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The Role of the Military in  
Humanitarian Emergencies

Conference Report

Oxford, 29-31 October 1995



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#### NOTE TO THE READER

**This summary report was written by Mr. Toby Lanzer in consultation with Dr. Barbara Harrell-Bond and Father Richard Ryscavage. It is based on the comments of speakers and participants at the conference 'The Role of the Military in Humanitarian Emergencies,' which took place under the auspices of the Refugee Studies Programme, Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, 29-31 October 1995. The report does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Refugee Studies Programme nor of the writer. A full transcription and tapes of the conference are available for reference at the Refugee Studies Programme's Documentation Centre.**

## Introduction

The Refugee Studies Programme, part of the University of Oxford's International Development Centre, Queen Elizabeth House, held a conference 'The Role of the Military in Humanitarian Emergencies' from 29-31 October 1995. Government and military representatives, UN agency and department officials, non-governmental organization delegates, church group leaders, academics, researchers, and students attended the conference. The programme included a keynote address and five sessions: (1) military protection in humanitarian emergencies; (2) coordination of the delivery of humanitarian assistance; (3) political roles and civil reconstruction; (4) information-communication & training needed for successful humanitarian assistance; (5) lessons learned and future developments. Except for the keynote address, panelists for each session were limited to ten minute presentations. Several speakers highlighted their detailed case experiences in Bosnia, Haiti, Iraq, Rwanda, and Somalia. Specifically, the conference sought to address the following issues:

- ▶ What are the advantages and disadvantages of using the military in humanitarian emergencies?
- ▶ To what extent can the military stabilise a hostile environment in order to offer protection to vulnerable groups caught in conflict, and to allow aid agencies to deliver humanitarian aid?
- ▶ What happens when the military, whether working under a mandate from the United Nations, NATO, or regional organisations comes into direct contact with humanitarian organisations to support humanitarian assistance and civil reconstruction?
- ▶ What can humanitarian organisations learn from the military to improve their way of delivering assistance?
- ▶ What are the relevant aspects of military culture to be introduced into humanitarian operations?

Another more fundamental question pervaded the deliberations: Should there be a role for the military in humanitarian emergencies? Overall, participants agreed that most of today's humanitarian emergencies arise because of political crises, therefore operations that address these should have three integrated components: political, military, and humanitarian.

One participant called on the conference to dispel the 'myths and stereotypes that humanitarianism is pure, i.e. motivated by independence, impartiality, and neutrality, while the military establishment is ugly, i.e. has political and sinister motives, which corrupt the aims of the humanitarians'. It became apparent rather quickly to the participants that stereotypical images of 'humanitarian' or 'military' exist. Many participants were struck by

the tension between different members of the military and the members of non-governmental and intergovernmental humanitarian establishments. Despite a long tradition of military participation in humanitarian aid, contemporary civilian assistance organisations are not generally used to working with the military. The conference provided an opportunity for participants to address the relations that exist between the two groups.

### **Relations Between Military and Humanitarian Organisations**

It is difficult to generalise about military and humanitarian organisations: both come in many shapes and sizes. However, it was evident at the conference that the organisational culture of both groups differs greatly. Each has their own structure, field behaviour, and professional vocabulary. Tensions between the two groups ran high at the conference as illustrated by some of the comments made by different participants: 'NGOs I've met in the field think that the military are blood-thirsty hounds, yet if anyone understands combat and pain, it's the military', and 'Military doctrine has adopted, or has been converted to humanitarianism and now has a new mission- that of saving lives: Surely, this is not credible'. 'We need the military but we don't want the military'.

One participant noted that tension between the two groups arises because the reasons for intervening are different from the outset: The military is there because they are sent by politicians; NGOs are there because they decided independently that there is a humanitarian need. However, if the role of the military in humanitarian emergencies continues to expand as it has during the first years of the decade, then both the military and humanitarian organisations will have to learn to work together. Otherwise, competition and tension between the two groups will continue to increase to the detriment of the people who are supposed to benefit from their assistance.

### **Humanitarian Emergencies and Humanitarian Intervention**

According to one definition offered by some participants at the conference, a humanitarian emergency is a situation where a group of human beings finds itself in a vulnerable position of suffering and under great threat. Since the end of the Cold War, the term 'complex emergency' or 'complex humanitarian emergency' has gained widespread use. In essence, it refers to civil war, man-made disasters, political chaos, and significant struggles for power that accompany and cause the humanitarian emergency.

One should not confuse humanitarian emergencies with humanitarian intervention, which has a specific definition in international relations: 'The intervention in a country with military forces, without the consent of the government of that country, for the purpose of protecting and providing assistance to the country's citizens'. The motives of humanitarian organizations are almost always mixed up with other interests. It is not enough to proclaim

them as purely 'humanitarian'.

A clear, comprehensive policy should back any humanitarian intervention because such actions interfere with the sovereignty of states; but the practice of humanitarian intervention tends to lack doctrine or guiding policy. Further, there is little chance of establishing such a doctrine because most sovereign states refuse to allow the United Nations carte blanche authorization to intervene beyond what is already authorized by the UN Charter.

Humanitarian interventions have proved to be much more tangled and complex in practice than they seemed in theory. One of the fundamental problems is knowing when the military should get involved in a crisis. To answer this, several options were put forward: First, when a country's majority treats the minority badly, such as Iraqi treatment of Kurds; second, when *coups d'etat* create an untenable situation for the majority of a country's population, such as in Haiti; third, when factional wars destroy much of a country's social fabric and threaten the lives of thousands of citizens, such as in Somalia; and, fourth, perhaps when there is minority control and suppression of the majority, as was the case in South Africa, although there was no intervention in that particular case. Further, humanitarian interventions tend to change over time in terms of what they are trying to accomplish and the obstacles that they face. It was pointed out, for example, that in Somalia the mandate shifted from a humanitarian action to an enforcement action.

Some participants at the conference asked if there are any alternatives to armed intervention? Among the suggestions were, first, that the Geneva Conventions be better applied and that countries' observance of them be under close scrutiny; second, that there should be more focus on preventive diplomacy to avoid an escalation of a problem before intervention is necessary; third, establishing 'UN Guards' contingents.

There is a long history of military involvement in humanitarian issues, perhaps because it is in the military's interest to win the support of the people in areas under its control. The Roman Legions while on campaign in Gaul in the first century BC carried out humanitarian aid programmes, as did Napoleon in the early 19th century. During and after World War II, the allied armies provided considerable food and non-food assistance to people in areas which had been liberated. With the establishment of the United Nations in 1945, however, there was a decrease in military intervention by individual nations. Instead, UN military components have been created to resolve international conflicts and address the consequent humanitarian issues.<sup>1</sup> The mandate for such operations comes from the Security Council.

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<sup>1</sup> Some participants from the NGO community suggested that the recent increase in humanitarian activities by the military reflected various military establishments looking for a new role in the post Cold War era. Military participants from developing countries noted that some of their national armies have had considerable experience in peace-time humanitarian roles. Others asked if the rich northern countries were not

After the Cold War ended, there was an initial increase in the international community's expectations of the UN to settle problems, especially as they relate to internal conflict. While such expectations are now decreasing, the UN appears to have three alternatives when asked to resolve internal conflict: First, to include those who created the problem in its resolution. This poses the challenge of inducing those who started the problem to solve it. Second, to declare those who created the problem as incapable of being part of the solution. This leaves the UN with the option of eliminating them or not getting involved. Third, to accept that some of the people or parties who created the problem can be part of the solution and that others cannot. This places the UN in a risky position of having to choose some parties over others. Whichever of these strategic decisions the UN adopts, it nearly always establishes a peacekeeping operation to implement it.

One of the former UN Secretaries-General, Dag Hammarskjold, once commented that, 'Peacekeeping is not a job for soldiers, but only soldiers can do it.' Each UN operation since the early 1960s effort in the Congo has included a humanitarian role. Several participants from the military felt that missions had a moral duty to respond with any humanitarian aid that they have available, even if there is no specific mandate for such functions.

There has been a considerable increase in peacekeeping activities since the end of the Cold War, although one speaker believed the trend likely to decrease in light of the UN failures in Bosnia, Somalia, and Rwanda.

In the case of Bosnia, one speaker from the military argued that peacekeeping was established to support humanitarian programmes as opposed to keeping the peace. In general terms, the aim for peacekeepers was to increase mutual confidence amongst the local people and create an environment of stability so that fewer people would get hurt and more would get aid. Day-to-day tasks includes close liaison with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, brokering cease-fires, and organizing convoys to deliver emergency relief. In the case of convoys, the military was not used to deliver humanitarian aid but to create the conditions whereby it could be delivered. Eventually, there comes a point when the UN is no longer the appropriate authority to command troops involved in the military operation on the ground because its command structures are not outlined clearly enough. This in itself is difficult to do because member states which have provided troops to the UN continue to treat the troops as 'theirs'. While this is likely to happen in any UN peacekeeping operation, the problem was particularly acute in Bosnia. Another participant explained that the problem in Bosnia

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withdrawing from some regions, such as Africa, and substituting an active political role with a 'band-aid' emergency relief approach carried out by the military. One member of an NGO questioned if we are not witnessing a 'creeping *coup d'etat*' by the international military which in order to counter the growing political chaos is taking a more prominent role in poor countries. Several military representatives took strong exception to these last remarks.

lay in the lack of agreement between the UN and NATO on how and where to use force. At the time of the conference, NATO was preparing to replace the UN forces in Bosnia. Several participants felt that future multilateral military interventions will be carried out by such regional bodies as NATO, rather than by the UN Peacekeeping Operations.

Several speakers raised and supported the idea that the UN should have its own stand-by force, although few people felt that member states would actually want to create and maintain such a force.

In recent peacekeeping operations, the threat to use force or the actual use of force by UN troops or by regional alliances, such as NATO, has increased. One participant explained that the UN legitimizes such action by citing the UN charter to allow member states to take measures thought necessary to prevent a conflict from spilling into other regions or to enable aid deliveries to take place. The use of force in humanitarian interventions provoked much discussion at the conference. Members of the military felt that it was justified, especially in self-defence or in defence of the mission. Most participants from aid agencies, however, argued that force should not be used. Humanitarian activities co-exist uneasily with armed enforcement because the use of force leads to a loss of neutrality and impartiality. Some participants, however, were more cautious. It was explained, for example, that neutrality is hard to maintain because every action by outsiders affects the local balance of power. All parties to a conflict manipulate the intervention despite the fact that the humanitarian community continually affirms its apolitical motives. Nevertheless, one participant argued that attempts should be made to remain 'as neutral and impartial as possible'; UN member states, which are likely to contribute troops to missions, see neutrality as a barrier against escalation hence they are more willing to make contributions than they might otherwise be.

### **Advantages of the Military in Humanitarian Emergencies**

Members of the military believed that there are several roles for them in humanitarian emergencies: First, protecting civilians caught in conflict zones and creating safe conditions for humanitarian operations. Concerning the first issue, however, Bosnia showed that 'safe areas' need far more resources than member states are currently willing to provide. One former military officer explained that 120 soldiers can guarantee security in an area of only 200 square metres! It is extremely difficult to protect civilians caught in a conflict and it really depends on the political will of the parties at war. Several participants from both the military and humanitarian communities agreed that the military has created safe conditions for humanitarian operations to take place. For example, the military were instrumental in securing airports, ports, and roads in Bosnia and Somalia. Conditions were also created so that humanitarian convoys could proceed safely. One participant argued that experience in Somalia has shown that locally hired militia groups put agencies into the role of fueling the conflict by providing resources for militia groups involved in the civil conflict; but NGOs

argued that hired local protection defended their action on the grounds that the UN and international military forces were not providing security to the NGOs operating in Somalia.

Second, the military has valuable expertise in logistics and engineering, and often has useful stand-by supplies. Logistics, including communications systems, and air and road transport, are always needed during humanitarian emergencies. A tragic but necessary role played by the military in Rwanda was to bury thousands of corpses. This proved to be a crucial sanitation issue given the hundreds of thousands of refugees caught in a relatively small area. Engineering skills are particularly useful during rehabilitation phases, when buildings, bridges and roads need reconstructing. Some military establishments, such as that of the United States, supply mosquito nets, tents, and other inputs to humanitarian organizations.

Third, some members of the military at the conference voiced their hope that the military become a powerful lobby on behalf of the eradication of land mines and chemical weapons. Closely linked to such work is the need for mine survey and clearing, in which the military has special expertise.

Fourth, several speakers from the military highlighted the fact that the military has a culture based on established hierarchy which can greatly facilitate management, discipline, and organization. These three factors, they felt were vital in an emergency setting and can prove to be advantageous in guiding humanitarian operations.

#### **Disadvantages of the Military in Humanitarian Emergencies**

Despite the positive role that the military has played in several humanitarian crises, many problems have also arisen:

First, there was widespread concern expressed at the conference that some military forces are often overly concerned with their own security. They tend to stay in barracks or behind compounds, content to draw *per diem* income supplements from the UN. Soldiers or peacekeepers often do not understand the context in which they are working and do not speak the language. Several members of the military admitted that humanitarian organisations tend to be more knowledgeable about conditions on the ground, often speak the appropriate language, and mix more openly with the local people.

Equally problematic is the behaviour of the troops. Members of the military have been known to partake in undesirable and illegal activities, such as the sale of drugs or fuel. Further, in Bosnia and Cambodia, there was widespread concern that peacekeepers were taking advantage of the very population that they are supposed to protect: sexual abuse of local women and girls by peacekeeping troops was unfortunately common. This particular issue provoked heated debate at the conference and some participants suggested that humanitarian organizations might be as guilty as peacekeepers. Further, lines of

accountability and 'rules' to deal with such matters, it was argued, are clearer in military structures than they are in non-governmental and inter-governmental humanitarian organisations.

Another disadvantage expressed at the conference was that there are different levels of training and expertise amongst the various components of peacekeeping missions. The military of some member states might be good at assessing needs in the field but weak at providing water systems. The UN, however, is not in a position to reject any contingents that member states offer, because the demand outstrips the supply.

Using the military in humanitarian emergencies has proven to be very expensive and, at times, inappropriate. In Rwanda, for example, research has illustrated that military cargo aeroplanes are four to eight times more expensive than available commercial carriers. In 1994, the United States Military worked to resolve the water crisis in Goma, Zaire, but quickly showed itself unable to adapt to conditions in the field. Some members of the military acknowledged that non-governmental organisations, which had fewer resources than the military, were able to deal with the problem faster and more effectively.

Having noted these issues, the participants at the conference turned to what could be done to improve the quality of the military response to humanitarian emergencies and to more effective collaboration between civilian and military actors.

#### **Training and Preparation for Humanitarian Activities**

Much importance was attached to the need for adequate training and preparation for the military, as well as humanitarian actors, before direct involvement in humanitarian activities takes place and that such training be based on internationally recognized standards. An effort has been made to harmonize worldwide humanitarian standards with instruments such as the Geneva Conventions, and with various codes of conduct for military and NGO actors. While soldiers receive extensive training to carry out various functions, the provision or implementation of humanitarian assistance is rarely among them. General knowledge about emergency relief operations, including the types of actors involved and the different sectors in which programmes take place, should be provided. Soldiers should be aware of human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, before they reach the field. In particular though, soldiers need training about the country in which the mission is taking place. This should include a basic understanding of the political, historic, social, economic, and cultural context. Language training is also important, although rarely provided. Certain elite sectors of national military forces are well trained in these areas, but training of the broader soldiering forces could be improved.

NGOs also need to become more involved in the preparation and training phase of peace keeping operations. Widely expressed at the conference was the desire for an increased

amount of preparatory contact and information between NGOs, intergovernmental humanitarian organizations such as the UNHCR, and the military. Routine programmes for cross-training members of these communities could be initiated. NGOs would benefit from having special training by the military in the areas of logistics and security.

One participant from the military called for a public information bank to be created. It would include documents about previous operations and would allow civilians and military to analyze past emergency relief activities for purposes of better training for the future.

One participant from the military called for a public information bank to be created. The bank ought to include documents about previous operations that have taken place. This would allow different military structures to analyse emergency relief activities and work to prepare their troops accordingly.

Many participants voiced the need for aid agencies to be more involved in the preparation of peace support operations. Indeed, it was widely felt that principal humanitarian organisations and military structures should increase the amount of contact and information sharing between each other. For example, there could be routine programmes to cross-train and prepare members of different organizations to work together. If the military and humanitarian organisations do not work together, opposing sides to a conflict will toy with them by playing one off against the other.

### **Coordination**

Coordination is perhaps the most challenging aspect of humanitarian emergencies. How can one harness the efforts of so many different types of actors, including host country government structures, donor governments, UN departments and agencies, international organisations, and NGOs, especially in a situation where the relief agencies are not part of the formal peace operation?

It was pointed out that in the UN system, a group known as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), has met routinely since 1993 to discuss specific operations and how to improve coordination. The committee is chaired by the Emergency Relief Coordinator, also known as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, and includes members of UN agencies, such as the World Food Programme, international organisations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, and groups of non-governmental organisations, such as the Steering Committee.

There was considerable discussion about the different types of coordination that could take place at the field level. For example, some speakers from the military voiced their approval for a 'top down' approach, which would include clear lines of authority and be

highly structured. NGOs were somewhat wary of such an approach as it does not coincide with the participatory decision making processes to which they are more accustomed. A participant from a UN agency raised the issue of coordination by consensus. While this satisfied the concerns of greater participation in the decision making process, some participants felt that the lack of time during an emergency would prohibit such a method from working effectively. Another issue which arose was whether or not the coordinating agency or department implemented its own humanitarian programmes. Overall, participants appeared to be more comfortable with a coordination role that does not manage or implement specific emergency relief activities. Some participants noted the fiercely independent nature of the NGOs and called attention to the fact that a coordination role by UNHCR or by the military would not always serve the best interests of the private organizations or of the people being served. In general, humanitarian organisations agreed that they had to receive more from such cooperation than their individual contribution if coordination was to work for them. Some specific suggestions that were put forward to improve future coordination follow:

- ▶ Designate a humanitarian coordinator, supported by a small group of professionals, to harness all actors' efforts so that agency competition is replaced with collaboration; How to designate such a coordinator is controversial.
- ▶ Detach the humanitarian component from the overall mission's military and political activities to the extent possible. Some participants argued that 'mixing missions' is a normal characteristic of complex humanitarian emergencies.
- ▶ Share information among all actors quickly; participants acknowledged that this recommendation was far easier in theory than in practice.
- ▶ Define the roles and responsibilities of different actors clearly, although it was not made clear by what process roles are to be defined.
- ▶ Encourage NGOs to present a consolidated picture and to work together on information sharing and security issues.
- ▶ Issue consolidated appeals on behalf of all humanitarian organisations;
- ▶ Work out security policies collectively;
- ▶ Plan emergency relief and rehabilitation programmes within a long-term development context, including capacity building for local institutions and groups.

### **Information Sharing and the Media**

Much importance was attached to information sharing and relations with the media. Concerning information sharing, it was emphasized that communication between political, military, and humanitarian structures should be horizontal, not vertical. However it was evident from the speakers that the NGOs' need for public information may validly conflict with the military's need to keep certain information private. Despite this reality, many speakers felt that there was too much secrecy involved in peacekeeping operations and explained their frustration at not knowing enough about what was occurring. Equally important, information flows between peacekeeping missions and other actors tend to be slow or not exist at all.

Calls for more transparency and openness were widespread. A specific suggestion was to establish information banks, which could include a hard-copy documentation centre and a data base. There are various methods for sending information, even in the most acute crises. For example, telex over radio and fax over radio are already in use in several operations. Electronic mail links are increasingly used, as well, although they depend on working phone lines.

Regarding the media, several speakers from the military highlighted the tremendous demands placed on those active in humanitarian crises by journalists. For example, commanders working in an important role might spend one quarter of their time with the press. Members of the military and humanitarian organisations were encouraged to create open, constructive relations with the media. Relations should be based on trust as information could flow in either direction: from a commander to a journalist or *vice-versa*. Essentially, the stronger the relationship between key players in a humanitarian crisis and the media, the better understanding each will have of the other. This, in turn, will promote more accurate and sensitive reporting. One speaker stressed the importance of 'dropping' journalists as soon as they break a commitment or understanding. Finally, while there have been exceptions, in general humanitarian organisations need the media more than the military because much of humanitarian organisations' funding depends on their visibility. The military, once involved, have a political commitment by their respective government or the UN to provide enough resources for the operation. This is not the case for humanitarian organisations, most of which need to appeal for funds before they get involved.

### **Finances and Accountability**

As previously noted, research on humanitarian activities in Rwanda and Somalia seems to show that the military is far more expensive than humanitarian organisations or commercial contractors. This is important to consider if governments are concerned about using taxes efficiently. In some situations there might be no alternative to using the military, in which

case the costs will have to be borne. Another point noted was that the military often debit the charge for their services against governments' aid budgets instead of bearing the cost themselves from defence allocations. One participant explained that despite the funding crisis at the United Nations, troops can be sought and deployed before money is available, provided that the Security Council approves the plans. In the case of humanitarian programmes, however, neither the UN Secretary-General nor humanitarian organisations can 'deploy' teams to address crises without first having the funds available. They must appeal for financing and it is only after money has been committed that agencies can carry out their programmes.

Concerning accountability, one speaker raised several important questions: How and to whom are humanitarian organizations and the military accountable? What happens when members of organisations responsible for the protection of civilians or the provision of humanitarian assistance promote the exploitation of women? Two suggestions came from the floor. First, that the UN Secretary-General appoint an independent ombudsman for each peacekeeping and humanitarian programme. This 'ombudsman' could report events as they occur directly to the Secretary-General or to the Security Council. Second, a member of an NGO suggested that humanitarian agencies develop an independently-monitored accreditation system for organizations using public resources. Organizations could be screened for their suitability and ability to respond to a certain crisis before getting there.

Several speakers alluded to issues, which largely determine success or failure in military-civilian collaboration. There is a primary need for a clear mission statement. If members of the military or relief agencies are not sure why they are getting involved, there is little chance for success. Missions should not be changed haphazardly. If there is a need to revise, expand, or diminish the mission statement, this should be done in close consultation with all the actors on the ground. If missions are to succeed, they need to be fully backed with political will and financial commitment for the entire course of the mission. Countries are often eager or concerned to get involved in certain issues but then lose interest. This sends a terrible message to those people carrying out the work. Lost interest and commitment will inevitably result in failure. Resources must be available quickly and consistently. Who defines the success of a mission? One speaker quipped that the 'UN should define its objectives so modestly that it is perceived as having succeeded'. Perceptions often lead to reality: if people feel that things are going wrong, failure is often only just around the corner.

### **Conclusion**

As has been noted in the preceding pages, the conference 'The Role of the Military in Humanitarian Emergencies' provided a three day forum where actors involved in humanitarian emergencies could engage in an extensive dialogue on various critical issues.

There are advantages and disadvantages of using the military in humanitarian

emergencies. Amongst the advantages are training and experience in dealing with the provision of security, logistics, engineering, and mine clearing. Disadvantages include high cost and unfamiliarity with local conditions.

It is extremely difficult for an external force to enter a hostile environment and stabilise it so that vulnerable groups caught in conflict can be protected. In general, countries are unwilling to commit the necessary human and material resources. Even when considerable resources are made available, protection is far from assured. It is likely, however, that states continue to provide troops to secure a hostile environment so that humanitarian assistance can reach civilians in need.

Experiences in Angola, Bosnia, Cambodia, Rwanda, and Somalia demonstrated the tensions that arise between the military and humanitarian organisations. To overcome this, there needs to be more contact (including training and planning sessions) before collaborative activities take place, and closer coordination once in the field.

There are several things that humanitarian organizations can learn from the military to improve their way of delivering assistance. For example, logistics and knowledge about security issues during humanitarian emergencies. Several people at the conference felt strongly that parts of military culture, such as its discipline, structured command, communication and organisational procedures, could greatly enhance the work of humanitarian agencies in the field. Likewise, if the military wish to become increasingly involved in humanitarian emergencies, they could do well to become more familiar with the different groups working in emergency relief, and inform themselves on such issues as human rights.

The conference clearly demonstrated that the civilian humanitarian actors and the military actors lack a common strategic vision or goal for the post-Cold War era. Close and effective, long-range collaboration between the actors, therefore, does not seem to be on the horizon.

As one speaker put it, 'What can be expected of military forces is limited. They can provide some protection for operations and some assistance... The main load of humanitarian assistance still has to be carried out by people whose profession it is, i.e. civilian organizations, both intergovernmental and governmental'.