

# **The Politicisation of Humanitarian Action and Staff Security:**

The Use of Private  
Security Companies by  
Humanitarian Agencies

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## International Workshop Summary Report

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## Workshop Synopsis

On April 23-24 2001 thirty humanitarian practitioners, government representatives and experts gathered in Tufts University, Boston, USA for a workshop on 'The Politicisation of Humanitarian Action and Staff Security: The Use of Private Security Companies by Humanitarian Agencies'. The event, co-hosted by International Alert and the Feinstein International Famine Center, was part of an on-going programme on the Privatisation of Security and Peacebuilding at International Alert. The overall aim of this programme is to assess the impact on peace and stability given the increasing use of private security and military companies by a range of actors in conflict situations, and to promote better means of regulating their activities. The use of such companies by humanitarian agencies, whilst not widespread, is a trend that is increasing with little understanding of the implications and limited development of appropriate policy. The workshop provided an informal opportunity for consultation and dialogue with and between aid agencies on this emerging issue so that appropriate responses could be explored. Initial findings of two surveys of aid agency policy and practice in Europe and the US commissioned by International Alert were presented at the workshop. This report provides a summary of the main themes and emerging issues discussed, as well as possible ways forward expressed by the participants.

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## I. The Changing Humanitarian Environment

The use of private security companies by humanitarian agencies needs to be understood within the context of the changing humanitarian environment and challenges to humanitarian actors. Key features of this include:

### The changing nature of conflict

Since the end of the Cold War the nature of conflict has changed dramatically. Many warring factions no longer focus on ideological motivations and the search for international recognition. Civilians are no longer random victims, but can be the principal targets of armed conflicts with a growing number of casualties being civilian. The number of refugees has increased from 2.4 million to 14.4 million over the last twenty years, and the number of internally displaced persons have increased from 22 to 38 million in the same period. Humanitarian assistance has consequently not only had to respond to a growing number of crises, but has had to be far more aware of the impact of conflict on its work and the insecurity that this brings.

### Worsening security risks for humanitarian staff

Violence against humanitarian staff has increased dramatically in recent years. Insecurity in places such as Chechnya, Somalia and Colombia has highlighted the security risks to

which aid workers are now exposed. Targeted violence against humanitarian staff has different forms: oral and physical threats, banditry, abduction and assassination. More common are politically motivated obstructions to humanitarian operations where violence is not merely a representation of criminality but instead a strategy to achieve other goals. Humanitarian staff are facing a deterioration in respect for international humanitarian law and a loss of perceived neutrality that creates dangerous field security conditions. For the first time, in 1998, more UN staff died providing emergency relief than in peacekeeping missions. Since 1992, more than 200 UN civilian staff have died and 80 others remain missing. Although not as severe, the record for NGO workers is equally alarming. The issue is, however, receiving growing attention by international policymakers, as expressed in the UN Secretary General's report on the safety of UN personnel last year.

### The politicisation and militarisation of humanitarian space

Recent military interventions by the international community, such as in Kosovo, have been presented as humanitarian in purpose and have forced military and humanitarian actors to work far more closely together than in the past. This has led to debate about whether humanitarian action is becoming more 'coherent' or more 'politicised' and what we are witnessing is the 'militarisation' of humanitarian action. Participants registered concern that this challenges the core humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality, and may in fact antagonise warring factions and magnify security risks rather than the reverse. The absence of security in places of little strategic interest to powerful states means that agencies are unable to bring relief to those in most need.

### The economics of conflicts and the commercialisation of aid

In order to improve efficiency and cost-effectiveness it was acknowledged that aid agencies are having to interact far more with private companies, such as the US company Brown and Root used in Kosovo, to undertake the enormous logistical tasks involved in humanitarian operations. Especially where Western interests are strong, the commercialisation of aid is becoming a powerful trend. In light of this it was argued that humanitarian values are distinct from those of the commercial sector, and it was felt that humanitarians are slowly losing their identity due to the realities of commercialisation. In particular there was concern that the technical dimension of 'aid delivery' often overshadows the humanitarian goal of 'alleviating human suffering'. Participants felt that it was important to underline the identity of humanitarian action as a civil movement aimed at active solidarity and partnership with communities in need.

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## II. The Privatisation of Security: A Fast-Growing Trend

The privatisation of security is another trend that aid agencies are encountering, the implications and consequences of which are not so clear.

### Factors in the privatisation of security

The international market for private security is expected to grow from an estimated revenue of \$55.6 bn in 1990 to \$202 bn by the year 2010. The privatisation of security is a complex issue comprising a number of factors. In particular, private security actors are common in weak states where state security forces do not have the capacity to provide public security. In the US and a number of other western countries, however, where the privatisation ethos is prevalent, governments are beginning to outsource security and military services to private companies such as DynCorp and MPRI in the US. This is particularly the case in places where there is political reluctance to deploy national forces. Beyond the common use of these companies in logistical tasks, the question was raised as to how much the national commitment can be outsourced?

### Mercenaries, private military and security companies: need for clarity in a blurred environment

There are three categories of actors associated with the privatisation of security, however, there is often confusion between the meaning of each of these terms. These categories are:

- *Mercenaries* are individual combatants fighting in foreign conflicts for financial gain. They are defined within international humanitarian law and there are UN and OAU Conventions that ban the use of mercenaries. Most attention to mercenaries was drawn by their use by national liberation movements during the early post-colonial Africa period, and they are still prevalent today in many conflicts.
- *Private military companies* are corporate entities offering a range of military services to clients. It is predominantly governments that use these services to make a military impact on a given conflict. Examples include MPRI from the US and Sandline International from the UK.
- *Private security companies* are similar to private military companies but provide defensive security services to protect individuals and property. Examples include DSL (part of Armour Group) from the UK and Wackenhut from the US. They are used by multinational companies in the extractive sector, and by individuals and humanitarian agencies in conflict and unstable regions.

### Accountability and regulation

Participants raised concerns about the accountability of private security and military companies, and whether there are adequate regulatory measures for their use. Attention was drawn to examples of laws, regulations and codes of conduct that have been developed, but it was believed that these are not comprehensive enough to allow for proper control of the activities of these companies.

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## III. The Management of Staff Security

The use of private security companies needs to be assessed using existing models of security management for humanitarian staff that are being developed by aid agencies.

### Existing security models: from soft to hard responses

During the conference, a number of security strategies were referred to, including:

- The *Acceptance* Strategy (or active security) which seeks political and social consent of belligerents through relationship and trust-building to reduce or remove threats.
- The *Protection* Strategy which utilises protective procedures and devices to keep threats at a distance, without addressing the root causes of them.
- The *Deterrence* Strategy (or passive security) which aims at deterring threats by legal, economic or political sanctions or, in extreme circumstances, by the defensive or offensive use of force that may involve arms.

The use of private security companies is an example of the last two of these strategies and may be seen as more of a hard response to security risks.

The increasing security risks faced by humanitarian staff has drawn attention to the security policies and practices of aid agencies. The UN Secretary General recommended substantial increases in security budgets in his report on the issue. There has been increasing specialisation in the field with the expansion of the UN security agency, UNSECOORD, and the appointment of security officers by a number of NGOs. Security training for staff is now commonplace although much still needs to be done. The question arose, however, as to whether the 'upgrading' of security impacts on the work of aid agencies and may be isolating humanitarians from those they seek to help? There needs to be caution and careful consideration before developing policy responses to address worsening insecurity and criteria for choosing between options.

### The cost-effectiveness of humanitarian staff security

Security management can be extremely costly for aid agencies, especially when state forces cannot provide security. It is becoming an issue with budgetary implications for the

UN, with additional funding requirements needed. For NGOs it is only the largest among them that can afford full-time security officers, dedicated to developing and implementing a comprehensive approach to security. It has been suggested - although this is disputed - that private security companies offer a relatively cost-effective way of providing security. This is one of the driving forces behind their use. Researching the cost of security would provide a better picture of the amount of money being spent on contracting private security companies. This would help all concerned understand the rationale behind the choices being made, particularly as there is concern that it is the responsibility of aid agencies to use their funds for providing relief, not security. Transparency and information concerning the cost and quality of security management is, however, sparse and was seen as an obstacle to conducting such a review.

#### **Active security strategy and engagement with local communities**

The acceptance strategy of security, outlined previously, is the closest to humanitarian principles. It requires an earlier and longer involvement with local communities and can be restricted by the lack of local networks between key stakeholders. It was felt that the most-favoured approach to security should be based on the humanitarian needs of assisted populations, proximity with local communities, effective partnerships and confidence-building measures. This could obviate the need to use private security companies or other security options that may have a potentially inflammatory impact. The realities on the ground, however, seem to indicate that this approach can be difficult to implement in practice. There are, for example, an increasing number of former military personnel looking for security jobs in an emerging humanitarian market which might favour a passive approach to security. This is something that human resources departments of aid agencies should be aware of.

#### **Who is responsible and who is accountable: NGOs, donors and governments ?**

The responsibility and accountability for humanitarian staff security - and by extension the use of private security companies - occurs at a number of different levels from individuals, to NGOs, governments and donors. According to international law, it is states that are primarily responsible - they are obliged to implement rules concerning the protection of UN personnel so that they can obtain access to victims. Humanitarian practitioners raised concern that it is the failure of governments that has led to aid agencies working in situations of endemic insecurity and which forces them to consider the use of private security companies, or other security options, that they are not equipped to deal with. It is a positive step that donors increasingly ask for greater attention to security as an accompaniment of receiving funding, but there was concern from NGOs that it is not always possible to

guarantee that security measures will be fully implemented or adhered to. Donor representatives underlined the use of the SMACC (Symbiotic, Management, Accountable, Contextual, Capacity) frameworks and logframes to ensure efficient accountable reporting procedures.

#### **Differences between UN and NGOs approaches**

The available options in humanitarian operations for UN agencies are restricted by the mandate of the UN, whereas NGOs potentially have a greater degree of freedom and greater access to certain locations. Somalia is an example of where exceptions take place. However, because of their ability to mobilise western public opinion and to advocate strongly in favour of humanitarian assistance, NGOs are usually able to highlight forgotten situations in marginal conflicts. The approaches of the UN and NGOs can become contradictory. Some participants felt that interagency collaboration on matters such as security are necessary to face the difficulties on the ground.

### **IV. Assessing the Use of Private Security Companies**

The workshop made an attempt to make an assessment of current practices in the use of private security companies.

#### **The need for a better assessment**

The use of private security companies is in many ways a specific issue within a broader question and debate about the use of armed protection by aid agencies in situations of violent conflict. Whilst often prima facie, it was the policy of aid agencies not to use private security companies, however this was not always the case on the ground. In places such as Nairobi and Kinshasa it was recognized that there is no other choice but to use private security companies. Participants felt, however, that they did not have a comprehensive enough picture of the problem or phenomenon in order to make sufficient judgements about the most appropriate response. The real need to know more about the actors concerned and acquire more information about the specific uses of companies was highlighted. Beyond this only general observations were possible about current practices.

#### **Current practices in humanitarian operations**

Private security companies fill a 'security gap' left by host states' inability to provide security for aid agencies. Where some organisations tend to withdraw from insecure situations, others may hire guards in order to provide relief to the most needy. This is particularly true in areas where security is not controlled by the host government because of collapsed institutions and the presence of armed factions. Generally speaking, private security companies are used for: site protection, training, risk assessment, advice on kidnappings, crisis management and review of existing security plans. They

have also been involved in de-mining activities. Few aid agencies have a clear policy concerning their use. The use of private security companies for armed escorts constitutes a very small and extreme proportion of their use and is restricted to the agencies performing large logistical tasks such as CARE and WFP.

#### **The use of private military companies in peace support operations**

Although peripheral to the main discussion, the use of private military companies - as opposed to private security companies - in peace support operations was discussed. It was suggested that these companies could be contracted to act as 'force multipliers' to augment the military capability of a warring faction and change the balance of power on the ground so as to enforce peace. This would in fact be in accordance with the humanitarian goal of the protection of civilian populations and the new 'human security' agenda. The use of private military companies in conflict management efforts in Angola, Sierra Leone and the Balkans was offered as examples of effective options for military intervention, although concerns about accountability were registered. Such an option should, however, be seen in the context of efforts being made by the UN to improve its peacekeeping capacity by implementing the recommendations of the Brahimi Report of the Expert Panel on UN Peace Support Operations, which may represent a small turning point towards making the UN more effective. Whilst appreciating that private military companies are likely to continue to provide technical support in international peacekeeping efforts, it was thought unlikely that they will be used by the UN to perform military tasks in any significant capacity.

### **V. Consequences, Implications and Impacts of Using Private Security Companies**

The workshop revealed a number of consequences, implications and impacts of aid agencies using private security companies that need to be taken into account when developing appropriate responses, including:

#### **Humanitarian principles and the legitimacy of humanitarian action**

If private security company personnel are armed or are from a military background then aid agencies might be perceived as being part of the conflict rather than mere bystanders there to assist its victims. This challenges the notion of impartiality and neutrality of humanitarian action and its identity as a civil movement. Participants raised concern that, although it was probably not the case, the perception that aid agencies were associated with 'mercenary' groups, or at least individuals of a dubious or criminal background to help provide security, might be very damaging to their public image. In particular, some apparently bonafide private security companies may

have other less legitimate affiliations or may provide services of a more military nature to other clients whilst at the same time working for aid agencies.

#### **Humanitarian security vs. protection of civilians**

The distinction between humanitarian security (i.e. providing for the safety and security of humanitarian staff) and the protection of civilians (i.e. the humanitarian goal of reducing the impact of war on the communities that it affects) is conceptually and practically not very useful. The lessons learned from the UNHCR concerning the armed protection of refugee camps is a case in point. The perception may also be that humanitarian security is at times a primary goal of aid agencies and not the protection of civilians which may perversely distance aid agencies from the people that they are trying to assist. Security should not be a goal in itself, but a means to an end, the aim being the alleviation of human suffering through the effective and impartial provision of humanitarian assistance. A priority is the breaking down of the distinction between humanitarian security and protection of civilians, and the adoption of a more holistic, global view of security.

#### **Humanitarian staff security: increasing risks?**

It is arguable that 'hard' security options, such as the use of private security companies and armed escorts, may be blurred by politically prevailing interests with the result that they make humanitarian staff more of a target of warring factions and not less. Because of the interdependence of security management between aid agencies, the risk of being (or at least perceived as being) the weakest link could make a particular organisation a soft target.

#### **Impact on conflict management**

In conflict situations, primarily in war zones and violent political conflicts, the means by which aid agencies ensure their security can potentially aggravate the dynamics of the conflict further. There may also be an impact on the security of the local community on the ground although this is hard to gauge. Understanding that security depends on the image and the integrity of the whole humanitarian community should encourage NGOs to collaborate on security-related issues. The question remains, however, as to what extent aid agencies can co-operate to make sure that they do not become hostages to these practices while ensuring quality and safety?

#### **Impact on the local security sector**

Although there may not be any other option, the use of private security companies by aid agencies only addresses the symptoms of insecurity (e.g. banditry and kidnapping) in the situations in which they work rather than the actual causes of insecurity. The impact on the host state's ability to provide security for its citizens needs to be considered. By hiring private security companies resources are going to the private

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sector instead of building local capacities for providing security such as community policing arrangements. These practices might have negative consequences on the ability of host governments to provide security and to be accountable.

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## VII. The Way Forward: Possible Options and Priorities

There was no consensus amongst participants at the workshop on the way forward, and how aid agencies could best address the use of private security companies. Instead there was recognition of the need for further analysis to provide clarity about the precise issues and problems before any responses could be developed. However, there were some suggested options and priorities by participants.

### Further research and case studies

There is little available information, data or examination of specific examples of the use of private security companies by aid agencies. It was felt necessary that, in order to make an informed response, a comprehensive picture of the problem or phenomenon was needed. In particular it was thought useful to look at specific cases where private security companies are being used such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan or Sierra Leone. Case studies with more detailed examination of the companies and individuals involved, and the experiences of addressing particular security concerns, could hopefully elicit possible lessons learned for other settings.

### Improving security management

The workshop highlighted the need for aid agencies to develop more effective security arrangements and policies per se, and to mainstream consideration of the issue throughout organisations. This in itself could help promote the more responsible use of private security companies and mean that they are only used in the last resort and after careful decision-making processes. At a minimum it was suggested that a check list of questions for vetting private security companies that have featured in the literature on humanitarian security management be used by aid agencies.

### Security networks for sharing information and approaches

The Humanitarian Security and Protection Network (HSPN), hosted by VOICE in Europe and the InterAction Security Working Group in the US, were put forward as possible forums in which aid agencies' use of private security companies could be addressed. These networks are designed to facilitate collaborative responses to security, conduct research activities and provide a means of information exchange between aid agencies to increase awareness and explore policy options concerning key security concerns. It was suggested that sharing information and lessons learnt on

aid agency use of private security companies would support the better selection of security companies. However, some participants expressed concern about information sharing given the limitations of what can actually be achieved practically on the ground. Nevertheless, such networks could help aid agencies to formulate their own policies on private security companies.

### Common standards, codes of conduct and guidelines

The adoption of the Security and Human Rights Voluntary Principles in December 2000 by corporations in the extractive sector was offered as an example of the way users of private security companies had addressed noted concerns. These principles, facilitated by the UK and US governments, aim to enable companies to manage their security in countries such as Nigeria and Colombia in ways that ensure the protection of human rights. It was felt that aid agencies were not ready to embark on such a process and that this may not be the best way forward. There was reluctance to develop and jointly agree standards, codes of conduct or guidelines as they are perceived as threatening to the flexibility and independence of aid agencies in situations that are unique.

### The development of regional and local initiatives

The InterAction Task Force on Security has recently come up with ideas on interagency collaboration on security, taking into account differences in the mandate and mission of aid agencies. They suggest that ground rules might, for instance, be able to be developed to address check-point behaviour, armed escorts and civil-military relations. The Code of Conduct for aid agencies in Sierra Leone is an example of where it was agreed to adopt a common approach in regard to security. This initiative is based on the understanding that security in Sierra Leone depends on the image and integrity of the humanitarian community as a whole.

### Security training

There are a number of organizations, such as RedR, Bioforce and InterAction, that offer security training for aid agencies. It was suggested that the consequences, implications and impact of aid agencies using private security companies could be explored in courses conducted for humanitarian workers. It was felt that, at a minimum, there should be a basic understanding of how the use of security companies will affect the whole security environment and that checklists should be adopted.

*This summary report, produced by Sami Makki at International Alert, has been disseminated widely to humanitarian agencies, government officials and NGOs. Survey studies on European and US based humanitarian agencies' policies and practices on the use of private security companies will be published by International Alert in the near future.*

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## Agenda

### Welcoming Remarks

Bea Rogers, Dean for Academic Affairs, School of Nutrition, Tufts University.  
Kevin Clements, Secretary General, International Alert

### Session I

#### Assessing the Context and Current Practice of the Use of Private Security Companies in Humanitarian Contexts

Urs Boegli, Head of Delegation, International Committee of the Red Cross  
Eugenia Piza-Lopez, Head of Policy and Advocacy, International Alert

### Session II

#### The Relevance of Practical and Policy Responses to Humanitarian Security

Koenraad Van Brabant, Humanitarian Accountability Project  
Max Glaser, Head of Context Department, MSF Holland

### Session III

#### The Use of Private Security and Military Companies in Peacekeeping Operations

David Shearer, New Zealand Government

### Session IV

#### Experiences of the Use of Private Security Companies: Two Surveys on US and EU

Chris Seiple, Vice President & Director of Strategic Initiatives, Institute for Global Engagement  
Tony Vaux, Humanitarian Initiatives.

### Session V

#### Assessing the Impact of Using Private Security Companies on Staff Security and the Local Context

Deborah Avant, George Washington University

### Session VI

#### The Way Forward: Defining a Best Practice Approach

Lucy Brown, Chair of Security Working Group, Interaction  
Olivia Lind Haldorsson, Director of HSPN, VOICE

### Session VII

#### Framework for Future Research and Action

Angela Raven Roberts, Director of Research, Feinstein International Famine Center

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## List of Participants

**Estrella Alves** (Tufts University, Feinstein International Famine Center); **Deborah Avant** (George Washington University); **Urs Boegli** (International Committee of the Red Cross); **Kevin Clements** (International Alert); **Pierre Gallien** (Action Contre la Faim, France); **Mike Gaouette** (Save the Children Fund, UK); **Max Glaser** (MSF, Holland); **Elissa Golberg** (Canadian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade); **David Harland** (UNOCHA); **Heather Hughes** (Oxfam-UK); **Damian Lilly** (International Alert); **Lucy Lindale Brown** (InterAction Security Working Group & American Red Cross); **Olivia Lind Haldorssen** (VOICE-HSPN); **Sami Makki** (International Alert); **Anita Menghetti** (USAID Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance); **Gregg Nakano** (Tufts University, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy); **Charles Petrie** (UNOCHA); **Eugenia Piza-Lopez** (International Alert); **Vanessa Raymond** (Independent consultant); **Chris Seiple** (Institute for Global Engagement); **David Shearer** (New Zealand Government, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade); **Skylar Sherman** (US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance); **Philip Upson** (Emergency Relief Team, UK Department for International Development); **Koenraad Van Brabant** (Humanitarian Accountability Project); **Tony Vaux** (Humanitarian Initiatives); **Angela Raven Roberts** (Tufts University, Feinstein International Famine Center); **Bea Rogers** (Tufts University, School of Nutrition); **Luc Zandvliet** (The Collaborative for Development Action, Inc.).