

CESR Letter to the Editor

(The New York Times)

To the Editor:

Congratulations on your comprehensive and moving account of the food crisis in Afghanistan ("Now the Battle to Feed the Afghan Nation"). But the article overlooks the dangers of militarizing the humanitarian effort.

The Geneva Conventions and Red Cross regulations mandate that relief aid be neutral, impartial and motivated solely by humanitarian concerns. There are good practical reasons for this. Increased links between military and relief operations have already led to a growing number of deadly attacks against aid workers in places such as Chechnya, Burundi and Bosnia. The war in Afghanistan has taken this military embrace of humanitarian relief to an entirely new level.

The article suggests that the United States has public relations objectives for wanting to drop bread as well as bombs. But independent groups like Oxfam and MSF, with decades of humanitarian experience in Afghanistan, object to the militarization of relief because it is ineffective as well as damaging to their impartiality. They argue that showering a heavily mined country with air-dropped food rations that can meet less than 1% of the need detracts from the unglamorous but crucial work of the trucking in and distributing the huge amounts of staple goods necessary to feed millions of hungry people.

The recent military rout of the Taliban has created the conditions for humanitarian access to the most desperate pockets of the Afghan population. Rather than seeking to score PR points, the US military should pressure its allies in the Northern Alliance to allow full and unimpeded access to UN and private relief organizations, and then get out of the way and let them do their job.

Ensuring that thousands of Afghans do not starve to death this winter is both a moral imperative and a human rights obligation for all parties who have contributed to the crisis.

Sincerely,

Roger Normand
Executive Director, The Center for Economic and Social Rights