HUMANITARIAN ACADEMY · HUMANITAIRES JOBS

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

Course handout · Week 6 : Armed escorts: the rule, the exceptions and the decision

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 6 : Armed escorts: the rule, the exceptions and the decision

Objectives

- State the general rule of the IASC guidelines: humanitarian convoys do not use armed escorts.
- Analyse a request for an exception with a structured grid: critical need, alternatives, real security, perception, duration.
- Organise an escort accepted as an exception and prepare its end.

The general rule

The **IASC non-binding guidelines on the use of armed escorts for humanitarian convoys** (2013, replacing the 2001 paper) set a clear rule: **as a general rule, humanitarian convoys do not use armed escorts**.

Why? An armed escort:

- visibly associates aid with an armed actor, which compromises perceived neutrality;
- may **attract** attacks rather than deter them;
- creates a **dependence** that is hard to end;
- may weaken the acceptance patiently built by all organisations, including those that do not use escorts.

Exceptions exist, but they are **exceptional**: a last resort to meet a critical need, when no other measure can bring the risk to an acceptable level.

A grid for deciding on an exception

To decide, the Academy suggests answering the following questions in writing, in order (they follow the spirit of the guidelines; read the full text in this week's readings):

1. **Need**: is the activity critical? How many people, what risk if it does not take place?
2. **Alternatives**: access negotiation, change of route or timing, low profile, accepted local partners, civilian air transport... have they been tried or analysed?
3. **Real security**: does the escort really reduce the risk, or does it increase it (attracted target, exchange of fire)?
4. **Provider**: who would escort? A party to the conflict raises more problems than a host-State police force or a peace force that is not a party.
5. **Perception and effects**: what effect on the acceptance of the organisation and of the whole humanitarian community?
6. **Duration and exit**: for how long, and under what condition does the escort stop?

Who decides

Each organisation remains responsible for its security decisions. In the United Nations, the use of armed escorts falls within the security risk management system and involves the country's humanitarian leadership. The guidelines recommend that exception decisions be taken at the **highest level** in the country, documented, and as far as possible **discussed collectively** (humanitarian country team, NGO forums), because one organisation's escort affects all the others.

Many NGOs have an internal policy that excludes any armed escort, unless decided by the head office. Others, like the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, keep to a very strict policy based on acceptance.

Organising an accepted escort

If an escort is accepted as an exception, rules limit its effects:

- **Written agreement** with the provider: strictly defensive role, known rules of engagement, clear chain of command, no transport of weapons or soldiers in humanitarian vehicles.
- **Distance** between escort vehicles and humanitarian vehicles, to keep the distinction visible.
- **No payment** that would turn aid into a source of funding for an armed party; if costs are unavoidable (for example fuel or allowances for a host-State police force), they are transparent and approved.
- **Regular review** (for example monthly) against the criteria, with a plan to return to convoys without escort.

A numerical example

On a road to a camp of 40,000 people, 6 convoys out of 50 were attacked in three months (12%). The attacks are by bandits, not by a party to the conflict. The host-State police offer an escort. After negotiation with community leaders and a change of timing, the rate falls to 2 attacks out of 45 convoys (4.4%) the following quarter, without escort.

Lesson: the grid requires testing alternatives first. Here, they reduced the risk by almost two thirds; the escort was no longer a last resort.

Exercise: applying the grid

A non-State armed group controls the road to an area where a cholera outbreak is spreading (12,000 people exposed). The national army, a party to the conflict, offers to escort your trucks. The armed group has declared that it will attack "any military convoy". No dialogue has yet been attempted with it.

Apply the grid and give your recommendation.

Model answer. Need: critical. Alternatives: not tried (dialogue with the armed group, delivery through an accepted organisation, air transport). Real security: the army escort would increase the risk, as the group has announced it would attack military convoys. Provider: party to the conflict, very negative perception. Recommendation: refuse the escort, urgently open a dialogue on access and study a civilian airlift.

Key takeaways

- General rule: no armed escort for humanitarian convoys.
- Exception only as a last resort for a critical need, when no other measure is enough.
- Grid: need, alternatives, real security, provider, perception, duration and exit.
- Decision at the highest level, documented and discussed collectively.
- Accepted escort: written agreement, distance, no funding of an armed party, regular review.

Quiz

1. According to the IASC guidelines, as a general rule, humanitarian convoys:
   A. Use private escorts
   B. Do not use armed escorts
   C. Are escorted by donors' security staff
   D. Use armed escorts
2. Which step comes first when analysing an exception?
   A. Choose the provider
   B. Establish the critical need
   C. Set the distance between vehicles
   D. Negotiate the price

3. An escort provided by a party to the conflict:
   A. Is always preferable to a police escort
   B. Is required by the 2013 IASC guidelines
   C. Raises more perception problems
   D. Is neutral with regard to humanitarian principles

4. Why discuss an escort decision collectively?
   A. Because it is mandatory for all donors
   B. To get good press coverage
   C. To share the cost of the escort between organisations
   D. It affects everyone's acceptance

5. In the numerical example, the attack rate falls from 12% to about:
   A. 2%
   B. 10%
   C. 8%
   D. 4.4%

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