HUMANITARIAN ACADEMY · HUMANITAIRES JOBS

Mini MBA Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination (CMCoord): preserving access and principles with armed actors

Course handout · Week 3 : The normative framework: Oslo Guidelines, MCDA Guidelines, IASC reference paper

A programme of exactly 3 months (12 weeks, 144 hours) to coordinate humanitarian action with armed actors: principles, armed actors and their culture, the Oslo and MCDA Guidelines, foreign military assets in disasters, complex emergencies and integrated missions, armed escorts, humanitarian notification and information sharing, access negotiation, liaison and forums, protection, country-specific guidelines and dilemmas. Based on the public texts of OCHA and the IASC. Corrected numerical exercises, three monthly exams with case studies, and a verifiable diploma from the Humanitarian Academy. Independent course: it is not OCHA's official UN-CMCoord course, to which it refers, and it does not award any United Nations certification.

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Week 3 : The normative framework: Oslo Guidelines, MCDA Guidelines, IASC reference paper

Objectives

- Identify the CMCoord reference texts, their scope and their value (non-binding but widely recognised).
- Apply the common criteria: last resort, unique capability, civilian control, time limitation, distinction.
- Explain the role of country-specific guidelines and how they are developed.

A set of texts, each for a context

CMCoord rests on **guidelines** negotiated between States, the United Nations and humanitarian organisations. They are not treaties, but they are widely recognised and form the basis of organisations' policies and national guidelines.

- **Oslo Guidelines** (1994, revised in 2006 and updated in 2007): use of **foreign** military and civil defence assets in **disasters**, in peacetime.
- **MCDA Guidelines** (2003, revised in 2006): use of military and civil defence assets to support United Nations humanitarian activities in **complex emergencies**.
- **IASC reference paper** on civil-military relationships in complex emergencies (2004): principles and concepts for all humanitarian organisations.
- **IASC non-binding guidelines on armed escorts** (2013): when and how an armed escort may, exceptionally, be accepted.
- **Country-specific guidelines**: adaptation of the principles to a given context.

The UN-CMCoord field handbook (version 2.0, 2018) brings these texts together and explains how to apply them in practice.

Last resort

The central criterion of all these texts is **last resort**: military assets are used to support humanitarian action only when there is **no comparable civilian alternative** and only their use can meet a **critical humanitarian need**.

"Comparable" is assessed in terms of **capability** and **timeliness**. If a civilian helicopter can arrive within 48 hours and that delay puts no lives at risk, the military asset is not a last resort. If no civilian asset can reach a cut-off area before people die, it may be.

> Last resort is not measured by cost or convenience. A free and available military asset is not, for that reason alone, a last resort.

The other common criteria

Beyond last resort, the texts converge on several rules:

- **Unique capability**: the military asset provides what civilians cannot (heavy lift, engineering, airport, communications).
- **Civilian control**: assets remain under military command, but the humanitarian operation remains under the overall authority of the responsible civilian organisation.
- **Limited in time and scale**, with an **exit strategy** defined from the start.
- **Distinction**: avoid humanitarian aid and personnel being confused with armed forces.
- **Request or consent of the affected State** for any foreign deployment in a disaster.
- **Cost**: the Oslo Guidelines provide that foreign military assistance should, in principle, be provided at no cost to the affected State.

Disaster or conflict: why two texts

In a peacetime disaster, armed forces are not parties to a conflict: cooperation is easier and the Oslo Guidelines apply. In a complex emergency, association with an armed force can compromise perceived neutrality and endanger staff and beneficiaries: the MCDA Guidelines and the IASC reference paper require greater caution.

When a disaster strikes a conflict zone, the two logics meet. The practical rule: apply the criteria that best protect populations and staff, and analyse the military actor concerned case by case (affected State, foreign, party to the conflict or not).

Country-specific guidelines

In many crises, the humanitarian country team (HCT) adopts **country-specific guidelines**, generally prepared by OCHA with humanitarian organisations. They set out:

- the relationship mode with each armed actor present;
- the rules on armed escorts, use of military assets and notification of movements;
- the rules on information sharing;
- the rules of conduct (visits to bases, transport in military vehicles, uniforms and weapons in premises).

They are adopted by the humanitarian leadership, shared with armed actors and revised when the context changes. Each organisation remains free in its decisions, but commits to respecting the common rules that protect the whole humanitarian community.

Exercise: is it a last resort?

A flood isolates 18,000 people. Three options exist to deliver 60 tonnes of food and water within 72 hours:

1. Military helicopters of the national army, available immediately, free.
2. Chartered civilian helicopters, available in 5 days, USD 180,000.
3. Local civilian boats, available within 24 hours, total capacity of 20 tonnes per day.

The country is at peace. Which option do you recommend, and does the last-resort criterion apply?

Model answer. The boats deliver 20 tonnes per day from day 1: 60 tonnes in three days, within the 72-hour deadline. There is therefore a comparable civilian alternative for the requested volume; the military helicopters are not a last resort for this delivery, except for cases the boats cannot handle (urgent medical evacuations, areas unreachable by water). As the country is at peace, cooperation with the national army remains possible for these specific needs, under civilian control.

Key takeaways

- Oslo: peacetime disasters, foreign assets. MCDA and IASC 2004: complex emergencies.
- Last resort: no comparable civilian alternative in capability and timeliness, for a critical need.
- Unique capability, civilian control, limited duration and planned exit, distinction, consent of the affected State.
- Disaster in a conflict zone: apply the most protective criteria and analyse the actor case by case.
- Country-specific guidelines turn these principles into common rules adopted by the humanitarian country team.

Quiz

1. The Oslo Guidelines mainly concern:
   A. Armed escorts for convoys in conflict
   B. United Nations peace missions
   C. Private security companies and their guards
   D. Foreign military assets in disasters

2. A free military asset is available, and a comparable civilian asset arrives in time. The military asset is:
   A. A priority because it is free
   B. Not a last resort
   C. A last resort
   D. Mandatory

3. "Civilian control" means:
   A. The donor commands the loaned military assets
   B. The operation remains under overall civilian authority
   C. Soldiers become civilians during the mission
   D. The military run distributions under supervision

4. Who generally adopts country-specific guidelines?
   A. The force commander
   B. The Ministry of Defence
   C. The humanitarian country team, supported by OCHA
   D. Each NGO separately, according to its own policy

5. The 2004 IASC reference paper deals with:
   A. Civil-military relations in armed conflict
   B. Vehicle purchases by UN agencies
   C. Security Council sanctions regimes and their exemptions
   D. Natural disasters in peacetime

Quiz answers : 1. A · 2. D · 3. A · 4. C · 5. B