icva talk back

LUBBERS PLACES EMPHASIS ON RETURN OF SIERRA LEONEANS

Early on in his term in office, the new UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Ruud Lubbers, has been confronted with a classical protection dilemma: should UNHCR focus on the physical safety of refugees in Guinea or should it prioritise their return to Sierra Leone instead? Following a visit to the region in February, the new chief of the refugee agency seems to have taken the view that the refugees may be better off in their country of origin and should return to Sierra Leone. In a briefing to donor governments in Geneva last week, Lubbers pointed out that many of the refugees want to go home.

According to unofficial figures used by UNHCR in Guinea, 80% of the refugees in one camp would opt for return. Many of the refugees, particularly those that have been present in Guinea for a longer period, have been frustrated by the situation in Guinea and have declared that they would rather die in Sierra Leone.

At the meeting with donors, Lubbers explained his proposal to create humanitarian corridors that would allow safe passage for the refugees and safe access to them by humanitarian organisations. Next to new sites in Guinea, Lubbers emphasised the possibility of creating a corridor through RUF-controlled territory to government-held areas in Sierra Leone.

Many humanitarian staff on the ground remain very sceptical about the plan. As was pointed out by one

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AFGHANISTAN: CONTINUING TO APPLY BANDAIDS

How are the current efforts of the international community actually helping the Afghan population? While the humanitarian community continues to provide relief, the UN Security Council has imposed further sanctions on a country ravaged by conflict and harsh natural conditions. Without creative international efforts to effect a political solution, the situation facing the population only threatens to deteriorate as bandaid solutions increasingly are the order of the day.

The sanctions against the Taliban authorities do little to rectify the humanitarian crisis facing the Afghan population. NGOs in December warned against further sanctions, noting that many in Afghanistan "feel isolated and victimised by the international community." Yet later that month, the UN Security Council nonetheless imposed a new round of sanctions,

EDITORIAL

HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS OVERLOOKED BY THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Ever since it started operations in 1994, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has seriously failed in fulfilling one of its main duties: to integrate human rights in the work of the entire UN system. Particularly, on the humanitarian side, the expertise and input of the OHCHR has been lacking. For example, the Office has been generally absent at the working level of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the main UN body for humanitarian coordination.

However, given the issues that the IASC is covering, such as internally displaced persons (IDPs), the OHCHR should have taken a leading role in ensuring that the humanitarian response addresses human rights issues. While there is increased recognition of the fact that the dichotomy between human rights and humanitarian action is no longer valid, the protection and promotion of human rights in humanitarian crises is often grossly overlooked or ignored.

A recent mission to review the response to IDPs in Burundi found that the protection of IDPs was not a priority of any agency present and that all agencies focussed, rather, on the delivery of assistance. At a meeting of the IASC in February, Dennis MacNamara, the Special Coordinator of the UN Inter-Agency Senior Network for Internal Displacement, who led the mission, blasted the UN humanitarian agencies for their collective failure. However, the NGOs are also to blame. According to MacNamara, not a single NGO is reportedly monitoring human rights and documenting violations in Burundi.

The Burundi office of the HCHR is greatly suffering from a lack of resources and adequate funding. But it also has failed to bring agencies together and to create an inter-agency forum for protection issues.

Given that IDPs find themselves within the legal jurisdiction of their national government, in essence the international protection of IDPs can only be achieved through human rights mechanisms (and humanitarian law, where relevant). In this respect, the OHCHR is the most relevant international body that can ensure that human rights mechanisms are effectively used and/or put in place to protect IDPs. In fact, it is the only international organisation that can be regarded as having a comprehensive protection mandate for IDPs.

The required proactive engagement of the OHCHR in humanitarian affairs necessitates several immediate steps. As a matter of priority, the High Commissioner should create an emergency desk in her office. This department would not only be involved in human rights crises that are not (yet) humanitarian crises, but also in humanitarian crises in order to facilitate a rights-based approach. The Office should also step up its operational role in the field and open more field offices. On this issue, the High Commissioner has said that she wishes to play "a strategic role." So far, it remains unknown what she means, but hopefully it includes involvement in the protection of IDPs. In addition, one concrete step would be the deployment (or secondment to other operational agencies) of human rights/ protection officers, particularly in IDP situations.

What is crucial in taking up all these activities is the need to increase the OHCHR's budget significantly. With an annual budget of US $75 million, the commitment to mainstreaming human rights throughout the entire UN system can hardly be considered serious. ◆

Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop

Mass Influx Requires Responsibility-Sharing

The failure to find durable solutions for refugees who have fled in previous mass outflows highlights a key element in refugee protection: the need to share responsibility. Discussions, ostensibly about responsibility-sharing, tend to turn into sterile debates about the rich-poor divide. A more informed debate is needed if there is to be any progress at all.

Between 8-9 March, the UNHCR Executive Committee will be examining refugee protection in cases of mass influx as part of the Global Consultations on International Protection. The subject, however, is unlikely to receive a very deep examination, given the format of the meeting, the limited time, and the number of states and organisations who will wish to speak in the Consultations (see *Talk Back* 2-7).

In sharing responsibility in cases of mass influx, it is undeniable that Western states need to provide greater financial assistance to poor countries protecting the majority of refugees. At a time of increasing wealth for the United States, for example, development aid has decreased, rather than increased and some countries offset, within their aid budgets, their own costs of receiving asylum seekers. However, responsibility-sharing is not just about the transfer of resources from rich to poor. Just as refugee crises are regional in origin and effect, responsibility-sharing also needs to take place on a regional basis. Within regions, some countries are deeply affected by displacement while others do little to relieve the burden. Why is it that Pakistan is host to millions of Afghans, yet India has less than 200,000 refugees? Can Japan, the second-largest economy in the world, be said to be sharing responsibility for refugee protection when it recognised only 60 people as refugees throughout the 1990s? Should countries in Latin America do more to take in refugees? Why has very poor Benin become the latest country to offer to resettle refugees while relatively wealthy South Africa tries to physically cut itself off from refugees? These questions underline the complexity of the responsibility-sharing debate and the need for a deeper discussion than it will receive in the Global Consultations.

There are many issues within the broad heading of protection in cases of mass influx which divide States.

Of crucial importance to the protection of refugees and to standards of treatment, is the divide in practice between Western states with cumbersome status determination procedures and developing countries, which have most often had to deal with exoduses. Traditionally, African and Asian states which have experienced a mass influx of refugees have approached protection needs by means of *prima facie* group determination, often followed by the establishment of camps or settlements where refugees may be allowed to stay indefinitely. In contrast, during the Kosovo refugee crisis, European states opted for a temporary protection regime, a device designed more to safeguard procedures rather than to uphold refugee law principles. As the term indicates, temporary protection is linked to the swift repatriation of the displaced: when evacuated Kosovars bucked expectations and did not return quickly enough, many Western states began to pressurise those who remained in order to make them return.

From a refugee protection standpoint, *prima facie* status determination is to be preferred. However, the generous approach of Africa and Asia has often not been followed up with meaningful and effective attention to finding durable solutions in protracted situations, thus ignoring a fundamental requirement of the international protection regime. Of the three durable solutions, voluntary repatriation in conditions of safety and dignity is the best, most practical response in cases of mass influx but, as we see in Afghanistan, is sometimes not tenable. Local settlement of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of refugees is unrealistic, especially where the host state is itself poor. Resettlement remains an option, although the lack of interest by many Western states in resettlement means that this particular durable solution has not been as effective as it could have been in providing a realistic alternative.

The failure to find durable solutions in long-standing mass exodus cases has led, inevitably, to attempts by refugees to find a life elsewhere, contributing to further displacement. In turn, this has led to sometimes bitter protests. Australia's complaints, for example, about the commitment of other states to share

Engaging Civil Society in the Stability Pact: A Reality That Has Yet To Be Realised

More than a year and a half after its creation, the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe is still missing a crucial element: the genuine engagement of civil society in its work. While governments have invested significant time and resources into the Pact, there remains a disconnect between the aims of the Pact and the NGO experience of working with it. It is time for the Pact to turn its various commitments to developing cooperation with NGOs into reality. If the Pact will continue to fail to include NGOs, there is a serious risk that its programmes will be carried out in isolation without a basis in civil society and that it will not be able to achieve its goal of creating regional stability.

Coordinated by the Special Coordinator's office in Brussels, the Pact works towards realising the commitments made in Cologne, Germany in June 1999 by more than 40 States and organisations to strengthen the countries of South Eastern Europe to attain regional stability. One of the promised outcomes of the Pact is Euro-Atlantic integration for the countries of the region. Organised into three Working Tables, the Pact is to coordinate its activities and avoid duplication with others. In the original document adopted in Cologne, the Working Tables are to give special attention to "fostering the exchange" between private citizens, societal groups, companies, and NGOs.

> *While there have been some cases of NGO involvement in parts of the Pact, the overall engagement of NGOs, to date, has hardly been systematic, sustained, or concerted.*

While there have been some cases of NGO involvement in parts of the Pact, the overall engagement of NGOs, to date, has hardly been systematic, sustained, or concerted. There have been limited efforts made to include local and international NGOs in the Pact's work. During a meeting with NGOs in June 2000 in Thessaloniki, Greece, convened by Working Table I on Human Rights and Democratisation, NGOs stressed the need for the Pact, as a whole, to engage in an ongoing dialogue with the non-governmental community. Since then, little has been done to follow-up on these recommendations. Those efforts that are made to involve NGOs often come with little advance warning and seem to be few and far between. (see *Talk Back* 1-9 and 2-4)

A Stability Pact Declaration on NGO-Government Partnership, adopted in October 2000 "recognised the key role that NGOs and civil society play in democratisation, peace-building, human rights protection and promotion, as well as in "carrying forward the spirit and values of the Stability Pact." Governments committed to nine points in this "NGO Charter" that would promote greater NGO involvement in the Stability Pact activities.

However, despite the commitment in the original Stability Pact document to avoid duplication, one of the action points for governments in the NGO Charter is to support the "creation of NGO networks in South Eastern Europe." A point that has been raised repeatedly with the Stability Pact offices is the need to work with existing NGO structures and networks instead of creating new ones. The NGO Council in Bosnia-Herzegovina, involving both local and international NGOs, is a perfect example of a structure that could be engaged by the Pact. By using the numerous such existing NGO structures in the region, the Pact could enter into a genuine dialogue with NGOs, given the common goal of regional stability.

There are cases where NGOs are involved in the activities of the Pact. In Albania, for example, the International Catholic Migration Commission was invited to participate in the Expert Coordination Team of the Task Force on Human Trafficking in South Eastern Europe given its work to combat trafficking. While treated as an equal partner at the table for this Task Force, many NGOs have not had such favourable experiences.

"What manner of creature is this?"

This example is not typical of the NGO experience of the Pact. Many NGOs have felt that the Pact

MILITARY FINDS THE "RIGHT" FORUM FOR MOVING AHEAD ON HUMANITARIAN AID

The international community may be heading down a dangerous path as efforts are underway to define guidelines for the use of military and civil defence assets (MCDA) in complex emergencies. Certain governments are pushing the guidelines in an effort to clarify the role of the military in complex emergencies. While the use of MCDA is only to be used in cases when the capacity of humanitarian agencies is inadequate, there is a real risk that this capacity will be reduced by donor governments withholding or redirecting funding to favour the use of MCDA. Such a situation could lead to future Kosovo-like situations where governments bypass humanitarian agencies, such as UNHCR, and have their militaries deliver "humanitarian" assistance instead: the unacceptable scenario where humanitarian assistance is more supply-driven than needs-driven.

The follow-up, or lack thereof, of the Kosovo evaluation is a good example of how governments call on humanitarian agencies for greater accountability and transparency, while they largely ignore the lessons that they need to learn because of their political agendas.

The Kosovo experience highlighted how the humanitarian and military were blurred when military forces stepped in to deliver "humanitarian assistance." Many of the issues that emerged during the Kosovo crisis were not new ones, but were simply magnified, as in the case of the military's involvement in the humanitarian assistance. More than a year has passed since the independent evaluation of UNHCR's response to the Kosovo crisis (11 February 2000), but little follow-up has been done by the broader humanitarian and international communities to learn and apply the lessons of Kosovo (see *Talk Back* 2-1 for a more thorough examination of these issues in relation to the independent evaluation of UNHCR's response in Kosovo).

The Kosovo evaluation addressed many issues beyond the direct scope or remit of UNHCR, such as the bilateralisation of aid and the involvement of the military in humanitarian aid. Interestingly, while governments regularly ask UNHCR what measures it has taken to follow-up on the recommendations contained in the evaluation, governments and the broader humanitarian community have largely shirked their responsibilities for their role in the resulting "chaos" that was the Kosovo response.

The lack of coordination in the response, which resulted in part from the bilateral approach of many governments, has a direct link to the role of the military in complex emergencies. The Kosovo evaluation recommended that UNHCR define the terms of its relationship when working with the military. A proposal has been circulated by UNHCR to governments to have a rotating military liaison officer position within UNHCR for 4-6 months, which would help to build up a network with various military. But such measures do not define criteria for engaging with military forces. A concern expressed at the time of the evaluation was that the military agenda would move forward in defining its role in future humanitarian crises.

And, indeed, more than a year later, many military forces have moved ahead. On the international level, the military and defence attaches have found an willing ear in OCHA and its Military and Civil Defence Unit (MCDU) and the MCDU advisory panel meetings.

OCHA's MCDU is in the process of further developing guidelines for the use of military and/or civil defence assets in disaster relief operations. Not only was a decision taken last year within MCDU to update these so-called "Oslo Guidelines," but there was also a decision to develop "an addendum or additional document" that would cover the use of military and civil defence assets in complex emergencies. While the Oslo Guidelines are non-binding, the move to extend similar guidelines to complex emergencies has taken place with the involvement of few humanitarian actors and a limited number of governments.

An outline of the new guidelines has been developed and a drafting group will soon be created, in which the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) has stated that it wants to have some *see page 11*

which came into effect on 19 January 2001.

The latest sanctions again have at their base the turning over of Usama bin Laden to a country where he can be "brought to justice" (S/RES/1333 (2000)). Restrictions have been imposed on the supply, sale, and transfer of arms and military vehicles and equipment to Taliban controlled area. The sanctions also demand the halt of illegal drug acrivities and the virtual elimination of "the illicit cultivation of opium poppy, the proceeds of which finance Taliban terriorist activities."

> *The sanctions come at a time when drought and low temperatures are having devastating effects on the population.*

The sanctions come at a time when drought and low temperatures are having devastating effects on the population. The new UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Kenzo Oshima, recently visited the region and described the humanitarian crisis as being more serious than ever before. The harsh winter conditions in Afghanistan have resulted in hundreds of deaths.

There is a provision in the sanctions for the UN Secretary-General to report back to the Council on the humanitarian effects of the sanctions. However, this requirement has come with no additional funds for the UN's humanitarian agencies that are to monitor the situation.

> *Imposing sanctions in a bid to root out suspected terrorists is doing little to help the Afghan population. Perhaps the time has come for the international community to rethink radically its approach to Afghanistan.*

While the Taliban has imposed a ban on poppy cultivation, the result has been further displacement given the lack of alternatives for poppy farmers. If alternatives, including development funds, are not found in order to provide work for those farmers, there is the possibility that the ban will be lifted.

Neighbouring countries in the region are doing little to improve the situation for Afghans. While both Pakistan and Iran have, in the past, generously admitted Afghan refugees, there are ongoing deportations. Pakistan has also been attempting to close its borders, but the movement of people continues. Pakistan is saying that it is incapable of coping with the estimated 170,000 new arrivals. There have also been reports that refugees have been told by authorities in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province to evacuate certain camps.

The Tajik government has, since September 2000, refused to admit some 10,000 Afghans who are exposed to shelling from the frontlines. Such a mass influx, worry the Tajiks, might lead to a spillover of the conflict into their territory given that there are likely to be armed elements among those 10,000. The need for the international community to assist in these situations of mass influx and responsibility-sharing will have to be addressed during UNHCR's Global Consultations on Protection, which will focus on mass influx from 8-9 March 2001.

Combined with the ongoing conflict and a lack of respect for basic human rights, including the severe measures imposed on women by the Taliban authorities, the Afghan population is being assisted by a humanitarian community that is forced to provide only temporary solutions. The international community has a responsibility to undertake efforts to find a durable solution to the situation facing Afghanistan. Imposing sanctions in a bid to root out suspected terrorists is doing little to help the Afghan population. Perhaps the time has come for the international community to rethink radically its approach to Afghanistan. In any case, without a political solution to the situation, the status quo will continue with the humanitarian community simply compensating for the failures of the international community. ♦

NEW LAMPS FOR OLD: THE ROLE OF INFORMATION MANAGEMENT IN HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Paul Currion

Many humanitarian organisations give little priority to information management in the midst of a humanitarian crisis; it is not seen as an essential part of their main humanitarian work. Yet, in reality, there is a direct association between the effective management of information and the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance. Our effectiveness is, of course, constrained by other, external factors, such as political influences, funding availability and security concerns, but these do not negate the central importance of good information management.

A Case in Point

"By mid-Autumn of [1979] a rapidly set up consortium of 35 non-governmental organisations... was sending up to £2 million a month on relief aid....

"Careful examination of the available information indicated that Kampuchea, although suffering a major crisis...was not in the grip of a famine... Nevertheless the fund raising campaign based on the threat of starvation and famine continued...

"[W]hether or not there was a famine at that crucial period... remained an academic [question]... There are significant dangers in over-supplying a country with food aid...in sufficiently large quantities...to detract attention from the major cause of death and its solution, namely disease and the need for a proper health care infrastructure."

"No one of course doubted at that time or since that the devastation of Cambodia... had been almost beyond belief or that the needs of the traumatised population... were great. What, however, was in question, was exactly what those needs were." (Christa D'Souza, 1984,

International Disaster Institute)

On the one hand fundraising priorities caused the NGO community to beat the famine drum too loud and for too long. But the reason that famine was identified in the first place was simply that decision-makers in these organisations either did not have access to information about the situation - or that the information they received was not useful "in evaluating the severity of a disaster and therefore what role they should play if any."

In 20 years, we have not come much further in placing information management needs at the forefront of the humanitarian response. The very nature of emergencies means that, very often, information is not easily available when required. In theory, there is much more information available to us now, but the problems we face in dealing with that information still appear to be the same - and the responsibility for this can largely be laid at our own doors.

> *...there is a direct association between the effective management of information and the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance.*

New Technologies...

In the last 20 years advances in information and communications technologies have made more effective information management possible in ways that could only be dreamt of in the 1970s. The Brahimi Report on United Nations Peace Operations included a section entitled "Peace Operations and the Information Age" (Brahimi 2000, Paras 246-264), in which it began to address some of the issues raised by technological progress.

The Report identified improved information systems, particularly those based on IT, as a "key enabler" to "facilitate communications and data sharing; to give staff the tools that they need to do their work; and ultimately allow the UN

The Role of Information Management in Humanitarian Assistance

to be more effective". Failure to capitalise on the investment made in IT can lead to consequences "more serious than wasted labour, ranging from miscommunication of policy to a failure to 'get the word' on security threats or other major changes in the operational environment."

> *...more effective management of information will lead to the more effective delivery of aid.*

Although the Brahimi Report was referring to peace-keeping and post-conflict work in the UN system, the conclusions it draws are the same for the wider humanitarian community. Today most NGO field offices have at least one laptop, but that laptop will probably only be used for word-processing, spreadsheets, and possibly e-mail.

While the size and sophistication of the humanitarian response has increased, our use of new technology to support that response has not advanced correspondingly. Most organisations fail to capitalise on the potential to improve their work that the technology offers in areas such as field-headquarters communication, survey and needs assessment, integrated reporting, and information-sharing.

... but Old Systems

One of the great mistakes that organisations make is to value the technology over the process. This can lead to organisations investing heavily in systems that go beyond their needs and then failing to make use of them effectively. Information technology, on its own, will not create better information systems that enable organisations to function more effectively.

Organisational cultures need to be changed so that the wider processes of information management become a priority. Consider the following points:

- needs assessments and evaluations cannot take place without proper data collection techniques;
- inadequate processing of that data will lead to weak, late, or inaccurate analysis;
- poor dissemination of that analysis will prevent key personnel from making decisions based on good information;
- the inability to change information into knowledge will prevent the organisation from developing its institutional memory and learning from its successes and mistakes.

It is clear that information is a foundation tool that should underlie all other areas of an organisation's work: more effective management of information will lead to the more effective delivery of aid.

Some agencies have already realised this, and have begun to work together to improve the flow of information within the humanitarian community. At the forefront of this work is the Structured Humanitarian Assistance Reporting (SHARE) initiative, a collaboration between UN, donor, and intergovernmental agencies. SHARE offers a way to share information between all humanitarian organisations, enabling a more co-ordinated approach to decision-making and implementation.

> *...data collection tends to focus on areas that are specific to individual organisations and data are not collected in a way that enables that information to be easily shared.*

The problems still remain, however: how do we gather information in such a way as to make such sharing possible, and how do we know what information we should be sharing?

The Information Gap...

Numerous humanitarian organisations work with information, collecting the data they need in the form of assessments, surveys, evaluations, and other field-based exercises. However, data collection tends to focus on areas that are specific to individual organisations and data are not collected in a way that enables that information to be easily shared.

The narrow geographical and thematic focus of most organisations' information gathering means that they will find it hard to take into account information from other locations and other sectors. Smaller organisations will not be able to get access to reliable information; bigger organisations will rely too much on their own information.

At the same time, rapid advances in information and communications technology have led to a proliferation in the quantity of information available to humanitarian workers at all levels - but not necessarily any corresponding improvements in their abilities to usefully handle that information.

Information management is a process, not an event...

... and how to fill it

Many organisations have difficulty sharing information because they feel that by sharing, they give up the control over how that information is used. Particularly when it comes to operational security, or raising funds for their work, organisations may feel that sharing information will actually jeopardise their work. These are legitimate concerns that should be addressed. At the moment, however, most humanitarian organisations are content to work without clear guidelines on how they will use their information.

The starting point is the development of effective policies that place information management at the centre of our responses, and management systems that back up those policies. While this might begin to sound like a complicated exercise in organisational development, there is only one basic and straightforward requirement for improving information management. This is simply that those involved in the collection of information do so in such a way that this information is able to be shared both within their organisation, and with other organisations.

What does this mean in practice? It means working with other organisations to ensure that your data is compatible with other data, through the application of data standards, such as agreed geographic place codes for settlements. It means that lines of communication are clear and well-understood and that reporting structures are timely, reliable, and regular. It means that monitoring and evaluation are priorities, to ensure that your organisation learns from its experiences.

The ultimate aim is to create an organisational culture that encourages and rewards information sharing – through channels as diverse as information focal points, intranets, regular meetings, listserv distributions, real-time bulletins, etc. In order to achieve this, changes need to happen at every level of our organisations to encourage the basic habits of managing information more effectively.

Information management is a process, not an event, and will only succeed if those involved understand the value of information and are committed to its effective use. Managing your information is a means to an end, not an end in itself, and the real measure of success is how improved management increases the timeliness, appropriateness, and coordination of humanitarian assistance. ◆

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organisation, "we know what the commitments from the RUF and other parties in this part of the world are worth."

However, the creation of the corridors to let refugees walk home is not the only issue. Given the extremely volatile situation in Sierra Leone, the sustainability of the return operation can be regarded as an even bigger problem. Aware of the need to link with the political, Lubbers mentioned that the return operation should be seen as part of the efforts of the international community to help the legitimate Government of Sierra Leone create peace and stability.

On the humanitarian side, however, a principle of refugee law is that refugees should have a free choice whether or not to repatriate. While the official UNHCR position is to assist those who want to return and not to promote returns, any preparation for a return operation may well distract from the need to provide protection and assistance to the refugees in Guinea, thus making the choice for them.

Lubbers' preference may have been prompted by the lack of cooperation of the Guinean authorities. Since the beginning of the escalation of the crisis in September last year, the government has been extremely slow in identifying new sites for the refugees trapped in the border zone and allowing them to move inland. Guinean military reportedly have harassed refugees, confiscated vehicles from aid organisations, and cannot be trusted.

In this environment, UNHCR is unable to provide adequate protection for the refugees (see also *Talk Back* 2-7). However, the response of the international community as a whole is lacking. As feared, the announcement of the community of West African States to send troops to Guinea has remained an empty promise to date. But even if ECOMOG troops would be deployed, based on previous experiences, the credibility and effectiveness of these soldiers should be seriously doubted.

The dilemma that Lubbers is facing is not new. In the mid-'90s UNHCR developed new policies for repatriation, using terminology such as "imposed return" or "return under less than optimal circumstances," following increased fatigue from host states and donor governments to continue to accommodate large numbers of refugees in protracted situations.

In his first weeks in office Lubbers has expressed priority to focus on UNHCR's core mandate of protection, a direction welcomed by many NGOs. If the new High Commissioner is to take this task seriously, he will find himself in opposition to governments from time to time. The Guinean government could have been the first test. It is ironic therefore that Lubbers appears to have adopted a more benign position in this case. ◆

the responsibility for refugee protection, have de facto broadened into attacks on the international system in general.

We are seeing now in West Africa the effect that the failure to share responsibility in times of mass influx is having. The lack of international aid to protect and assist the hundred of thousands of refugees from Sierra Leone in Guinea — appeals for money to move camps away from the border last year fell on deaf ears — is now causing a humanitarian crisis. Despite the presence of a UN peacekeeping force and British soldiers in Sierra Leone, refugees are under attack by rebels and by Guinean forces. The High Commissioner for Refugees has emphasised that the UN has only one plan for the refugees: in the absence of viable alternatives supported by the international community, UNHCR is negotiating to repatriate refugees to the part of Sierra Leone controlled, currently, by the government of President Kabbah via a circuitous land and sea route. For the refugees in Guinea, the *prima facie* recognition that they are in need of international protection has turned into an all too temporary haven. ◆

somehow assumes that all its workings are immediately transparent. While it is not always clear how NGOs can access the structures of the Pact, there is also an onus on the NGO to find a way in. In fact, there is still an aura of mystery surrounding the Pact (see also *Talk Back* 2-4). What is the Pact's relationship to funding? How are the resources of the Pact to be used? When are they available and from where? For the vast majority of NGOs, it remains easier to seek funding through individual donors than to try to find their way through the Pact and its ill-defined "vetting process" for projects. Even some donors are at a loss as to what to do when they receive project proposals from NGOs that could potentially fall under the auspices of the Pact.

Instead of continuing with piecemeal efforts to involve NGOs, it is time for the Stability Pact to turn its commitment to working with NGOs and involving them in the activities of the Pact into a coherent reality.

Admittedly, as a new and unique body, the Pact is still to some extent defining itself and developing structures and working methods. However, it is also clear that the Pact does not fully appreciate the complexity of consultation and accountability within the NGO sector itself.

Instead of continuing with piecemeal efforts to involve NGOs, it is time for the Stability Pact to turn its commitment to working with NGOs and involving them in the activities of the Pact into a coherent reality. A first step would be the creation of an NGO liaison post within the Special Coordinator's office to work on the development of an ongoing dialogue between the Pact and the NGO sector. In addition, all three Working Tables need to take steps to better engage NGOs and civil society and to ensure their full involvement in the Pact's activities.

To date, the focus of the Pact's work has been largely on governments. While engaging governments in a political dialogue is essential for regional stability, working with the people in the region is just as cru-

cial. The recent admission of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia into the Pact is a welcome step. The next step should be the realisation that NGOs and civil society are crucial partners in effecting lasting change. The Pact has to prove that the political commitments made to engage NGOs and civil society in the work of the Pact do not turn out to be mere rhetoric, but that they are applied throughout the region. ♦

ISSUE OF THE MONTH
Military Moving Ahead on Humanitarian Aid

control, especially regarding security. MCDU's plan is to have the guidelines reviewed and eventually cleared by the UN's humanitarian coordination body, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. The guidelines are then to be disseminated to an international meeting before the end of the year.

The guidelines, however, are not the only area where militaries are trying to further define their role with regards to humanitarian operations. Through civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) mechanisms, certain militaries are getting involved in humanitarian action.

Through civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) mechanisms, certain militaries are getting involved in humanitarian action.

The European Union's proposed rapid reaction force is another mechanism that has the potential to subordinate the humanitarian to the political.

The follow-up, or lack thereof, of the Kosovo evaluation is a good example of how governments call on humanitarian agencies for greater accountability and transparency, while they largely ignore the lessons that they need to learn because of their political agendas. ♦

RURAL DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION OF PAKISTAN

Grass roots organisations are few and far between in Pakistan, a country whose power is mainly centred at the federal and provincial levels. The government's inadequate machinery at the district and village levels renders it is largely out of tune with many of its citizens' needs.

It was under these circumstances that Dr. Sadiq Malik founded the Rural Development Foundation of Pakistan (RDF) in 1978. Initially, RDF was faced with serious obstacles that nearly impeded its development. Feudal lords, as they are known, still have a great deal of power in Pakistan. They were awarded large land holdings under British Colonial rule and have been known to deprive rural villagers of their legitimate rights. It is these villagers that RDF seeks to empower. The organisation has been hugely successful in the implementation of Village Development Committees (VDCs). These self-sufficient committees are the foundation for RDF's vision of village-based development.

From its headquarters in Islamabad, RDF oversees the development of its network of 200 member NGOs, which each take on the oversight of four to five rural villages. With more than 45,000 villages in Pakistan, there is more than enough room for expansion. With the proper resources," says Dr. Malik, "RDF will expand the network to cover the maximum number of villages."

Specifically, RDF ensures that its members are efficient from start to finish in managing individual village projects. These projects deal mostly with agriculture, sanitation, drinking water, primary health, and education. In order to increase the effectiveness of these projects and to complement the fieldwork of its member NGOs, RDF recently established the Institute of Rural Development Studies (IRDS) and the Global Institute of Information and Management Studies (GIIMS). These newly formed schools offer a wide range of classes focusing primarily on project management and information technology that are useful in managing the day-to-day operations of village projects.

In these classes and in the field, RDF advocates that NGOs act on the villagers' own concerns and priorities. It is the duty of the NGOs to bring these needs to the surface. RDF then works to bridge the villages with donors and government agencies. "Initially," says Dr. Maliq, "this was very hard to accomplish." But RDF has found a way to supplement the government's efforts by working to fill the gaps in the lower rungs of government, where the red tape is thick and results often long in coming. ♦

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