What is Humanitarian Access?

Humanitarian access concerns humanitarian actors' ability to reach populations affected by crisis, as well as an affected population's ability to access humanitarian assistance and services.

Access is therefore a fundamental pre-requisite to effective humanitarian action. Full and unimpeded access is essential to establish operations, move goods and personnel where they are needed, implement distributions, provide health services and carry out other activities, and for affected populations to fully benefit from the assistance and services made available.

In situations of disaster or civil unrest, national authorities have primary responsibility for the well-being of those affected. In situations of armed conflict, the responsibility for the civilian population's well-being lies with all of the parties to conflict. If they are unable or unwilling to meet the basic needs of the affected population within their control, they are obliged to allow and facilitate the impartial provision of assistance.

Our ability to establish and maintain humanitarian access is related to our adherence to humanitarian principles (see OOM Humanitarian Principles). For example, if one or more parties to a conflict believe, rightly or wrongly, that humanitarian actors are acting in favour of a political or military outcome, or that humanitarian action is not being implemented strictly on the basis of humanitarian needs alone, they will be less willing to allow humanitarian activities.

Constraints on Access

Many types of constraints affect humanitarians' ability to reach people in need of assistance, particularly in situations of armed conflict, but can also be problematic in natural disaster contexts. These constraints also affect the ability of affected populations to have full access to humanitarian aid. They include

- Bureaucratic restrictions on personnel and humanitarian supplies.
- Impediments related to climate, terrain or lack of infrastructure.
- The diversion of aid, and interference in the delivery of relief and implementation of activities.
- Active fighting and military operations.
- Attacks on humanitarian personnel, goods and facilities.

It is important to note that not all constraints on access are deliberately obstructive and may not constitute violations of international law. They can include physical problems such as a lack of roads, or climatic conditions such as snow. In many cases, a combination of access constraints create limit access rather than a single factor. Achieving and maintaining access usually requires coordinated efforts, such as liaison with the relevant State and non-State actors at all levels, to establish acceptance for humanitarian actors and their work. In recent years, bureaucratic constraints, politically and

"Increasingly today acquiescence for humanitarian access is lacking. I am most of all saddened and horrified by the rising attacks on aid workers. We are too often attacked for what we have or who we are. When the delivery of humanitarian access is restricted, lives are lost and misery prolonged needlessly."

John Holmes,
Op-Ed 18 August 2009

[1] **Mandate of Emergency Relief Coordinator on Access.** [A/RES/46/182]
"Actively facilitating, including through negotiation if needed, the access by the operational organizations to emergency areas for the rapid provision of emergency assistance by obtaining the consent of all parties concerned, through modalities such as the establishment of temporary relief corridors where needed, days and zones of tranquility and other forms."

economically motivated attacks on humanitarian personnel and active fighting have increasingly contributed to limited access to conflict-affected populations.

What is the role of OCHA?

OCHA has a vital role in facilitating and coordinating humanitarian actors' efforts to establish and maintain access, and to overcome factors that inhibit access. Facilitating and coordinating efforts to establish access to affected populations is central to the Emergency Relief Coordinator's (ERC's) mandate and the Terms of Reference for Humanitarian Coordinators. In 2007, the ERC committed to establishing more systematic monitoring and reporting on access, reporting instances of grave concern to the Security Council, and to supporting efforts to increase access on the ground.

At the country level, OCHA supports Humanitarian Coordinators in their role through coordination on options and strategies to increase access and promote compliance with humanitarian principles. An important OCHA service in this regard is civil-military coordination, which is often essential to establish humanitarian corridors or days of tranquility in the midst of hostilities.

OCHA also facilitates efforts to monitor access in order to identify constraints and their implications for affected populations. This data can then be used to build common approaches to resolving issues and to inform advocacy and negotiations solutions.

What does OCHA say?

- OCHA condemns all attacks on humanitarian personnel and is deeply concerned that direct attacks on humanitarians have increased in recent years.

- Multiple types of access constraints in a given context mean there is no single blanket solution. Strategies must be tailored to the specific contexts, actors and patterns of interference experienced. Coordinated approaches are increasingly essential.

- To establish acceptance for humanitarian action, and therefore access to affected populations, humanitarian actors must establish and maintain liaison with all relevant parties, both State and non-State.
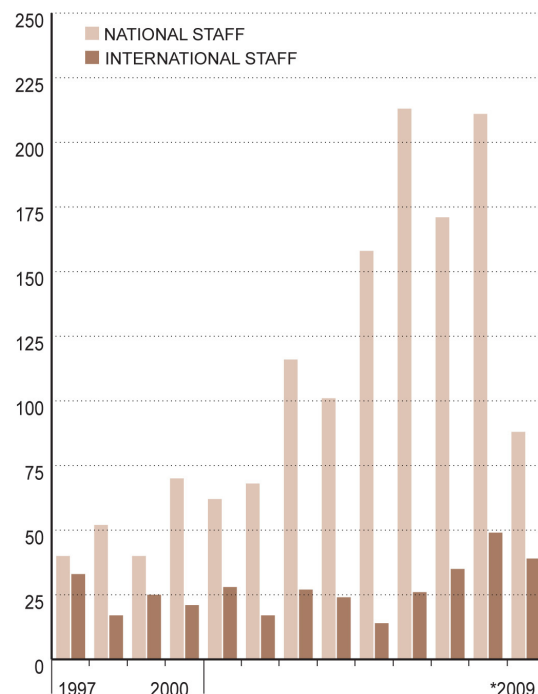
To find out more

- Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict (S/2009/277), which includes an annex reporting the most severe and prevalent constraints on humanitarian access.

- *Humanitarian Negotiations with Armed Groups*, a guide for all humanitarians involved in securing access in conflict situations. (OCHA. 2006) http://ochaonline.un.org/humanitariannegotiations/index.html

- Protection Policy Instruction

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Humanitarian workers as victims of security incidents

NATIONAL STAFF
INTERNATIONAL STAFF

Case study

El Fasher, Sudan: In 2004, the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) rebel group controlled two thirds of North Darfur - a conflict-affected region of Sudan with acute humanitarian problems. Humanitarians needed to access the region to conduct a needs assessment and provide aid, and requested OCHA to lead negotiations with the SLM. OCHA met with the local SLM leadership to explain the nature of humanitarian work, the responsibility of the SLA to provide access to populations in SLA controlled areas and to guarantee the security of humanitarian workers. The SLM explained its concerns and needs regarding working with humanitarians, including fears that humanitarian staff were Government spies. A written agreement was drafted, which included agreement by humanitarians to travel in convoys and to notify SLA leadership of movements. The SLA agreed not to attack convoys, or to steal aid or vehicles. The agreement proved extremely useful as a shared reference point whenever misunderstandings or disagreements arose. Every day, the humanitarian agencies sent staff movement details to the OCHA focal point, including vehicle registration plates, which were then relayed by the SLA to field commanders as needed. As a result, SLA attacks on convoys diminished dramatically and humanitarians gained access to suffering populations previously out of their reach - a total caseload of over 500,000 people.