

Translation

Speech by Ambassador Busso von Alvensleben
Deputy Director-General responsible for Global Issues: Civilian Crisis Prevention,
Human Rights, Humanitarian Aid and International Terrorism,
at the Global Public Policy Institute
as part of the project
"Raising the bar: Enhancing transatlantic governance of disaster relief and
preparedness"

on 2 June 2008

**"Change and dynamism in the humanitarian world – challenges to the
independence of humanitarian aid"**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to join you here today and for this opportunity to discuss with you the challenges associated with international humanitarian aid as a field of shared European Union-transatlantic endeavour.

Humanitarian aid is now increasingly important not only because of the growing number and scale of natural disasters but also because – especially in complex and protracted crises – it's an integral part of the international response and often indeed the only international aid that gets delivered on the ground.

The European Union and its member states provide more than 50% of humanitarian aid around the world and the United States of America is the biggest donor country. That's why it's so vital to intensify even further the cooperation in this field between the European Union and the United States of America.

In Germany the lead ministry for humanitarian aid is the Federal Foreign Office. Obviously we work closely with humanitarian aid actors and implementing partners. These fall into three main categories:

- the United Nations, whose central coordinating role we strongly support
- the Red Cross movement, which over the decades has built up invaluable networks, standards and expertise in this area
- the non-governmental organizations, which regularly deliver promptly and efficiently and with tremendous dedication the lion's share of humanitarian aid.

We are also keen to see close cooperation within the donor community and most especially with the European Commission. During Germany's EU Council Presidency in 2007 we made humanitarian aid one of our priorities. Together with the Commission we initiated a process that resulted in a fundamental document known as the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, which was actively endorsed by all member states.

This document, which has been signed by the European Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament, spells out for the first time the principles underpinning the EU's humanitarian aid. The intention is to help ensure humanitarian aid can be delivered still more efficiently in line with the fundamental principles of neutrality, impartiality, humanity and independence. This is clearly a daunting challenge and will require maximum effort from each and every one of us. For the environment in which humanitarian aid is delivered is changing all the time; the need is growing and the problems of implementation are becoming ever more complex.

There could be no more forceful reminders of the magnitude of the challenges we face than the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar caused by Cyclone Nargis on 2 and 3 May and the severe earthquake in China on 12 May.

In the changing environment in which humanitarian aid is delivered we are now increasingly concerned with issues such as

- what does humanitarian aid mean to recipients and donor countries and how is it used?
- how is the aid itself and those who implement it perceived?
- how can we ensure unimpeded access to those in need?
- how can we to protect the necessary "humanitarian space"?

In the immediate aftermath of the cyclone I went out to Myanmar as Federal Foreign Minister Steinmeier's special envoy to help persuade its Government to let international aid workers into the country and allow them access to people in need. I then flew on to the special summit of ASEAN foreign ministers in Singapore to appeal for whatever support they could give. Afterwards I returned to Rangoon for the

special conference jointly convened by the United Nations, ASEAN and the Myanmar Government on 25 May 2008.

From my talks on this trip with government officials and representatives of the UN, NGOs and other donors I brought back a host of impressions and experiences that may be useful food for thought during our discussions later on.

My mission throughout this trip was to try and explain the nature and purpose of the humanitarian aid Germany and the international community were offering. It was a gesture of solidarity with the cyclone victims, I pointed out, and intended to save lives, prevent or alleviate suffering and preserve human dignity. And we realized speed was of the essence and any further delays would mean yet more victims.

As you all know, the Myanmar Government took a great deal of persuading before they would allow foreign aid workers into the country. Even weeks after the cyclone Western aid workers in particular are still being denied unimpeded access to the disaster zone. There is deep mistrust of all foreigners, especially Westerners, as well as any kind of humanitarian initiative from outside the country. Following the conference in Rangoon on 25 May there are hopeful signs, however, that international aid workers may increasingly be allowed in. The Myanmar Government insists that humanitarian aid must come with no political strings attached – something other governments in the region warn against, too.

For if humanitarian aid is seen to have any kind of political motive – a kind of Trojan horse employed to pursue a much wider agenda – its whole mission may be compromised. A case in point are the warships laden with relief supplies for Myanmar sent out by three countries and now kept waiting offshore. Since they were viewed by the Government as a military threat, they did not exactly facilitate the UN Secretary-General's talks with the Myanmar authorities. The principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity as the one and only basis for humanitarian action are fundamental if humanitarian aid is to be acceptable and its delivery therefore possible.

Not just in Myanmar but in other countries, too, the politicization – whether real or perceived – of humanitarian aid is clearly an issue. We've seen also in complex crises such as Darfur/Sudan or Somalia what this may mean especially for access to people in need as well as in terms of protecting the humanitarian space and the security of aid workers. The issue of how humanitarian aid is perceived is also crucial

for the acceptance of any role – should the need arise – for civilian and military cooperation in this field.

In our view the United Nations and particularly OCHA, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, have a key role to play in promoting the acceptance of humanitarian aid around the world. We believe OCHA should be strengthened and given greater support.

But of course it's up to every donor, too, to help maximize acceptance of humanitarian aid. And that means ensuring our own practice is fully in line with fundamental humanitarian principles and applicable international humanitarian law. Especially in acute crisis situations it's very important to consider how the comparative advantages of the various actors can be employed to ensure maximum acceptance. This is best done by those donors with direct access to those responsible for allowing humanitarian aid operations to go ahead.

In connection with this issue of acceptance we believe also those who deliver humanitarian aid on the ground have a vital role to play. In Myanmar the local NGOs are of key importance. Until very recently international aid workers could get through to the disaster zone only through individual contacts and in very small numbers. Initially that meant the local partners of NGOs operating in Myanmar were the only people in the crisis zone with relevant expertise. What a crucial role local actors can play – quite apart from the issue of acceptance of international humanitarian aid – was also evident during the humanitarian crisis in Kenya following the December 2007 elections. Thanks to its established network and deep roots in the community, the national Red Cross movement was able to provide prompt and efficient humanitarian aid geared to local needs.

In the light of this experience, we need to ask whether our current system takes due account of the crucial role of local actors. Should we be doing more to ensure better linkage between international aid and local actors on the ground, especially when it comes to coordinating our response to acute crisis situations?

In the context of European Union-transatlantic cooperation we're very keen to explore these two vital issues in greater depth, namely, maximizing acceptance of humanitarian aid worldwide and the role of local actors in responding to humanitarian crises.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Ultimately the issues I've raised come down to the core principles of humanitarian action, particularly that of the independence of humanitarian aid.

For it's a fact that humanitarian aid is not implemented in some kind of political vacuum. Whether we're talking about political conditions such as those in Myanmar or the conflict in Iraq or about Afghanistan or the Congo, the key issue is always how to organize humanitarian aid so it can fulfil its role despite the tensions that may arise between humanitarian principles and political, military, economic or other interests. The humanitarian aid also of the German Government is organized in a foreign policy framework. But we don't view it as an instrument of our foreign policy. We believe it's vital to consciously and consistently respect the independence of humanitarian aid. The moment humanitarian aid is or is perceived to be employed to promote some political or military agenda or strategy, its integrity is compromised. That can put victims and aid workers at serious risk.

For humanitarian aid to be accepted, independence, impartiality and neutrality are of crucial importance, for they are ultimately the guarantee that the powers-that-be will not regard it as political interference and allow it into the country. By the same token, the existence of a "humanitarian space" remains indispensable, for without it the delivery of humanitarian aid in line with these principles becomes impossible. For what's the point, if there's no way to ensure aid actually reaches those who need it!

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm sure forum participants from both sides of the Atlantic broadly agree on the analysis of the problems and challenges we are facing. What is crucial at this stage, however, is to come up with joint solutions to the challenges humanitarian aid is now up against.

Thank you very much.