ECHO CONFERENCE PANEL INTERVENTION
Elisabeth Rasmusson, Secretary General of Norwegian Refugee Council

Thank you for the invitation to participate in this distinguished panel and to share NRC’s reflections on the important topic of humanitarian space. Recent years have seen a clear trend towards politicisation and militarisation of humanitarian aid in conflict zones such as Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It seems to me that there are six good reasons to resist this trend.

First, the legitimacy of humanitarian action is destroyed if we get too entangled with the military. In Afghanistan, I think you would all agree that this is the case. With the notable exception of ECHO, donors direct funds to actors working in the areas where their troops are located, irrespective of need. Humanitarians also assist in “clear, hold and build” campaigns, as part of NATO’s counter-insurgency strategy. Make no mistake: this is military, not humanitarian action. The EU should resist this disastrous policy mix. At best, it spells an end to principled humanitarian action; at worst it adds to the conflict dynamic and thus prolongs human suffering.

Second, politicisation and militarisation of aid have quite simply failed. Together with the previous Emergency Relief Coordinator, John Holmes, NRC repeatedly drew donors’ attention to the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. But there are still large gaps in humanitarian response; civil-military coordination has failed; the civil-military guidelines are ignored and humanitarian space is practically non-existent.

Third, the blurring of lines between military and humanitarian action creates problems for the future - in addition to its inability to resolve problems in the present. In DRC, the UN peacekeeping operation MONUSCO is mandated not only to protect civilians, but also to assist the national army. Despite MONUSCO’s problematic mandate, the UN agencies on the ground rely on it for physical security and delivering assistance. What will they do when the peacekeepers leave? Will that be the end to humanitarian assistance as well? I don’t think so. There are other ways than purely military to deliver assistance, even in a volatile setting such as DRC. As humanitarians, we just have to be much more vocal in advocating for humanitarian principles and much smarter and more resourceful when it comes to negotiating humanitarian space.

Fourth, mixing military and humanitarian interventions undermines our identity and thus our capacity to act effectively. NRC aspires to act in accordance with the humanitarian principles. This is not an “airy fairy” ideological position. The humanitarian principles are tools to create humanitarian space. We recognise that without acceptance by actors that control the territory we cannot operate. Thus, we are very concerned by the increased military involvement in humanitarian assistance and protection, which often undermines our acceptance on the ground.

Fifth, the increasingly politicised approach to aid cuts off vital avenues for humanitarian access negotiations. NRC aspires to engage with all parties to conflict, be they state or non-state actors, but this is becoming increasingly difficult. Given the recent United States Supreme Court ruling that criminalised the provision of material support to foreign terrorist organisations, we need to demonstrate how the criminalisation of aid and aid workers engaging with organised armed groups may practically undermine humanitarian access. We appeal to the EU carefully to consider the humanitarian ramifications of criminalising aid.

Sixth, the frequent need for logistical support, often readily available within the military, has the knock-on effect of even making natural disasters subject to political-military interests and
objectives. There is an increased reliance on military assets in large-scale disasters such as in Pakistan. But using military assets in natural disaster response is problematic – that’s why we have the Oslo guidelines: to help us act in accordance with both the humanitarian principles and the principle of last resort. Obviously, natural disasters require airlift and other logistical support. This is expensive and in low supply. But that in itself does not mean that international military support is the right answer. Military assets should never be the first resort. Donors have a responsibility to enable humanitarian actors to do their job with civilian means, as far as they possibly can.

Now that the EU is reinforcing its disaster response capacity, both the European Consensus and the international civil-military guidelines will hopefully be strictly observed. Humanitarian disasters should activate an EU humanitarian response, but has to be kept separate from the constraints and interests of the European Security and Defence Policy.

Let me now turn to how NRC delivers aid in a world characterised by shrinking humanitarian space.

As an operational NGO assisting people displaced by conflict, NRC is faced with a complex and dangerous environment requiring constant refinement and innovation of our aid delivery methods. We rely on high quality services, impartiality and sensitivity to cultural and religious differences.

In many countries affected by humanitarian crisis, the humanitarian system is perceived as a foreign or western project. Add to this proliferation and fragmentation of armed actors, rapidly evolving security conditions and a rejection of international interference by assertive governments, and you have a multitude of obstacles to humanitarian space that we face on a daily basis in the same locations.

Humanitarian actors increasingly use physical security strategies such as high walls, armed security, armoured vehicles and reduced mobility, which limit their interaction with the local population and undermine their acceptance. NRC’s approach to these strategies is to keep them to a minimum. We cannot afford to become disconnected from affected populations – that would lower our awareness of what is going on and what is about to happen, which can be lethal. In extremely dangerous places such as South Central Somalia, where NRC has its biggest operation world wide, we have to stay ahead of the game.

NRC is accepted on the ground because the assistance we deliver is considered relevant, timely and impartial. Clearly, the way we are perceived and the degree to which we are accepted is directly linked to our action on the ground.

I would now like to address how the Commission and EU Member States can improve humanitarian space.

With the European Consensus, the EU agreed to uphold the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. Your view was that a principled approach was an essential condition for humanitarian actors to operate in insecure environments.

The Consensus also made clear that EU humanitarian aid is not a crisis management tool.

With these policy clarifications, our expectations of the EU as a principled humanitarian actor rocketed. And some progress has been made.
First, the Consensus has strengthened the EU’s institutions for humanitarian aid, which now feature a Council Working Group as well as a Standing Rapporteur in the European Parliament.

Second, the Consensus has intensified the EU’s dialogue with humanitarian stakeholders, most recently in the run up to the mid-term review.

Third, the Consensus has stimulated humanitarian policy debate in the EU. NRC briefed the Council Working Group, COHAFA, on Sri Lanka last year. We would like to see COHAFA arranging regular debates with NGO and UN partners, so that we can bring situations of shrinking humanitarian space to the attention of Member States. But COHAFA also needs to evolve from being a discussion forum between Member States to becoming an influential humanitarian voice within the Council and the Political and Security Committee.

I would like to suggest three other measures that could help put the Consensus into practice:

First, Member States should look at the Consensus and ask themselves whether they have done their utmost to infuse their national policies with the principles and objectives of the Consensus. The Consensus makes a commitment not to politicise humanitarian aid – this also applies to national foreign policy. But as I suggested earlier, there is little evidence of the Consensus being applied in Afghanistan. The ISAF troop contributing nations count 25 EU Member States, many of which continue to use aid for political and military purposes, in clear contradiction to the Consensus. We believe strongly that the EU should keep humanitarian action completely separate from its political, military and development action worldwide, including in the European External Action Service, and, importantly, it should be seen to be doing so.

Second, the EU should ask itself whether it has really done everything it could or should to implement the guidelines on promoting compliance with International Humanitarian Law. Is it making use of all the means of action at its disposal in relations with third countries? If not, what more can be done? NGOs are constantly exposed to reprisals, threats and expulsion by governments if we dare to raise their non-compliance with International Humanitarian law. We need the EU to reason with host governments and to help lift the humanitarian access restrictions imposed on us.

Third, all components of the EU should abide by and advocate for the good humanitarian donorship principles. Most importantly, these principles clearly state that humanitarian funding should only be allocated in proportion to needs and on the basis of needs assessment – not for any other purpose, be it stabilisation, state building or counter-terrorism.

Finally, I would like to make some suggestions on how humanitarian organisations can work together to improve humanitarian space.

First, we should invest more in acceptance strategies to increase our access. The UN’s security management system obliges UN agencies to adopt a physical security posture when delivering aid, while many NGOs, including NRC, rely on acceptance. The ERC and the Humanitarian Coordinators are mandated to facilitate access through negotiating with parties to the conflict. I welcome Valerie Amos to her new position and call on her to multiply efforts in this regard. I hope the EU will support her in these efforts.

Second, we should invest more in engagement with all armed groups for humanitarian purposes, be they state or non-state armed groups. Talking to armed groups for the purpose of opening humanitarian access does not mean we accept their political agendas, or that we afford
them legitimacy. As humanitarians, we must resist the trend set by the United States Supreme Court
to criminalise aid.

**Third, we must strengthen humanitarian reform implementation in the field.** We need stronger
leadership and better coordination of our operations, especially in large-scale emergencies and in
countries where host governments prevent us from reaching the people in need. This requires a
dedicated HC who is supported by all members of the UN Country Team and OCHA. The HCs also
require effective management by the ERC.

**Fourth, we have to find effective methods of strategic cooperation within the UN - without
going down the track of structural integration.** UN integration compromises the ability of the
Humanitarian Coordinator to coordinate humanitarian activities. Often, the humanitarian agenda is
subordinated to political and military interests. This undermines the legitimacy of humanitarian
action. We must try to avoid further UN integration happening in Somalia, as it would certainly lead
to a deterioration of the humanitarian situation and a higher security risk for humanitarian workers.

**Fifth, it is essential that we uphold the separation between military, political, development
and humanitarian action in our field behaviour.** Humanitarian NGOs cannot act as military
contractors. Donors should keep military and development budgets separate, and resist channelling
aid to military projects. International military forces, including those of EU Member States, should
refrain from adopting a civilian posture, by driving white vehicles, distributing aid items to win
hearts and minds or other deliberate attempts to appear civilian.

**Sixth, a stronger collective effort should be made to abide by generally agreed civil-military
guidelines.** Any military contribution to humanitarian relief needs to be demand-driven and to
respect the principle of last resort. Recent practices such as the NATO air bridge in the Pakistan
flood response, did not respect the humanitarian principles, as NATO is widely considered a
belligerent party in Pakistan. Equally worrying is the fact that the UN did not stand united on
whether or not to make use of the air bridge, and that the ERC was not formally asked by NATO
whether its assistance was required.

Madame Chair, you allowed me ten minutes to cover a subject close to our hearts as humanitarian
actors. The reason I am here today is to bring the most important and fair-minded donor in the
humanitarian business the evidence of an NGO partner. I hope you appreciated that I came with the
concern of a committed advocate, the commitment of a true partner of the EU and with the
objective of strengthening our cooperation across the board.

Thank you, Madame Chair.