Humanitarianism's Thin Red Line: Armed Escorts in Theory and Practice

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Abstract

In armed conflicts around the world, armed escorts are increasingly used by civilian actors in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. These escorts, at times, include peacekeepers, counter-insurgents, armed forces, armed groups or even private security companies. The use of armed actors, however, remains a critically underexplored issue. This paper will assess the theory and practice of the use of armed escorts by humanitarian actors, uncovering the legitimising discourse and the impact that armed escorts have on humanitarian principles and acceptance by local communities. It accomplishes this through a critical analysis of humanitarian guidelines and policy documents and draws from the limited research on armed escorts. The article draws from fieldwork in Sudan in 2022 to empirically show these trends in Darfur, demonstrating that the use of armed escorts by one non-governmental organisation can cause a knock-on effect to others, and that once in place, there is a lock-in effect.

Keywords: armed escorts; security; safety; Darfur; Sudan; NGOs; violence

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the number of attacks on humanitarian workers has dramatically increased, resulting in growing attention on the issue of safety and security (Neuman and Weissman, 2016). This insecurity has further led to an increase in the use of military assets to protect humanitarian staff (Bjerknes, 2020). It has been argued, however, that this blurring of lines between military and civilian is counterproductive, and has actually increased the risk to humanitarian actors (Fast, 2014). Military actors can attract the attention of their enemies, leading to humanitarians being caught in the cross-fire. Humanitarians using escorts may not be seen as neutral, which can lead to civilians rejecting their assistance and humanitarians being targeted directly. Due to the risks associated with their use, escorts are typically seen by humanitarians as a trade of principles that is acceptable only as a 'last resort' (Grace, 2020; IASC, 2013) to be used in 'exceptional circumstances' (IASC, 2013). There is at times a temptation by humanitarian actors to describe violations of principles – including the use of armed escorts – as a 'red line' for humanitarian organisations (Labbé and Daudin, 2016).

However, given how frequently they are used, they are perhaps better understood as a thin red line – and one that is frequently crossed. This article will discuss two broad effects of armed escorts that remain under-researched, theorising the existence of a **knock-on effect**, when one organisation begins using armed escorts, increasing pressure on others to do the same, and a **lock-in effect**, whereby once armed escorts have begun, they are extremely difficult to cease.

Despite the frequency with which armed escorts are used, there is a large gap in research and analysis on them, either from a theoretically informed perspective, or from studies on operational successes or failures. There is a dearth of research on armed escorts and a lack of empirical case studies. This is partly due to their sensitive nature and that humanitarian organisations have strong incentives not to publicise their use. There is, therefore, no source that is able to summarise the literature on armed escorts, analyse their usefulness from a theoretical perspective, or provide detailed analysis of an empirical case study. This article aims to contribute to fill gaps in our collective understanding of armed escorts, to synthesise what little literature is available on the subject and to help explore the effects

that armed escorts have on humanitarian assistance. It does this by providing empirical analysis of the case of Darfur, Sudan and the impacts of the knock-on and lock-in effects.

Armed Escorts in Theory and Practice

The Legitimising Discourse of Armed Escorts

An armed escort is typically defined as: 'A security measure that serves as a visible deterrent to a potential attack, and, if necessary, acts in self-defence against an attack. Armed escorts can be provided by military as well as non-military actors, such as, police, private security companies or non-State actors' (IASC, 2013: 3). During the Cold War, humanitarian organisations used armed escorts in certain situations, including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) using *mujahideen* fighters to escort small teams in Afghanistan in the 1980s (Crombé and Hofman, 2011: 54). The end of the Cold War saw a dramatic surge in humanitarian assistance and United Nations (UN) military operations. This crowding of humanitarian space collectively led to increased danger, alongside a concerted push for civilians to coordinate with military interventions (Alexander and Parker, 2020). United Nations Security Council resolution 751 of 24 April 1992 on Somalia established the first UN military operation with the explicit purpose of protecting and facilitating humanitarian assistance (United Nations Security Council, 2013: 122–3). Similar operations were conducted in missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where UN military escorts to civilians failed in their stated aims. In Somalia, UN peacekeepers were seen as quick to resort to high levels of violence against thieves and bandits. In BiH, however, they were seen as risk averse, preferring to hand over humanitarian assistance to Bosnian Serb militia rather than risk confrontation (Seybolt, 2008: 142–3). In both cases, the failures of UN military interventions had ripple effects that destabilised humanitarian assistance in general.

The difficulties faced in Somalia and BiH, combined with the increased targeting of humanitarian staff, led to a call for more regularised procedures for determining when and how armed escorts should be used. This led to the first drafting of guidelines and procedures on the use of armed escorts (Mezzalama, 1995: 7). Internal discussions within the UN eventually produced the 'Non-Binding Guidelines on the "Use of Military or Armed Escorts for Humanitarian Convoys"', initially endorsed by members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) on 14 September 2001. The guidelines note that armed escorts should only be used as a last resort, when the following criteria were met: (1) sovereignty, where the local power is unwilling to grant access without military escort; (2) need, in which the level of humanitarian need is high but access cannot be granted without an armed escort; (3) safety, in which the armed escort will increase safety of humanitarians without compromising security of beneficiaries; and (4) sustainability, in which the use of armed escorts will not compromise long-term capacity of the organisation (IASC, 2001: 10). There is clear tension in these criteria; for example, it is easy to imagine a scenario where the government was not mandating the use of armed escorts (as in criteria 1), though issues around insecurity push humanitarians to seek the use of military support for safety reasons. The evolution of security risk management procedures within the UN and non-UN organisations, the crowding of humanitarian space and the increasing complexity of humanitarian assistance all necessitated an update to these procedures, which took place in 2013 (IASC, 2013: 1). The criteria for exceptional use of armed escorts were reframed as (1) humanitarian need and programme criticality; (2) responsible authorities (a rephrasing of the 'sovereignty' criteria); (3) safety and security; and (4) sustainability (IASC, 2013: 6). Although specifically produced for UN agencies and associated non-governmental organisations (NGOs), their prominence has made them the default guidelines for those both within and outside the UN system. Organisations with greater independence, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and MSF, operate on similar guidelines.

Whereas, in theory, humanitarians may seek to improve their safety and security by using armed escorts, from an international humanitarian law (IHL) perspective, questions remain about whether – or not – the armed actors in an escort (or the convoy in general) would remain a viable military target. Sutton's study of humanitarian actors in South Sudan noted that while NGOs may assert that they are protected under the IHL principle of distinction, this is questioned by their ready acceptance of the use of military escorts (Sutton, 2020). Whereas the principle of distinction asserts that armed actors must distinguish between civilian and military, these lines become blurred when humanitarians cling closely to armed actors, creating a situation where the humanitarians are claiming protection while standing next to valid military targets. In an era where conflict remains dominated by artillery, mortars, missiles and roadside bombs, this principle of distinction may be meaningless when humanitarians are a matter of metres away from armed actors. As noted by Bassil, IHL is relatively silent on whether an armed escort would actually be a viable target (Bassil, 2020: 561). Whereas

the status of the humanitarians would not change, their proximity to valid targets can render this distinction meaningless in practice.

Deterrence and Acceptance

To better understand the use of violence and its impact on humanitarian operations it is useful to critically analyse predominant security strategies. Security management is often conceptualised as a triangle, its three corners being acceptance, protection and deterrence (Fast, 2014). An acceptance approach attempts to reduce or remove threats by increasing the political and social consent of the host community. In effect, this approach is preventing the threat from arising. The protection approach relies on the use of devices and procedures to reduce one's vulnerability to the threat when it appears – examples could include fences, blast barriers and the like. Deterrence aims to match threat with counter-threat, therefore increasing security by clearly showing that violence will be met with violence (Humanitarian Practice Network, 2010: 55).

Humanitarians frequently employ a mix of these strategies; however, the use of deterrence force often runs directly contrary to acceptance. A common argument against the use of military escorts is therefore the negative impacts escorts will have on perceptions in the host community (IASC, 2013). Using escort risks jeopardising the humanitarian principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality, further harming acceptance. Locals may look unfavourably on the humanitarian assistance being offered and may simply not accept it. Mobile clinics or distributions may find that despite the extensive need, locals simply don't show up. Even worse, other parties to the conflict may view the armed escort as proof of partnership and thereafter deny humanitarian access to areas that they control, or even begin to target them.

For example, during the US occupation of Afghanistan, American military units known as 'provincial reconstruction teams' partnered with civilians and provided military escorts through Taliban areas. The problem, however, was that locals began to conflate NGO staff with the counter-insurgent force. This has frequently been attributed as a direct reason for an increase on attacks on humanitarian staff in both Iraq and Afghanistan (Fast, 2014), even leading to attacks on NGOs who didn't use armed escorts. MSF directly attributed an attack killing five MSF staff in Afghanistan on this blurring of military and civilian actors (De Torrenté, 2006).

There is also the practical issue of gaining acceptance. Driving a massive military convoy through different areas will likely require the permission of many layers of authorities, including governmental, regional, religious or traditional leaders (Humanitarian Practice Network, 2010: 57–8). Ignoring these layers of acceptance and authority may increase the speed of the movement but will inevitably incur costs related to acceptance strategies. Regarding acceptance in a community, if humanitarians are unable to convey the non-violent nature of their assistance, communities may react accordingly.

In sum, the dominant discourse in the humanitarian sector asserts that the promise of deterrence may not yield the aims it purports to and, at worst, may actually make humanitarian staff more vulnerable rather than less. Critical analysis of this assumption, however, shows that it is not necessarily true in all cases. It remains an open question as to whether the use of armed escorts actually decreases the threat and therefore the overall risk. In some cases, the use of a military escort may be met with indifference by locals, who may also see the armed actors as protecting them when they go to receive assistance. There are shockingly few studies, either from policy or academic sources, questioning in a methodologically rigorous way the assumptions underlying the justification for the use of armed escorts, and greater data-driven research on the topic is badly needed.

Humanitarian Decision-Making and Escorts

The positions of organisations with regards to armed escorts are as varied as the NGOs themselves. Organisations funded by the United States have been mandated the use of armed escorts in contexts where American military were deployed (Stoddard et al., 2008: 12). The same is true for UN agencies and UN-funded NGOs, who work hand-in-hand with UN peacekeeping missions in contexts around the world. The partnership between civilian and military in an armed escort may be no stranger to such organisations than the partnership between peacekeepers and UN civilian staff in general. Whereas the UN system has clear flexibility on the acceptance of armed escorts, NGO positions vary. CARE International, for example, has a policy against using armed escorts, though its policy related to armed escorts states that it will make decisions in consultation with UN agencies who may be more willing to use them (CARE International, 2022). The ICRC, meanwhile, has taken a clear view against the use of armed escorts except when 'the refusal of such an escort would lead to the paralysis of humanitarian activities' (ICRC, 1995). MSF, meanwhile, has a more flexible position, at various times protesting the use of armed escorts by other humanitarian actors, and at times embracing their use. For example, in 2017, MSF protested the use of armed escorts by other NGOs in Mali (Marín, 2017), even though MSF had agreed to their use in Nigeria the previous year (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2016). Other

organisations are much stricter, such as the Nonviolent Peaceforce, who maintain a complete operational prohibition against the use of armed escorts.

In the case of the UN and its specialised agencies (UNICEF, UNHCR, International Organization for Migration (IOM), World Food Programme (WFP), etc.) security analysis and policies are delegated to the United Nations Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS), which is mandated to analyse security contexts and stipulate operating procedures for UN agencies and their partner NGOs. In countries where it operates, UNDSS has comparatively limited capacity to undertake assessments in order to alter previously completed security assessments or to open up previously designated 'no go' roads. This means that once armed escorts are begun, aid agencies quickly become reliant on them due to UNDSS' lack of ability to delist the routes as 'no go', as has occurred in both the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Egeland *et al.*, 2011: 17) and Yemen (Vuylsteke, 2021), among others. It has been argued the professionalisation of security by UNDSS has resulted in heightened risk aversion, leading armed escorts to be used in contexts where they are not needed (Grace, 2020: 38–9). Some have argued that it is really the push from within the UN system – specially UNDSS – and its attempts to professionalise security management that has acted as the thin edge of the wedge, pushing armed escorts onto the humanitarian community (Friis, 2015: 220).

The decision to use armed escorts may sit at various levels in different organisations. For independent humanitarian NGOs, such as MSF or Oxfam, the decision can be entirely ad hoc, at times driven by immediate concerns on the ground, at others by broader contextual trends. Other NGOs vary, and some may have to confirm with donors before money can be spent on armed escorts, while some donors may mandate their use. Typically, however, the use of armed escort would require authorisation at the highest levels within the organisation.

It is important to note that one organisation's decision to use armed escorts can have massive ripple effects on the humanitarian community in a specific context. In general, when humanitarian organisations are working in similar contexts, they may increasingly imitate one another through a process of 'mimetic isomorphism' (Cusumano, 2019). A similar process can be observed with regard to armed escorts, in which smaller organisations may be influenced by larger ones. Larger organisations may be able to assess their levels of acceptance through discussions with key community members, the gathering of feedback and community participation (Fast *et al.*, 2014). For NGOs who are not able to conduct their own risk assessments, a complex understanding of their acceptance may be impossible

and they therefore become reliant on larger actors, such as the UN, to do it for them. When these larger actors, such as the UN, begin using armed escorts, this can trigger a knock-on effect, in which the decision by the UN to use escorts pressures others to do the same.

Further, security policies and procedures have been shown to be 'sticky', in that they are very hard to change once in place (Stoddard *et al.*, 2017). Research has also shown that security managers in humanitarian organisations are more likely to increase assessed risk levels than lower them, making a downgrading of risk analysis extremely difficult (Stoddard *et al.*, 2016). Taken together, these trends have led to what Mark Duffield has called a bunkerisation of aid (Duffield, 2012). With specific regard to armed escorts, these trends combine to produce the lock-in effect; once escorts are in place, they are 'sticky', with security managers much more likely to continue their use than halt them. Taken together, both the knock-on and lock-in effects create a situation in which the use of armed escorts by one organisation can increase the likelihood of their use by others, while making cessation of the practice extremely difficult.

Structure and Incentives of Armed Actors

Although this article is collectively referring to armed escorts, it is important to acknowledge the diversity in what those armed escorts look like in practice; an escort might be anything from a fleet of military vehicles with air support, to a single police officer who might not even have their own transportation.

UN peacekeepers are regularly used to accompany civilian humanitarian staff in South Sudan, Central African Republic and DRC, and in many other contexts. When UN peacekeepers are used as armed escorts they typically follow the principles and procedures laid out in the Military and Civil Defence Assets (MCDA) guidelines, first produced in 2003, which were eventually developed into the IASC's 'Non-Binding Guidelines on the "Use of Armed Escorts for Humanitarian Convoys"' in 2013. During the convoy the military commander is in charge and may halt or reverse the convoy according to their understanding of the security of the situation. The guidelines stipulate that the UN humanitarian agency requests the escort and is responsible for choosing the location while also ensuring the operation retains its 'civilian nature and character' (OCHA, 2006: 9). If, for example, the WFP or the World Health Organization (WHO) wishes to visit a certain region they may request an armed escort through the UN humanitarian coordinator; however, the escort itself (and the ability of the agency to travel to that region) will be stipulated by UNDSS guidelines and protocols.

Whereas peacekeepers frequently fill the escort role, in some places the job is done by the host state's armed

forces, international counter-insurgents, private security companies or even local armed groups. As noted above, American counter-insurgent forces accompanied some NGOs in Afghanistan and Iraq. In Somalia, NGOs including MSF and ICRC have regularly contracted local security companies to provide armed escorts (Neuman and Leduc, 2011). Private military companies have also been used by NGOs in contexts including Iraq and Afghanistan (Stoddard et al., 2008).

Escorts may also vary dramatically in size. For example, a typical escort operation by Chinese UN peacekeepers in South Sudan in 2020 included nearly forty soldiers in ten vehicles (China Military Online, 2020). During the American counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan, the American military gave escorts to NGOs which included a platoon of forty soldiers, a de-mining unit, armoured vehicles and, at times, helicopter gunships (Perito, 2005). By contrast, in the refugee camps of north-east Syria following the defeat of ISIS in 2016, NGOs were required by the local Kurdish authorities to use a military escort of a single armed police officer travelling in NGO vehicles (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2022).

For many organisations, the use of escorts is a 'red line' that they are not willing to accept. When in 2021 the government of Niger imposed military escorts on organisations outside of urban areas, many NGOs chose to simply halt their programmes (ACAPS, 2021). Legally speaking, the Geneva Conventions stipulate that warring parties have the responsibility to ensure humanitarian access to populations in need. However, there are some stipulations for when this may be ignored, and the exact grounds for when this is legitimate is not completely clear (Friis, 2015: 217). In some cases, when a state has imposed armed escorts out of an insistence that humanitarians need protection, organisations have influenced the kind of escort imposed. In Pakistan, UN agencies were able to negotiate away from a high-profile escort of armoured military vehicles to an unidentified police escort out of uniform, which met the concerns of the state that the humanitarians needed protection (Egeland et al., 2011: 23). In such cases, a low visibility escort may be preferable to a heavily militarised one. At the same time, however, once word spreads that the military escorts are accompanying NGO vehicles unidentified, it may spread further suspicion on the NGO vehicles, increasing their desirability as a target, as observed by MSF in Mali (Marín, 2017: 4).

Although in many cases the push for the use of armed escorts comes from humanitarians or the broader UN system, at times it comes from armed actors who may have their own reasons for compelling civilian humanitarians to be accompanied by military or police. Some governments may wish to restrict humanitarian access,

while others simply want humanitarians to take part in a coordinated effort with the local government. Still others may have genuine concerns for the safety of the humanitarian actors and see it as their responsibility to impose security even when humanitarians might reject it.

A key problem here is the potential perverse incentives of armed actors, who may have interests other than the delivery of assistance and which may be political or economic in nature. When armed escorts are provided by states, armed groups or private companies they typically don't do so for free. In addition to paying for gasoline, repairs on vehicles or even salaries of soldiers, humanitarians may find themselves paying a service fee as well. Once a market has been created for escorts, it may be exceptionally difficult to stop their use, since without humanitarian paymasters, armed actors may lose a vitally needed source of income. They may pressure more NGOs to use armed escorts, amplifying the knock-on effect, and may resist the cessation of the use of armed escorts, amplifying the lock-in effect. Both effects can therefore be triggered by internal character-istics of the humanitarian organisation (as noted earlier with regard to security management) but also externally by the actors performing the escort service.

The situation therefore may create a perverse incentive for the armed actor to increase the insecurity of the humanitarian actors, thus necessitating the continued use of the armed escort protecting them. MSF's first mission to Afghanistan in the 1980s experienced prob-lems in this area, when their *mujahideen* escorts increasingly demanded money, leading the Head of Mission to note that the situation 'bordered on extortion' (Abu Sa'Da and Crombé, 2016). More recently in Yemen in 2020, it was reported that humanitarian organisations were forced to pay 3000 USD for an armed escort from Aden to Mukalla, plus the costs of fuel (Vuylsteke, 2021). When security is monetised, it may create a situation where those with the money get security, while those without find themselves increasingly targeted (Humanitarian Practice Network, 2010: 76). Alternatively, humanitarians may find themselves unable to access target populations, or may expend much-needed resources on armed actors instead of on people in need.

Armed Escorts in Darfur, Sudan

This article follows a period working for a humanitarian organisation in Sudan from September to November 2022, in a role that involved analysis of political trends, security and access constraints. Although not specifically a research trip, this trip informed this article and allowed me to compare empirics observed to what theoretical literature is available.[1] In the words of Bates et al., social

scientists can 'soak and poke' in an environment – to soak up information and poke around – in order to move from curiosity to explanation and to highlight and focus on the processes that generate the phenomena we study and their impacts (Bates *et al.*, 1998: 14). Observing people interacting in a particular socio-political and cultural setting allows inferential analysis to guide research (Hayward, 2000: 187). My aim was not to interview individuals in order to gather data from them but to observe broader trends and compare them with what secondary literature was available on the topics. This approach draws from the ethnographic form of 'deep hanging out', as conceptualised by Clifford (1996) and Geertz (1998). Informal discussions and observations in the research area can therefore be included in a research project, an approach that is especially useful in politically sensitive or conflict-affected areas (Browne and Mcbride, 2015).

Darfur provides a compelling empirical case for analysis, as it demonstrates clearly the ethical trade-offs associated with the use of armed escorts by peacekeepers, armed forces and even armed groups. It also helps to demonstrate how beginning the use of armed escorts can cause the knock-on and lock-in effects noted earlier. As discussion of Darfur will show, once one organisation pushed for armed escorts, a situation was created where others were compelled to follow, and the organisation saw their access reduced. Further, once armed escorts were in place they were extraordinarily difficult to cease.

Since 2003, the Darfur conflict has displaced at least two million people into IDP and refugee camps in Sudan and neighbouring Chad. During the worst parts of the killing in the first seven years of the conflict, more than 300,000 people were killed by informal militia known as the *Janjaweed*, supported by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). A new wave of instability has begun since the *Janjaweed* were formalised into the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and redeployed to the region in 2014. Abuses and violence by the RSF led to a surge in displacement, with more than 450,000 people displaced in 2014 and 100,000 in January 2015 alone (International Crisis Group, 2015: 1). This violence continued through to 2022, with a further 470,000 displaced between January and August of that year (ACAPS, 2022). The humanitarian needs in Darfur in 2022 were immense, with 6.2 million people in need, and 1.9 million people living in displacement camps in Darfur (OCHA, 2022a: 5). However, the situation worsened in 2023 when the RSF entered full-blown civil war with the SAF.

Darfur is a context in which armed escorts were used by humanitarian organisations for a lengthy period, from 2006 through to the time of writing in 2023. Darfur therefore remains an extreme example in the use of armed escorts, due to the extensive period in which UN security protocols have mandated their use. There is no official list of which NGOs have requested armed escorts in Darfur and NGOs typically do not discuss their use due to the highly sensitive nature of such operations, that combined with the negative reaction their use might receive among private donors shocked to learn that money they donate is used to fund armed forces or armed groups. In addition to UN agencies, NGOs working as UN partners and even NGOs outside of UN funding schemes have used armed escorts in Darfur, with only a few organisations (such as the ICRC, MSF and Non-violent Peaceforce) consistently refusing their use.

The United Nations–African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) was authorised by the Security Council in July of 2007, explicitly mandated to ensure the protection of civilian humanitarian staff and the facilitation of assistance (United Nations Security Council, 2007). As early as 2006 the UN had mandated the use of armed escorts by civilian staff (Human Rights Watch, 2006). The number of times escorts were used increased, reaching more than 2,700 in a three-month period in 2009 (United Nations Security Council, 2009: 10). By 2017, UNAMID was conducting 331 military escorts in a six-month period (UNAMID, 2017: 15). During the deployment of UNAMID, however, an over-reliance on the use of escorts limited the ability of UN agencies to access populations in need, causing a knock-on effect for other NGOS, who felt pressured to accept the use of armed escorts. Even during periods of intense conflict some organisations criticised the use of armed escorts by others, noting that it was increasing access constraints rather than alleviating them, thus amplifying the knock-on effect even further. For example, in 2007 MSF President Dr Christophe Fournier openly criticised the use of armed escorts by other NGOs and the UN in Darfur (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2007).

Many UN agencies and NGOs felt that armed escorts were being used long after the period in 2007–08 when they really were a last resort (Loeb, 2013), demonstrating the lock-in effect. Although Darfur had long been a place of armed conflict, things became more unstable following UNAMID's withdrawal in 2020 (Kurtz, 2022). Following the withdrawal, UN agencies were still required to use armed escorts, now having to rely on the SAF, the police or the RSF. UNDSS remained unable to update security protocols, even though the actor providing those escorts was no longer present, showing that the lock-in effect can outlast even the actors who trigger the use of those escorts.

Some agencies and NGOs sought to get around this abandonment of neutrality by relying on the police to

serve as escorts instead of the military, as they were seen by UNDSS security advisors as more multi-ethnic and neutral. In March of 2022, however, the US State Department blacklisted the Central Reserve Police following a crackdown on protestors in Khartoum. This compelled the use of SAF as an escort; however, SAF themselves complained about providing escorts, pushing humanitarian actors towards the RSF, as noted in public meetings. In September of 2022 the current arrangement between OCHA (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) with SAF and RSF stipulated a clear set of payments. The armed actors were paid between 60–100,000 SDG (Sudanese pounds) per vehicle per movement, with an overnight fee of an additional 60,000, as well as the cost of fuel. The problems with use of the RSF were even more exposed when in April of 2023 the RSF entered a period of open civil war with government forces. Not only had an armed group accused of war crimes been used by humanitarian actors – severely challenging acceptance in non-Arab Darfuri communities – but massive security concerns now arose from being associated with an armed group in the middle of a full-blown civil war. The implications for acceptance are obvious, and it is hard to imagine displaced people viewing humanitarians positively when they arrive alongside the armed force that displaced them.

It is important to note that there was nothing inevitable about the use of armed escorts. In North Darfur, some humanitarian organisations had avoided their imposition by negotiating with local authorities and traditional leaders, pushing for armed actors to focus on area security rather than on armed escorts (Egeland *et al.*, 2011: 23). In such contexts, area security can include the patrolling of roads and checkpoints, maintaining military presence and conducting flyovers, all aimed at creating a situation of security for the local population as a whole rather than simply accompanying humanitarians.

As the case of Sudan shows, once the UN agencies have a system of armed escorts in place it can lead to a knock-on effect on other organisations and a lock-in effect with regard to their use. Once UNDSS had made this decision, pressure began to fall on all other organisations to increasingly use armed escorts. Other NGOs – including those who didn't use armed escorts – came under regular pressure from the Sudanese authorities, supported by UNDSS analysis. In Darfur, UN agencies experienced a lack of resources due to an overall funding shortfall. OCHA's Coordinated Humanitarian Appeal had in 2022 only reached 31.5 per cent of the projected needs (OCHA, 2022b: 1). Because of this, UNDSS was unable to update its analyses in order to open the roads that were previously blacklisted – a clear example of lock-in. NGOs reliant on UN or US funding were compelled to follow the same rules, while increased

pressure was put on other NGOs as local authorities dragged their feet and threatened to block access unless those NGOs agreed to use SAF or RSF escorts. Although there may have been justification for the use of armed escorts by UNAMID when it was deployed in 2007, the situation in 2022 saw humanitarian actors blocking themselves due to armed escort policy implemented many years earlier. As a result, both access and acceptance suffered, questioning the humanitarian principles on which the assistance was supposed to rest.

The use of armed escorts may in some cases be necessary as a last resort; however, it is clear by the frequency of their use, and their persistence in Darfur, that they are frequently relied on for other reasons than absolute necessity. The 'red line' has been crossed frequently, thus questioning whether it is a red line at all. Both the knock-on and lock-in effects can spread the use of armed escorts by humanitarians, making their use sticky for years, even decades. The result, as seen in Darfur, is an unnecessary sacrifice of humanitarian principles, access to people in need and, therefore, a subversion of the aims of humanitarian assistance.

Conclusions

Several pieces of practical wisdom can be drawn from the discussion above. First, humanitarians may push for armed forces and peacekeepers to focus on area security rather than escorts so that humanitarians need not travel in convoy with armed actors. This, however, may come with its own risks, depending on whether the armed actors use violence to achieve area security. When using armed escorts it is wise to pre-negotiate both the route and role of the armed escort and wherever possible to avoid paying or remunerating the armed escorts. Rather than be given an indefinite mandate, the use of armed escorts should have a clear 'sunset clause' stipulating the period when they will be used, at which point they can only be re-activated following an updated security assessment, avoiding situations like that seen in Darfur, where the use of escorts is continued due to the lack of an updated security assessment.

Greater research is needed on armed escorts and their use by humanitarians. Some argue that armed escorts increase security while others argue it increases insecurity. As yet there is no data-driven study confirming either hypothesis. It remains an open question whether the use of armed escorts actually decreases the threat and, therefore, the overall risk. What is clear, as the case of Darfur demonstrates, is that the use of armed escorts comes with access costs, which through knock-on and lock-in effects can affect the international humanitarian response as a whole.

Note

1 Those who took part in discussions about this research topic were informed that conversations would be for an internal report for the NGO in question (who wished to remain anonymous in any subsequent academic articles), and that information shared would also be used to broadly inform an academic research article. They were briefed that they wouldn't be quoted or used as specific interview references or data sources but that information informally shared would be used to broadly inform both the internal report and this article. The discussions were therefore held under the ethical aegis and oversight of the organisation in question following internal protocols related to safety and security of all involved.

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