

# MCC Wants to Avoid Military Role in Iraq Aid

AMMAN, Jordan - As Mennonite Central Committee prepares to implement aid programs in Iraq, MCC staff are increasingly concerned about the involvement of the U.S. and British military in providing humanitarian aid.

MCC is committed to helping the most vulnerable people in a disaster and to working with people on all sides of a conflict. In a war situation involving occupying forces, however, such a task can be difficult.

Scenes of American and British troops handing out food aid, and the uncertainty of who will govern Iraq in the near future, are also raising concerns for humanitarian aid groups.

“Our concern relates to how we can be seen as an impartial agency not tied to any military or political agenda,” said Willie Reimer, director of MCC’s Food, Disaster and Material Resources office. This concern, shared by many other humanitarian aid organizations, is felt especially keenly by MCC, a faith-based, fundamentally pacifist organization.

Aid to Iraq has trickled into the country since the war began March 20. Recently, aid convoys from the Jordanian government and the international group Doctors Without Borders crossed the Jordan-Iraq border. Meanwhile, at the port of Umm Qasr in southern Iraq, a British military ship unloaded relief goods destined for desperate Iraqi citizens and the Kuwaiti Red Crescent Society has distributed some goods in communities near its shared border with Iraq.

MCC aid has been pre-positioned around Iraq and continues to enter the country. A civilian convoy to Baghdad the week of April 1 included hygiene supplies provided by the MCC-supported All Our Children.

But security guarantees for future shipments remain tenuous. For MCC, the question is how best to deliver aid to those in need.

“In the civil war in Sudan, MCC partners had a policy that they would not distribute food if either government soldiers or rebel soldiers were present,” Reimer said.

In Iraq, a similar stance will be taken by many aid organizations, but analysts say it may be wishful thinking. Does this mean humanitarian groups like MCC will have to rely on military forces to provide aid to Iraq?

“If at all possible, we try to avoid being associated with anything to do with the military,” Reimer said. “Only if vulnerable people will otherwise not receive any food or water would MCC utilize such methods.”

MCC experience in past conflicts has shown that military and humanitarian goals are widely divergent.

“The military uses food to further their own strategic objectives, with aid being part of their ‘hearts and minds’ campaign,” said Rick Janzen, MCC co-director for the Middle East. “NGOs [non-governmental organizations], on the other hand, must be impartial and objective and provide aid based on need.”

One of MCC’s guiding principles is that MCC seeks to demonstrate God’s love by working among the suffering, regardless of politics, religion or other distinctions.

There is fear among humanitarian agencies that the military will co-opt their efforts, that their work will be seen as part of military activities.

Capacity is also an issue, said Janzen. NGOs have experience and background for responding to emergency situations and are able to identify the most vulnerable people and provide necessary aid. In addition, he said, relief agencies know what types of food or other aid is needed, know how to involve local populations and try to respect the dignity of recipients.

According to an Oxfam report, aid interventions controlled by the military are

often neither appropriate nor cost-effective. U.S. food aid to Afghanistan in 2001 did not consist of popular local foods. The air-dropped food cost about \$7.50 per kilo. By contrast, U.N. World Food Program aid costs an average of 20 cents per kilo, and includes local staples.

“Soldiers handing out packets of food off the back of a military vehicle may make for good public relations back home,” said Janzen. “But it does not make for a good aid program.”

Aid workers will point out that, though military involvement in humanitarian work is sometimes necessary to ensure security, it can also contravene internationally recognized standards for NGO disaster response.

These guidelines state that aid should not further a particular religious or political view, and should not be used as an agent of a government’s foreign policy.

International Humanitarian Law, meanwhile, stipulates that military forces are obligated to protect civilians and assure their survival. The Fourth Geneva Convention requires any occupying power to ensure the provision of food and medical supplies, and the maintenance of hygiene and public health.

Humanitarian workers argue that these rules do not mean that the military should control humanitarian aid. Rather, NGOs, because of their experience and proven abilities, must take the lead on providing relief. As a result, access is crucial.

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