

Distinct roles, shared spaces: The need for effective civil-military dialogue and coordination in the Central Sahel

15 October 2020

On Thursday 15 October the UK, NRC and OCHA co-hosted a successful side event titled 'Distinct roles, shared spaces: The need for effective civil-military dialogue and coordination in the Central Sahel'. The event's panel included Jan Egeland (Secretary General, Norwegian Refugee Council), Brigadier-General Pierre-Joseph Givre (MINUSMA Force Chief of Staff), Colonel-Major Pierre Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso Armed Forces), Mr Tidiane Fall, Country Director for ACF in Niger and Mme Fatimata Toure, the director of the civil society organisation GREFFA. Around 300 people were in attendance for a rich session, which elicited concrete next steps on the important matter of civilian-military coordination in the Central Sahel.

The relatively weak operational dialogue within the civil-military humanitarian coordination mechanisms (humanitarian CMCoord) in the Central Sahel has hindered the necessary relations between civil and military authorities and humanitarian actors, an essential condition for guaranteeing humanitarian principles. This weakness is due in part to a fairly limited level of engagement between national civilian and armed actors and the absence of a civil-military humanitarian coordination dialogue at the regional level, exacerbated by military operations taking on an increasingly cross-border dimension (such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, Operation Barkhane). The event therefore aimed at bringing key players around the table to kick-start the dialogue and insist on the need for a functioning civil-military coordination as a pre-requisite for both the humanitarian and the military response in the Sahel.

The humanitarian community, represented by the NRC, highlighted the need to maintain the distinction between humanitarian and military actors, so that humanitarians are not associated with the military. This requires, in particular, not using the infrastructure, equipment or escorts of security or military actors. The use of armed escorts can only be used as a "last resort". Situations of last resort are defined according to precise criteria. Escorts of independent suppliers or contractors transporting humanitarian aid or materials also pose a risk to humanitarian actors and should be subject to similar rules and alternatives should be found.

'Quick Impact Projects' (QIPs), implemented by national and international armed forces to increase their acceptance among local communities, also risk sowing confusion between humanitarian and military mandates. These projects often seek to "win the hearts and

minds" of populations, particularly by meeting the essential needs of populations in the short-term in terms of food, water or health. As pointed out by Jan Egeland, interventions aimed at meeting humanitarian needs but implemented by the military may meet some needs in the short-term but also involve significant risks for communities and humanitarians. By allowing the delivery of assistance by those also conducting military campaigns, they put the populations receiving aid at risk of reprisals by armed groups; they blur the distinction between humanitarian and military mandates and deteriorate the perception of neutrality of humanitarian aid.

Brigadier-General Pierre-Joseph Givre (MINUSMA Force Chief of Staff) pointed out the need for military contingents to ensure the acceptance among the local population and that this is often the goal of quick-impact projects. The Brigadier-General also proposed closer collaboration and the need for all parties to understand each other better. Colonel-Major Pierre Ouedraogo (Buirkina Faso Armed Forces) agreed with Egeland's message of distinction and pointed out the need for military forces to respect humanitarian principles. Madame Toure pointed to the fact that the quick impact projects do in some cases improve the relationship between the military forces and the population but highlighted that the lack of ability to protect the population is a major concern. Mr Fall insisted again on the protection concerns linked with the blurred lines between the military and humanitarian actors.

The UK, OCHA and NRC have highlighted the headline outcomes of our event below, as next steps to help us take forward our collective work on improving civilian-military coordination in the Central Sahel.

- We call for improved understanding between all actors in the Central Sahel, including mutual understanding of military and humanitarian actors' mandates and objectives. We call for all actors to support neutral and impartial humanitarian action as the basis for improved civil-military coordination.
- We welcome the call for a regional-level civilian-military coordination platform, suggested at the Senior Officials Meeting on 8 September.
- We call for coordination platforms to be established at national and local levels; where national platforms already exist, we call for them to be strengthened with resource and senior engagement. In addition, we call for these platforms to enable context-specific technical training and adherence to international humanitarian guidance.
- We call for empowered CIMIC and dedicated CMCoord focal points to be established from relevant forces, agencies and organisations to help bring decision-makers together.
- We call for coordination efforts to place the needs of the most vulnerable at the centre of any decision-making process.

The UK, OCHA and NRC are committed to setting up a follow-up plan, including a related working group, to measure progress against these suggested goals. We will provide further details of this process in due course.