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Ensuring the safe and uninterrupted delivery of humanitarian aid during political instability and armed conflict.

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Introduction

Humanitarian aid trucks waiting to deliver essential supplies, such as food, water and medicine, is becoming an increasingly familiar image shown in news coverage from conflict-affected regions around the world. Behind these images shown on television are real families waiting for the next time they will be able to have a meal, entire communities trying to rebuild their sense of normalcy amid all the uncertainty and parents struggling to find medical care for their children. Even though the needs of these affected people and entire populations are often urgent and immediate, the actual delivery of assistance is way too often limited, slowed or complicated by ongoing conflict, damaged infrastructure and rapidly changing political conditions.

In these environments, humanitarian organizations, among them the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross), MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières → Doctors without borders) and United Nations agencies, must often navigate complex political and operational realities while simultaneously striving to remain impartial and focused on addressing human needs. Even small delays or minor disruptions in the delivery of assistance and essential supplies can result in serious consequences for communities that rely on this humanitarian aid for access to food and water, medication, shelter and other basic necessities. Therefore, maintaining safe and reliable access for humanitarian aid is crucial for ensuring that the affected communities actually receive the help and support they need while preserving their dignity and wellbeing during times of political instability and armed conflict.

General Overview

Ensuring safe and uninterrupted delivery of humanitarian aid during political instability and armed conflict is essential.

- Political instability can disrupt local food chains and decrease access to clean water, healthcare and other essential services. Without humanitarian aid, vulnerable populations will face starvation, dehydration or dying from diseases.
    - When these basic necessities collapse, the population can become desperate and take drastic measures to survive. It can lead to stealing and violence, but also to displacement, migration and the recruitment of youth into armed groups or extremism.
    - Direct support, such as medical care, emergency shelters and cash assistance, will allow crisis-affected families to maintain agency and stability despite a systemic breakdown. This preserves human dignity.
- The aid workers and access should always be protected. Parties in armed conflict need to negotiate safe passage and adhere to the International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which states a set of rules that seeks to limit the effects of armed conflict for humanitarian reasons, to protect relief personnel operating in high-risk zones where violence and administrative blockades threaten operations.
- To ensure that aid reaches people based strictly on need rather than on political, religious or military agenda's, humanitarian actors must adhere to the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.
- By simply addressing the urgent needs and reducing competitions over scarce resources, humanitarian assistance can help ease tensions within affected communities. When people have reliable access to food, water, healthcare and shelter, they are less likely to take desperate measures to survive, reducing the risk of even further instability and danger.

Ultimately, the safe and uninterrupted delivery of humanitarian aid is essential for meeting urgent and immediate humanitarian needs, protecting human dignity and vulnerable populations during periods of political instability and conflict.

The Geneva conventions are a series of four international treaties with three additional protocols. The treaties were adopted on August 12 in 1949. The third and fourth conventions are particularly relevant for the issue of safe and uninterrupted delivery of humanitarian aid during conflict.

- The first Geneva convention → protects wounded and sick soldiers on land during war.
- The second Geneva convention → protects wounded, sick and shipwrecked military personnel at sea during war.
- The third Geneva convention → ensures humane treatment, basic living conditions and communication rights to prisoners of war (POW's).

- The fourth Geneva convention → protects civilians, including those in occupied territories, and prohibits forced deportation, hostage-taking and torture.

The three protocols were adopted later in time and together with the Geneva conventions they form the core of International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

- Protocol I (1977) → strengthens the protection of victims in international armed conflicts.
- Protocol II (1977) → extends core protections to non-international (civil) conflicts.
- Protocol III (2005) → introduces an additional neutral protective emblem, the red crystal.

Grave breaches of these conventions, like willful killing, torture, unlawfully confining civilians, extensively destroying property not justified by military necessity or compelling a POW or protected person to serve in the forces of a hostile power are considered war crimes and will have consequences. The International criminal court (ICC) investigates and prosecutes individuals accused of war crimes. The ICC operates under the principle of complementary, meaning they act as a last resort and will only step in and take action if national courts are unwilling or unable to genuinely investigate and prosecute the crimes themselves.

Major Parties Involved

1. Most affected recipient countries:

Some countries are more affected by political instability and armed conflict and the consequences thereof than other countries.

- Sudan and South Sudan → facing extreme famine risks, widespread looting of food convoys and severe threats to humanitarian personnel.
- Gaza (Palestine) → deemed one of the most high risk environments for aid workers, suffering from massive supply route bottlenecks, lack of access, and unprecedented aid worker casualties.
- Afghanistan → dealing with continuous operational constraints, border closures, and restricted aid environments due to regional tensions and domestic political restrictions.
- Syria → affected by the ongoing war, geopolitical division, and haphazard constraints on cross-border aid corridors.
- Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) → marked by armed conflict in the eastern regions, leading to widespread displacement and difficulties in providing safe passage for aid workers.
- Yemen → suffering from fractured leadership, severe infrastructure damage, and blockade-induced delivery strains.

- Ukraine → ongoing conflict has restricted land and sea supply routes, requiring careful negotiation for localized humanitarian corridors.

2. The World Food Programme (WFP)

The World Food Programme (WFP) is one of the world's largest humanitarian organizations and plays a vital role in delivering life-saving assistance in conflict–affected areas. Through its food assistance programmes, logistic expertise, transportation services and the coordination of humanitarian operations, the WFP helps populations in need access essential resources. Even in some of the world's most challenging environments.

3. United Nations Security Council (UNSC)

The United Nations Security Council helps ensure the safe and uninterrupted delivery of humanitarian aid by promoting international peace and security. Through resolutions, peacekeeping operations and diplomatic efforts the Security Council encourages parties in conflict to allow humanitarian access, protect civilians and comply with international humanitarian law. These actions help establish an environment in which humanitarian organizations can safely and effectively deliver assistance to people in need. Moreover, the UNSC is able to adopt binding resolutions under the UN Charter, meaning member states are legally obligated to comply with them.

4. Egypt, Jordan, Turkey and Pakistan

Egypt, Jordan, Turkey and Pakistan act as primary overland corridors and marine shipping alternatives to avoid active war zones and contested waters.

Possible Solutions

- Encouraging negotiations for temporary, geographically defined demilitarized zones or time-bound ceasefires to allow aid convoys to pass safely and allow civilians to evacuate,
- Suggesting informing the conflicting military parties about the exact coordinates of humanitarian facilities, personnel and convoy routes to prevent accidental targeting,
- Proposing the transferral of project implementations to trusted local NGOs and community leaders when international staff face extreme security risks,
- Considering using multiple transportations modes, combining land, sea and air drops, and alternative border crossings so that is one route is blocked by conflict, another remains active,
- Recommending the use of mobile money or encrypted blockchain tokens for sending financial aid, to remove the need for physical money or goods convoys, reducing the risk of looting and corruption,

- Proposing to use predictive artificial intelligence and real-time satellite imagery to map active combat zones and blockades, allowing convoys to reroute,
- Requesting the use of cargo drones to deliver critical lightweight medical supplies directly to hard to access areas.