, but when peace-enforcers began to violate humanitarian law, the organisation had complained. Subsequently MSF's installations were attacked. The lesson, he said, was that international intervention with a humanitarian mandate often masked a political intent and that collaboration needed to be sharply scrutinised.
• Fourth, it was important to maintain a strict separation between military relief (for example, as delivered under the obligations of an occupying power) and humanitarian action. Great confusion had been generated by certain types of humanitarian-like actions that had been taken by the military, particularly the US military. The dropping of food packages from the air in Afghanistan at the same time that the bombing commenced, was publicised as the distribution of "humanitarian" rations. The use of humanitarian rhetoric to buoy up military strategy was a dangerously confusing approach, particularly rife in the armoury of military forces in the global North.

The above notions, Rafa said, however, provided only a minimal understanding of the optimal relationship between humanitarian and military actors. It was vital that an analysis be carried out on a case-by-case basis. From an MSF perspective, the proliferation of standards and guidelines would only make the situation more complex. As the Iraq war loomed, there were many issues that needed to be carefully examined. At one end of the spectrum there was a necessity to liaise with armed forces, but it was vital that the humanitarian role was respected and not conflated with the military one.

The US was currently setting up an office for humanitarian coordination in Kuwait with which MSF, for example, had refused to cooperate. The appropriation of humanitarianism appeared, he said, to be a core element of the war ideology as described by Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State in a recent statement viz: "NGOs are a multiplying force of our combat team."