

Testimony

Of

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I want to thank the co-chairs, Congressman Shays and Mr. Thibault, and members of the Commission on Wartime Contracting, for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today. I am Beth Ellen Cole, director of Intergovernmental Affairs for the U.S. Institute of Peace, a congressionally-created and supported federal institution focused on international conflict prevention and resolution. The views I express here today are my own and do not represent the views of the U.S. Institute of Peace.

I suspect that my testimony will differ from the other representatives you have called to testify today. USIP does not conduct development – we leave that to the specialists in our U.S. Agency for International Development and those organizations present here today. We do not conduct official diplomacy – we leave that to the able men and women in the State Department. We focus on that critical component of analysis, action, and training that promotes the mitigation of and resolution of conflict where the U.S. has determined that its own security interests are at stake. I was the lead writer for the *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction*¹ the first “doctrine” for the whole of government, and whole of community action, published by USIP in 2009. I believe you were provided with copies of the manual last year. I have taken this opportunity to provide additional copies this year. What I say to you today reflects some of what USIP learned during the writing of this manual.

I will also discuss the duty that the Congress gave to USIP 27 years ago to act as a primary interlocutor between our military, our diplomatic and development agencies and the U.S. humanitarian agencies that are operating in zones of conflict. In fact, I have the honor of co-chairing the only regular “contact group” between these actors in the U.S. – the Working Group on Civil-Military Relations in Non-Permissive Environments. This working group, hosted by USIP, brings together the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Regional Combatant and functional Commands, the Navy, the Air Force, the Marines and the Army, the Department of State, USAID, and members of Interaction, the largest umbrella organization for humanitarian and development NGOs in the U.S. Some of the participating NGOs are here today.

The spark for this dialogue arose from the challenges to the delivery of assistance to populations in need in Afghanistan. In 2005, the President of Interaction approached the first head of the newly-established Office of the Coordinator for Stabilization and Reconstruction (SCRS) at the Department of State with concerns about the encroachment by the U.S. military into the humanitarian assistance sphere in Afghanistan. SCRS asked USIP if we would convene the relevant parties. The assistance activities conducted by the military were alleged to be blurring the distinction between armed forces and unarmed humanitarian and development workers, jeopardizing the safety of the latter and forcing retreat among them to more secure areas. This shrinkage of humanitarian space, NGOs argued, led to less, not more, help for needy people – the opposite of the U.S. government’s goal.

Did a perceived redundancy in action by NGOs and the military lead to waste, corruption and the entry of armed contractors as well? Does the military – unfamiliar with the technical and culturally

¹ *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction*, U.S. Institute of Peace and the U.S. Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, U.S. Institute of Peace Press, October 2009.

appropriate nature of development assistance – create unintended problems when it is the deliverer of development and humanitarian aid? Does the increase of for-profit development contractors, many with armed protection, cost the U.S. government more than NGOs that forsake profit? Who is best suited to provide humanitarian and development assistance in zones of conflict? Do strategies that leverage the expertise of the development community but rely on the host nation population to carry them out have more impact and staying power? Do they have other benefits as well – promoting reconciliation and peaceful co-existence among parties in dispute?

While USIP does not attempt to answer these questions, they have been at the heart of the dialogue USIP has hosted since 2005. Our first meeting of the Working Group on Civil Military Relations in March of that year was tense and tumultuous. But over time, we have learned that regular dialogue often leads to better understanding, less duplication of effort, increased safety for Americans on the ground, clearer roles and responsibilities, faster response in emergencies, and ultimately, savings to the American taxpayer and greater assistance to impacted populations. This dialogue produced some key rules for the road, agreed to in an historic document released in July 2007 by the U.S. Department of Defense, InterAction and USIP, entitled “Guidelines for Relations between U.S. Armed Forces and Non-Governmental Humanitarian Organizations in Hostile or Potentially Hostile Environments.”

I have provided a copy to each of you of these Guidelines. Most U.S. personnel – both military and civilian – receive a copy of these in their training and the UN and InterAction distribute these to their staff as well. USIP has worked with members of the Working Group, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the US Army JAG Corps to produce a table top exercise that highlights potential scenarios based on these guidelines where military and humanitarian/development actors experience problems that impact the safety of deliverers and the delivery of assistance. We will be training the trainers in USIP’s Academy for International Conflict Management and Peacebuilding later this year who will then lead this exercise for their agencies.

It is important that you know about the existence of this ongoing civil-military dialogue that continually wrestles with the top problems in zones of conflict and seeks solutions through the development of guidelines, training of our personnel before they deploy and the ongoing development of doctrine. All of this is aimed, ultimately, at developing the capacity of the host nation and their citizens to conduct assistance and development on their own.

What we have learned – all of the parties to this dialogue – are some simple facts.

- First, years before the U.S. military is on the ground in places like Afghanistan, NGOs are likely to be there, providing assistance in the worst conditions. And years after our forces have withdrawn, NGOs will still be there. The U.S. Agency for International Development and other similar agencies may also be there on a bilateral basis in many of these places when post-conflict missions evolve into more traditional development missions. Humanitarian assistance and development is their business. The dramatic increase in profit-making contractors working

in this “business” is muddying the waters leading to legitimate questions about the accountability, role and conduct of these for-profit entities.

- Second, the widespread perception that major U.S. NGOs operate on the fly, without standards and rules, is simply not true. The Interagency Standing Committee (IASC) under the auspices of the U.N. brings NGOs together routinely to create, issue and update guidelines for assistance operations. SPHERE, a ground-breaking project, has created a Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards for Humanitarian Assistance, and works to update those as conditions on the ground warrant. Ironically, no similar standards existed for the myriad of U.S. agencies providing stabilization assistance – a major reason why USIP wrote the 2009 doctrinal manual referred to earlier.
- Third, a reading of these fundamental building blocks for NGOs shows that the line between humanitarian and development assistance is not a sharp one. When emergency health care is delivered, the involvement of the community, the on-the-job training of future health care workers, and the infrastructure that is often built, leads to the rebirth or creation of a health care system that might endure beyond any emergency phase. That is development. And you can trace that path for the other sectors – sanitation, water, food, shelter, and education.

This essential communication work has taken place at USIP headquarters in Washington, D.C. and the parties have all benefited enormously. For example, the working group was meeting on the day the Haiti earthquake struck in January of 2010. Within 24 hours, representatives of the Joint Staff, InterAction, and the UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), who were in our conference room just a day before, were able to hit the ground running in part because they knew each other, had worked together on doctrine and organizational guidelines that animated their activity. Most importantly, they had developed mutual trust – a fleeting commodity in these missions.

In Afghanistan, the story is not as sublime. The dialogue between NGOs, the U.S. military, the International Security Assistance Force, now NATO-led, UNOCHA and the U.S. Embassy has been halting and difficult. It has been jumpstarted by civilians in the U.S. Embassy and then disbanded. It has been led by UNOCHA and then halted. It has been revived in some form by a new General assigned to ISAF and then petered out as rotations brought in new officers. But the imperative of delivering humanitarian and development assistance does not stop.

In our Working Group, we have been focusing, almost solely, on this Afghanistan problem of late. Time growing short for the U.S. and its partners to show significant progress before transition targets are missed. Delineating respective roles and responsibilities is critically important at this phase. The organizations most likely to remain in place assisting the host nation for the long haul are probably the same ones that were there when the U.S. entered the country – the NGOs, both international and local. So it is imperative that we build the trust that is necessary – the trust we have found so fleeting – to enable development and ongoing humanitarian assistance to be successful.

USIP remains committed to fostering the dialogue that is necessary to transition to successful host nation-led development. Members of the working group and USIP believe that the civil-military working

group model has proven its effectiveness and should be replicated in Afghanistan to remedy the collapse in effective communication among the key actors there. We stand ready to assist in that process. Thank you very much. I am happy to answer your questions.

*The views expressed are those of the author and are not at the U.S. Institute of Peace, which does not take policy positions.
