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Humanitarian Responses to a War in Iraq

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In the event of a war with Iraq, there will be a critical need to protect civilians and provide humanitarian assistance in a highly unstable environment.

Specialists in emergency humanitarian relief have devoted considerable attention to the possible consequences of a war for Iraqi civilians, but their concerns have not generated actions commensurate with the expected need. Until recently, United Nations officials refused to speak openly about preparations for humanitarian assistance, on the grounds that the UN advocates a peaceful resolution of the dispute. They are now talking publicly about their concerns and plans. The U.S. government also refused to acknowledge that it was preparing for assistance and development tasks, until the Bush administration established the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance within the Office of the Secretary of Defense in February. Non-governmental humanitarian assistance organizations (NGOs) have sought to highlight the need to prepare for a possible catastrophe in Iraq. However, without support from the United Nations or national governments, their efforts have been largely stymied.

To examine the [potential humanitarian needs](#) resulting from a war in Iraq and ways to meet those needs, the United States Institute of Peace held a Current Issues Briefing on February 26. **David McLachlan-Karr** from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), United Nations; **Sandra Mitchell** from the International Rescue Committee; **Michael O'Hanlon** from the Brookings Institution; and [George Ward](#) from the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), Department of Defense, provided a wide range of perspectives.

Four Perspectives on Humanitarian Needs and Responses

The panelists addressed three questions: What are the primary humanitarian requirements that should be anticipated before, during, and after war in Iraq? What roles will U.S. and international military forces, UN agencies, NGOs, and Iraqi officials play in response to those needs? What problems may hinder effective responses, and how can they be addressed before and during operations?

The panelists agreed that the critical needs will include physical protection of civilians, delivery of food and water, and provision of shelter for displaced people. Although there was a broad consensus on the proper roles for the different types of actors, fulfillment of those roles will be made difficult by the relative absence from Iraq at the present time of NGOs and UN agencies. (The oil-for-food program, run by the

World Food Program is a large exception.) Panelists identified a number of problems that already hinder effective preparation and may hinder operations. A sober assessment of the problems reveals that many of them are likely to persist and degrade the effectiveness of the humanitarian response during and in the immediate aftermath of hostilities.

What are the primary humanitarian requirements that should be anticipated?

- *Protection:* At the height of a conflict, one of the main concerns will be to avoid civilian casualties. Ward said the Pentagon now has a procedure for feeding into the military structure information on humanitarian and civilian sites that should be preserved in the event of conflict. During and after open hostilities, UN agencies and NGOs will need access to people behind the front lines, forcing NGOs to face the difficult question of whether to coordinate with the military. Protection could become an even bigger issue after the fall of the Baath regime, according to Mitchell. A change in the internal security framework will lead to security, political and judicial vacuums that could be exploited very quickly by hardliners and spoilers. Most Iraqis have no interest in continued conflict, but the exploitation of a security vacuum is a real possibility that could lead to large-scale population movements. Mitchell pointed out that in 1991, more Iraqis fled their homes after the Gulf War cease-fire than did during the height of the conflict. Many of the people who leave their homes will congregate near Iraq's borders in an attempt to seek asylum in neighboring countries. McLachlan-Karr said the United Nations assumes at least some of those countries will not allow displaced Iraqis to cross their borders.
- *Shelter:* McLachlan-Karr said that the United Nations expects 600,000 to one million refugees and considerable numbers of displaced people within Iraq. These people will need shelter until they can return to their homes. If neighboring countries do not provide sanctuary, relief agencies hope they will at least provide cross-border access to the affected populations. However, most NGOs do not currently have good working relations with Iran or Turkey.
- *Food, water and sanitation:* The United Nations has determined that 60 percent of Iraqis are dependent entirely on the government for food. McLachlan-Karr said any disruption of the food distribution system will immediately effect hundreds of thousands of people. Furthermore, five million people lack consistent access to clean water. The delivery of food, water and other necessities will be vastly complicated by the likely destruction of Iraq's infrastructure. Ward stated that military forces will do all they can to minimize damage to Iraq's transportation and electrical infrastructure. However, he said a large percentage of the population probably will have to cope with little or no potable water during and shortly after any fighting. O'Hanlon said it is highly likely that U.S. forces will disable Iraq's electrical generating capacity so they can take full advantage of their night vision combat capabilities. Without electrical power, water and sewage systems cannot work.

What roles will international and Iraqi actors play in response to those needs?

- *United Nations:* UN agencies will be expected to play a central role soon after the cessation of hostilities, and have delineated responsibilities among themselves "to an operational level," according to McLachlan-Karr. However, the United Nations will evacuate its international staff in the event of a war, which means its programs will be suspended until the security environment allows for the return of personnel.
- *Humanitarian organizations:* The role of NGOs will be to work with UN agencies and international donors in secure areas to provide whatever humanitarian assistance is required. They will have to identify as quickly as possible populations that are at risk and vulnerable to reprisals. However, NGOs have very little existing field level knowledge or capacity in Iraq, due to lack of funding and to sanctions imposed on the country.
- *International military forces:* The U.S. Defense Department's view is that the "center of gravity" for humanitarian operations ought to be the international and multilateral organizations and agencies. The role of the military in humanitarian assistance, according to Ward, "will be first, to create space

for humanitarian assistance to be delivered. Secondly to facilitate relief operations by international humanitarian organizations. Third, to coordinate efforts in so far as other organizations wish to be part of a coordination mechanism, and to share information through the appropriate structures for civil-military coordination." O'Hanlon pointed out that the first priority of coalition forces will be to create a stable environment. The tasks will not necessarily be consistent with humanitarian activities. They will include separating forces, securing cities, and destroying weapons of mass destruction. He expects a military presence in the range of 200,000-250,000 troops to win the war, with 150,000-200,000 needed to secure the peace through December 2003.

- *Iraqi officials:* The United Nations anticipates having to use the Oil-for-Food distribution structure, even though the authorizing mandate will be suspended in the event of a conflict. The program now distributes 460,000 tons of food per month, so it will be impossible to design an effective alternative. Ward echoed the need to rely on Iraqis for relief and reconstruction activities. He said the U.S. government has given a great deal of attention to identifying Iraqis with whom it can work.

What problems may hinder effective responses, and how can they be addressed?

- *Money:* Lack of money is one of the biggest obstacles to effective planning and preparation for UN agencies and NGOs. Both rely on donations from states. At the time of the briefing, the UN had received \$37 million to allow for the most basic emergency preparedness, such as positioning stockpiles of food and deploying emergency staff. However, there is nowhere near the needed amount of material in place. According to Mitchell, there is "very, very little" money trickling toward NGO relief assistance. For example, the U.S. government has provided only about \$1 million so far to the NGO community to prepare for war. If there is a war in the coming weeks, it will be extremely difficult for humanitarian organizations to get up to speed to respond effectively. Ward listed \$24 million in U.S. government expenditures to date for humanitarian assistance planning. He recognized that the amount is small compared to what might become necessary and said the U.S. government expects to contribute significantly more.
- *Security:* The foremost concern of UN agencies and NGOs is security for their personnel. Assuring this security will require close liaison with military forces operating in the area, despite the distaste many NGOs and some UN agencies have for such interaction. There is also the issue of the broader security environment. In light of the need to fill a likely security vacuum, Mitchell argued that coalition forces will have to shift in a matter of hours from heavy combat to policing and confidence-building activities. She questioned whether military forces are ready to provide policing and justice functions immediately after the regime falls. O'Hanlon argued that the number of troops and the time required to provide a secure environment will put a very heavy strain on U.S. forces. For that reason alone, the Bush administration needs to improve its relations with allies so that they will participate in post-conflict stabilization efforts.
- *Coordination:* At the headquarters level, McLachlan-Karr of OCHA and Ward of ORHA said their offices are acting to strengthen ties with many organizations and to coordinate planning. OCHA has done this first within the United Nations and ORHA has done it first within the U.S. government. At the time of the briefing, these two central coordinating bodies had not yet spoken to each other. According to Mitchell, NGOs remain very concerned at the prospect of a coordination effort that is run by the U.S. government, especially by an office located within the Pentagon. Among other problems, a U.S. government lead could chill the participation of European donors and NGOs. Instead, most NGOs would support a lead coordination role by the United Nations so that NGOs can preserve their independence from the military. At the theater level, the ORHA has already established a humanitarian operations center in Kuwait. In event of a conflict, the coalition forces will create field level civil-military operation centers. The U.S. will deploy a 60-person disaster assistance response team (DART). The DART will have the primary purpose of assessing needs and will be able to make quick reaction grants. Even though many NGOs will be reluctant to interact with the military, Mitchell called on NGOs to be "realistic" and recognize that working with military forces is something that NGOs do all the time to deconflict areas of operations, receive security

advice, etc.

- *Weapons of mass destruction*: "Who will assist the Iraqi people in the event of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)?" asked Mitchell. The NGO community does not have the training, equipment or skills to respond in a WMD environment. According to Ward, in the event of use of WMD by Saddam, it is not safe to assume that coalition forces would have access to an effected population.

Summary

The combination of probable humanitarian needs and lack of operational preparedness by UN agencies and relief NGOs is sobering. McLachlan-Karr and Mitchell cautioned that this is "not another Afghanistan." The coping mechanisms of the Iraqi people are not as strong and the potential magnitude of the conflict is much greater. In addition, there is little relief presence on the ground in central and southern Iraq, so any crisis response will not be able to build on detailed knowledge or an assistance infrastructure. (The oil-for-food program is overseen by the World Food Program, but the Iraqi government is responsible for the actual delivery of assistance.)

The U.S. military will be the dominant actor during and immediately after hostilities. While it is taking humanitarian imperatives into account in its planning, it expects UN agencies and NGOs to take the humanitarian lead. These agencies and NGOs are not prepared to shoulder the responsibility. They do not have the financial wherewithal and they have been reluctant to appear to treat a war as inevitable, which in combination have stunted their planning, coordinating and prepositioning activities. While emergency assistance will be difficult in any event, it will be next to impossible in areas contaminated by weapons of mass destruction, if they are used.

As a war in Iraq grows increasingly likely, most of these problems are beginning to be addressed. If war breaks out, familiar difficulties will remain in the areas of civil-military coordination, the need for security in an unstable environment, and politically tinged emergency relief funds.

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This USIPeace Briefing was written by [Taylor Seybolt](#), moderator for the briefing and a program officer in the Institute's Grant Program.

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