

What is United Nations Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination?

When an emergency or natural disaster creates humanitarian needs, many countries deploy their military or civil defence organizations to respond. Bilateral support to disaster-affected States can also be provided through the international deployment of foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets (MCDA). When local and international humanitarian organizations are also involved in that response, it is essential that they can operate in the same space without detriment to the civilian character of humanitarian assistance.

It is for this reason that United Nations Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination (UN-CMCoord) facilitates dialogue and interaction between civilian and military actors—essential for protecting and promoting the humanitarian principles, avoiding competition, minimizing inconsistency and, when appropriate, pursuing common goals.

UN-CMCoord delivers a coherent and consistent humanitarian approach to military interaction, enhancing a broad understanding of humanitarian action, and guiding

political and military actors on how best to support that action.

It helps to develop context-specific guidance based on internationally agreed guidelines, and it establishes humanitarian civil-military coordination structures, ensuring staff members are trained to make that coordination work. UN-CMCoord is essential in complex emergencies, where the involvement of MCDA in humanitarian assistance may have serious consequences, and could impact the perceived or actual neutrality, impartiality and operational independence of the overall humanitarian effort.

UN-CMCoord in natural disasters

The Guidelines on the Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief (Oslo Guidelines) were developed through an intergovernmental and inter-agency process. They seek to ensure that foreign MCDA, such as helicopters and ships, bilaterally deployed in response to a natural disaster can support

and complement the relief operation. However, such assets must not be used in a manner that may compromise principled humanitarian action.

With military assets frequently used by Governments to support relief efforts, OCHA and its humanitarian partners work with Member States to incorporate the possible use of military

assets in contingency-planning activities. OCHA also engages military actors early in emergency response operations to assist their understanding of the humanitarian environment, and to ensure coherence and consistency in relief efforts to avoid inappropriate assistance or duplication of effort.

UN-CMCoord in complex emergencies

In an armed conflict or high-risk environment, using military assets to support humanitarian action becomes more complicated, particularly if military actors are party to the conflict. *The Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets to Support United Nations Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies (MCDA Guidelines)* explain that even greater consideration should be given to the use of MCDA to support humanitarian operations in a non-benign environment. They seek to preserve the impartiality, neutrality and

operational independence of humanitarian actors and humanitarian action.

In complex emergencies, the interaction facilitated by UN-CMCoord aims to facilitate humanitarian access, the security of humanitarian aid workers and operations, and the protection of civilians. In certain circumstances, mobilizing MCDA to support humanitarian assistance may be necessary. This can take the form of engineering support, transport or the provision of armed escorts for humanitarian convoys. If the security environment prevents

humanitarian access to certain areas, military actors may be asked to provide direct life-saving support, but only until safe humanitarian access is restored.

Some Governments adopt strategies that include military activities to engender acceptance and support from the local population. This can form part of a comprehensive or whole-of-Government approach aimed at achieving post-conflict stability. Without proper coordination, this approach can undermine the core principles of humanitarian action and reduce humanitarian operating space.

The absence of a clear distinction between military activity and humanitarian assistance can hamper aid delivery, create access problems and threaten the security of humanitarian personnel. Effective UN-CMCoord ensures humanitarian

action is seen as distinct, while also identifying areas where humanitarian civil-military interaction is possible. When UN peacekeeping forces are present, the UN integrated-mission model creates a way for peacekeeping contingents and humanitarians to

work alongside each other (see *OCHA on Message: Integration*, and the *IASC Reference Paper on Civil-Military Relationship in Complex Emergencies*).

What is OCHA's role?

UN-CMCoord is a key component of OCHA's core function: coordinating humanitarian response. In humanitarian operations with a military presence, OCHA leads the establishment and management of interaction with military actors. This relationship will change depending on the type of emergency and the roles and responsibilities of the military. OCHA supports humanitarian and military actors through training and advocacy on the guidelines to achieve timely and appropriate use of MCDA in support of humanitarian operations and humanitarian civil-military

interaction. OCHA also seeks to establish a predictable approach to the use of these assets by considering their use during preparedness and contingency-planning activities.

OCHA's Civil-Military Coordination Section (CMCS) supports relevant country-, regional- and headquarter-level activities. As custodian of UN-CMCoord-related guidelines, CMCS helps humanitarian actors develop context-specific guidance tailored to a particular emergency. CMCS runs a global training programme that equips humanitarian and military actors with the skills and knowledge

necessary to communicate and, where appropriate, effectively interact with each other. It also prepares and deploys personnel to act as dedicated UN-CMCoord experts in the field.

CMCS advises the international community on humanitarian needs related to deploying foreign MCDA in support of relief operations or humanitarian assistance. This takes place through an advocacy strategy that complements and supports discussions up to the Under-Secretary-General/Emergency Relief Coordinator level, coupled with the publication of operational guidance to the international community.

What does OCHA say?

1. Militaries can contribute to humanitarian action through their ability to rapidly mobilize and deploy unique assets and expertise in response to specifically identified requirements.

2. While military action supports political purposes, humanitarian assistance is based on need and is provided neutrally without taking sides in disputes or political positions on the underlying issues.

3. Humanitarians must be aware of the issues emanating from working with the military to ensure that their neutrality, impartiality, operational independence and the civilian character of humanitarian assistance are not compromised.

4. Coordination between humanitarians and military forces can range from cooperation to coexistence. OCHA manages the interaction through UN-CMCoord and by applying related guidelines.

5. Effective and consistent humanitarian civil-military coordination is a shared responsibility, crucial to safeguarding humanitarian principles and humanitarian operating space.

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November 2013

To find out more

- www.unocha.org/uncmcoord
- Guidelines on the Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief (Oslo Guidelines), Rev. 1.1, November 2007
- Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets to Support United Nations Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies (MCDA Guidelines), Rev. 1, January 2006
- Civil-Military Relationship in Complex Emergencies - an IASC Reference Paper, 28 June 2004
- IASC Non-Binding Guidelines on the Use of Armed Escorts for Humanitarian Convoys, 27 February 2013
- United Nations Civil-Military Coordination Officer Field Handbook, 2008 (under revision)