

### **Priorities and labels – on piracy and aid in Somalia**

*By Jesper H. L. Jørgensen, president of Médecins Sans Frontières Denmark*

Denmark has been a seafaring nation for centuries. Despite the country's modest size, Danish shipping companies account for 10 percent of oceangoing global trade. The recent Danish anti-pirate strategy is therefore a natural consequence of wanting to protect an important Danish industry.

The strategy however completely ignores the needs of the Somali population, who have been suffering from the consequences of civil war for more than two decades. The strategy is directed at helping some of the world largest shipping companies – not the starving population of Somalia.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been working in Somalia since 1991 providing medical humanitarian aid. In 2010 MSF among other things performed more than 480.000 consultations and gave nutritional support to more than 24.000 children. We have around 1.400 people providing assistance in Somalia. We also run a number of projects that assists Somalis fleeing the violence in their country to neighboring countries like Kenya, Ethiopia and Yemen.

Despite the big numbers we are unable to meet the needs of the population, which far exceeds our capacity. We continue to see increasing needs caused directly and indirectly by the violence in the country. The humanitarian situation in the country is dire and the needs are great – too great to be subordinated national Danish interests. The Somali population's primary needs are not jails or Danish gunships, but humanitarian aid, food and medicine.

### **Dangers of integrating aid and domestic security**

Another worrying aspect of the strategy is that it is part of an approach that combines the “...*political, military and humanitarian effort, as well as efforts in development policy in Somalia and throughout the region*”<sup>1</sup> and thereby integrating national economic interests, aid and military action.

It adds to the ongoing trend of blurring the lines between humanitarian aid and military action and the lines between helping those in need and seeing to your own national interests.

By adding to this blur the anti-pirate strategy complicates the already extremely difficult working conditions in Somalia for those who work to alleviate the consequences of the humanitarian catastrophe.

For humanitarian organizations like MSF our protection lies in the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence. Conflicting parties must know that we are not part of an agenda or take sides. If our impartiality can be questioned our safety is jeopardized and our ability to reach those most in need is compromised.

If we are perceived as being part of a conflict we risk being targeted by other parties. This compromises the safety of our national and expatriate staff and ultimately hinders us from delivering aid. Those who suffer the most are the people, who do not receive assistance – they are the real losers in this misuse of humanitarian principles.

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<sup>1</sup> Strategy for the Danish counter-piracy effort 2011-2014

MSF was forced to withdraw our expatriate staff from Somalia in 2008, when three colleagues were killed in a targeted attack. The security situation has forced our expatriate staff to visit for short periods of time and otherwise coordinate projects from our offices in Nairobi.

We keep working on a daily basis to ensure that the conflicting parties recognize us as an independent and neutral organization and allow us to assist the Somali population.

### **Dangerous labels**

In Denmark we see an increasing desire to make use of words like 'aid' and 'humanitarian' for projects that might include a civilian dimension but are aimed ultimately at increasing our own national security.

The distinction between aid and military action has been intentionally blurred by those who have had an interest in justifying military actions with a humanitarian vocabulary.

The latest example is the plan of the political opposition in Denmark to include a substantial budget of 1.5 billion Danish kroner (200 million euro) for security initiatives under the heading of aid and thereby ostensibly raising the share development aid make up of the total GDP.

It is tempting to aim for both security and stability alongside development and humanitarian aid. But making aid a part of military strategies to further Danish interests contradicts the very idea of humanitarian aid – to help those most in need. If our own security is our only concern, will we help those in need if their situation does not pose a risk to us? Are people in countries that have no pirates worth helping then? We cannot let this utilitarian thinking poison the humanitarian principles that Denmark have always held high.

### **Proportionality**

While the scourge of piracy is a real problem that warrants action the measures that are proposed are nowhere near proportional to the problem compared to the grave humanitarian crisis in Somalia and the attention and funding it receives. The consequences of piracy of Somalia's coast are - however awful - no match to the humanitarian crisis that unfolds on shore.

Finally we also need to stress that aid should not be part of military strategies because they will be subordinated military goals instead of aiding those in need. The blurring not only directs attention away from the needs of the recipients but also increases confusion and insecurity making it harder to reach those in need.

The Danish politicians need to acknowledge these issues and separate military action from aid and not forget the real needs of the people of Somalia.

*MSF have been working in Somalia since 1991. MSF does not receive institutional funds from the Danish government for projects in Somalia.*