HUMANITARIAN ACADEMY · HUMANITAIRES JOBS

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

Course handout · Week 5 : Complex emergencies: distinction, perception and integrated missions

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 5 : Complex emergencies: distinction, perception and integrated missions

Objectives

- Explain why the distinction between humanitarians and armed forces is vital in conflict, and how to protect it day to day.
- Analyse the risks and benefits of an integrated United Nations presence (political or peace mission and humanitarian team).
- Apply concrete rules of conduct: vehicles, premises, weapons, visibility, meetings.

What changes in a conflict

In a **complex emergency**, the humanitarian crisis stems from armed conflict or widespread violence, often with a breakdown of authority. Armed forces are rarely neutral there: they fight, administer and control populations.

If humanitarians are perceived as linked to one party, three consequences follow: **loss of access** to areas held by the other party, **attacks** on staff and beneficiaries, and **distrust from populations**, who no longer dare to come for aid.

> Perception matters as much as reality. A strictly neutral NGO can lose access if its vehicles are seen parked in a military base.

Protecting distinction day to day

Country-specific guidelines and organisational policies translate distinction into simple rules:

- **No weapons** in humanitarian premises and vehicles ("no weapons" policy displayed at the entrance).
- **No transport** of humanitarian staff in military vehicles, except for exceptions decided under the rules (last resort, medical evacuation).
- **No uniformed military personnel** in distributions or humanitarian activities.
- **Civil-military meetings** preferably in neutral places, not in bases.
- **Distinct visibility**: humanitarian logos, vehicles and clothing clearly different; the military must not use white vehicles or humanitarian symbols.
- **Language**: humanitarians are not "force multipliers" and do not take part in "hearts and minds" operations.

The integrated United Nations presence

In several countries, the UN deploys both a **mission** (political or peacekeeping) and a **country team** (agencies, funds and programmes). The United Nations **integration policy** aims at a

shared strategic vision between the two, under the authority of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General. Often, the Humanitarian Coordinator is also Deputy Special Representative.

Benefits: coherence of peace, protection and aid efforts. Risks: **association** of humanitarian action with the mission's political or military agenda, especially if the mission supports a party to the conflict.

The integration policy recognises these risks. It provides that integration should take forms adapted to the context and preserve **humanitarian space**: for example, humanitarian offices separate from the mission, distinct communication, logistics assets without mission markings in sensitive areas. NGOs are not part of integration.

Protection of civilians: complementary roles

Many peacekeeping missions have a mandate to **protect civilians**. For the military, this means deterring and responding to physical threats. For humanitarians, protection also covers access to rights, documentation and support to survivors.

Dialogue is useful: sharing trends (without personal data), flagging risk areas, coordinating patrols around displacement sites. However, humanitarian information must not serve military targeting, and patrols must not expose the people who spoke to humanitarians.

Coexistence does not mean silence

Even in coexistence, a minimum of dialogue is essential:

- **Notification** of humanitarian sites and movements (week 7);
- **Advocacy** for respect of international humanitarian law: protection of civilians, hospitals and schools; unimpeded access;
- **Exchanges on security** needed to protect staff.

This dialogue is conducted by designated people (OCHA, CMCoord focal points of organisations), with prepared messages, to avoid scattered contacts that blur the image of the humanitarian community.

Exercise: a delicate invitation

The commander of a foreign force, a party to the conflict, invites all NGOs to lunch in his base to "present his school rehabilitation projects". Journalists will be present.

Propose a joint response from the humanitarian organisations, in three points.

Model answer. 1. Decline to attend in the base and in the presence of the press, to avoid any visible association. 2. Propose a technical coordination meeting in a neutral place, through OCHA, to discuss security and avoid duplication. 3. Recall the country guidelines: military projects must not be presented as humanitarian, and schools must not become targets.

Key takeaways

- In conflict, the perception of neutrality determines access and security.
- Distinction rules: no weapons in premises, no military transport except by exception, meetings in neutral places, distinct visibility.
- The UN integration policy aims at coherence but must preserve humanitarian space.
- Protection of civilians: complementary roles, without humanitarian information serving targeting.
- Coexistence: minimal, targeted dialogue carried by designated people.

Quiz

1. In a conflict, being perceived as linked to one party mainly leads to:
   A. More funding from donors for the response
   B. Loss of access and risk of attack
   C. Better security
   D. No effect

2. Where should a civil-military meeting preferably be held in a conflict zone?
   A. In the commander's vehicle
   B. In the military base
   C. During a distribution
   D. In a neutral place, outside bases

3. The United Nations integration policy:
   A. Includes all NGOs present in the country
   B. Aims at a shared vision, with humanitarian space preserved
   C. Forbids any contact between mission and agencies
   D. Abolishes humanitarian coordination by clusters

4. Humanitarian information shared with an armed force must never:
   A. Concern the general security of roads
   B. Be useful to protection of civilians operations
   C. Be accurate, verified and dated by the organisation
   D. Serve targeting or expose people

5. May the military use white vehicles and humanitarian symbols?
   A. Yes, always
   B. Only at night
   C. No
   D. Only in disasters

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