

United States Senate
Committee on Foreign Relations

Hearing: Defining the Military's Role towards Foreign Policy
Date: Thursday, July 31, 2008
Witness: George Rupp, President and CEO, International Rescue Committee

Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to address the distinguished members of this Committee. I am honored to be part of this panel, and I appreciate the time and attention you are devoting to this important subject. I am the President of the International Rescue Committee, a board member of InterAction, the coalition of over 160 relief and development nongovernmental organizations, and the co-chair of an InterAction CEO-level steering committee on civil-military relations. In these roles, I have followed closely the worrisome trend toward militarization of foreign aid that has emerged in the arena of foreign policy and humanitarian assistance.

As important as InterAction is for the entire NGO community, my perspective is most crucially informed by the experience of the International Rescue Committee. Our origins go back to Albert Einstein and focus on resettling refugees in the United States—in the earliest instance from Nazi-occupied Europe. We continue to do that work in collaboration with the State Department and through 24 resettlement offices across the U.S. But because there are large numbers of uprooted people who will not be resettled in America, we also operate in 42 countries around the world.

Almost all of the countries in which we operate internationally are in the midst of conflict or suffering from its aftermath. Our largest programs are in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. We also have programs in Iraq. Therefore, we are accustomed to working in close proximity to military forces, and we are acutely aware of the indispensable role that assuring security plays in allowing our work.

I was present earlier this month when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates delivered remarks in which he acknowledged “that America’s civilian institutions of diplomacy and development have been chronically undermanned and underfunded for far too long—relative to what we traditionally spend on the military, and more important, relative to the responsibilities and challenges our nation has around the world.”

In keeping with the collaborative tone that Secretary Gates has consistently exemplified, I would like to register three points: first, the U.S. military has an entirely appropriate role in humanitarian activity; second, in all but the most extreme settings, there is a comparative advantage for a civilian-led response to the challenges of relief and development assistance; and third, there is a quite drastic imbalance in the resources available for the two sectors.

1. Appropriate Role of the U.S. military in Humanitarian Activity

As my first point, I would like to acknowledge the vital contribution to international disaster assistance that the U.S. military provides at crucial times of urgent need. Especially in sudden-onset natural disasters our military has impressive capacity to deliver quality engineering and transportation capabilities, logistical personnel and materials, and emergency telecommunications quickly and with global reach.

Examples of military involvement in humanitarian operations in exceptional circumstances include Ethiopia and Sudan in 1984-1985, Northern Iraq in 1991, Goma, Zaire, in 1994, and Kosovo and Macedonia in May 1999.

More recently, the U.S. military's contributions to affected populations after the Indian Ocean tsunami and the Pakistan / South Asia Earthquake were invaluable, and their contribution helped improve public opinion toward Americans in those countries.

But even in these dramatic examples, the U.S. military's efforts were most effective when they were coordinated with such civilian agencies on the ground as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations, and NGOs that are expert in disaster relief.

2. Comparative Advantages of Civilian Response to Crises

My second point is that civilian humanitarian agencies are positioned to respond more effectively than the military in situations where they are present, operational, and knowledgeable about the needs of populations in distress. Many of the International Rescue Committee's relief workers have spent their entire careers cultivating a professional approach to aid delivery in which we take pride. Like other major relief and development agencies, we emphasize programs designed to involve people in the very projects from which they will benefit. We strive for empowerment of local communities, capacity building of national institutions, gender equity, and self-reliance of individual beneficiaries.

One of the most crucial components of NGO staff security in the field is the acceptance by local communities of our presence. We cultivate this acceptance by valuing cultural sensitivity, understanding local customs, demonstrating long-term commitment in a community or refugee camp, and employing high numbers of community members.

Military troops can compromise the security of NGO staff by blurring the lines between military and civilian humanitarian personnel. If we work too close to the military, NGOs become vulnerable to accusations that we are agents of the Pentagon or spies rather than operationally independent humanitarian workers. This problem is exacerbated in those instances when the U.S. military has chosen to conduct aid projects while driving civilian vehicles and dressed as civilian aid workers while carrying concealed weapons – a dangerous practice that can put the lives of NGO workers in jeopardy. As a result, NGOs are vigilant about distinguishing ourselves from belligerent forces.

It is tempting, I am sure, for military commanders with personnel and resources to deploy them and carry out humanitarian activities as part of a “hearts and minds” campaign to win the support or acceptance of a local population. This type of activity may meet short-term goals of the military: positive outreach to local populations, exercises in team building, and boosting troop morale. But it is not a good use of taxpayer money and may have little lasting impact. In contrast, well-designed civilian-led efforts demonstrate a long-term commitment to help others.

The motive of soldiers who are implementing aid services is not in question, but there is good reason to doubt their effectiveness in undertaking activities for which they are not trained. Further, estimates of the cost per year to maintain a U.S. soldier in the field are as much as ten times what it takes to deploy an American aid worker – and even a much higher multiple of the amount required to support the vast majority of our staff (over 95%) drawn from the local population.

I was involved in a two-year project to draft and negotiate a common set of principles for operational conduct in field operations. The resulting *Guidelines for Relations Between U.S. Armed Forces and Non-Governmental Humanitarian Organizations* were jointly published in 2005 by InterAction and the U.S. Department of Defense. The Guidelines provide practical recommendations on how NGOs and the military will conduct themselves in terms of dress and appearance, institutional visibility protocols, transportation, field activities, communication, joint meetings, and coordination. They are particularly needed in places like Afghanistan and Iraq where the U.S. military and NGOs operate in the same space.

Even though the Guidelines have been approved by the U.S. Department of Defense and the Secretary of State, they need to be disseminated into the ranks of the U.S. military and to our own field staff. I appreciate that Defense Secretary Gates has acknowledged this need, which should help raise awareness about them. The Guidelines include much common sense, but they are not yet common knowledge.

3. Funding for Humanitarian Assistance: Out of Balance

That brings me to my third point: the imbalance in resources available to the civilian and military sectors.

With over \$600 billion a year in funding and over 1½ million uniformed personnel, the Pentagon and its operations account for 22% of the Federal Budget. All spending on international affairs agencies is a little over 1% of the Federal budget. Relief and development aid is much less than 1%.

The ability of the Department of State to carry out effective, long-term strategies to rebuild countries that are recovering from conflict has been hampered because of resource constraints. The U.S. military has stepped in to fill the gap. A number of new programs that are well-funded in the DoD budget involve the military in humanitarian, development, and reconstruction activities. These include the Commanders’ Emergency Response Fund Program (CERP), the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) operating in Afghanistan and Iraq, and some of the

planned activities of the Africa Command (AFRICOM) and the Southern Command (SOUTHCOM).

The result is that the proportion of official development assistance that the Department of Defense controls has grown dramatically – surpassing 20% of all of the U.S.’s Official Development Assistance in 2005, a four-fold increase since 1998, when it was 3.5%. The percentage is slightly lower in the past fiscal year (18%), but is still remarkably higher than the pattern through the 1990s.

The militarization of development assistance, the growing power of combatant commands, and the projection of U.S. global power in the form of military might are undermining the authority of the Secretary of State to set the agenda for U.S. foreign policy. At the same time, USAID’s lead role in poverty reduction and impartial humanitarian assistance is depleted by years of chronic underfunding and reduction in qualified staff.

The legitimacy of foreign aid depends on the extent to which our efforts are perceived as consistent with the needs of those we seek to assist. Congress should fund aid programs that have long-term impact, build trust with communities, and cultivate genuine relationships with countries receiving assistance. These programs should be funded where they belong – in the international affairs budget and not in the defense budget.

Conclusion

As Secretary of Defense Gates stated earlier this month, “We cannot kill or capture our way to victory.” We are learning that the fight against extremism will not be won in the battlefield. The enemy is not terrorism; the enemy is ignorance and poverty. The remedy is health, education, and economic development, carried out in a cost effective way by experts.

Importantly, we must build the capabilities to shape the security environment in ways that obviate the need for military intervention. Poverty alleviation and state building are the keys to reducing external threats to U.S. security. USAID and the Department of State – our Departments of Peaceful Offense and Benevolent Power – must be given ample financial resources, staffed with trained and experienced personnel, and supplemented with a surge capacity of civilian staff ready for deployment on shortnotice to trouble spots around the world. As General “Kip” Ward, Commander of AFRICOM, suggested to me in a meeting: we should each “stay in our lanes”.

In closing, I emphasize that this recent trend of militarization of foreign assistance is not irreversible or inevitable. It can change. And it is you – the distinguished Senators who serve on this Committee – who are in a position to influence and guide that change as the country prepares for a new administration. That is why this hearing today is particularly timely.

Thank you.