

# CIMIC in an SFOR Peace Support Operation in Bosnia

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*Everything in this country could eventually end in total surprise and there was nothing that could not at any moment prove to be the opposite of what you could expect.*<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

It was with some hesitation that I accepted the invitation to make a contribution to this issue of *NL-ARMS*. The period during which I served in SFOR stood not on its own, for many went before us and have followed since. Too great an emphasis on one of many IFOR or SFOR tours does not do justice to everything that was achieved by others. Besides, I am convinced that each six-month period has its own emphases. In one, the orderly course of an election organised during that period is central, in another, the increasing numbers of returning refugees and displaced persons is the main issue. So there is the danger that a member of another SFOR contingent does not recognise his or her situation in what I am saying. I will limit myself to the period around the sending out of my battalion. On the basis of this limited experience it is still possible to draw several lessons that can be useful for the decision making with regard to CIMIC in the operational decision making process of commanders during peace operations. I have opted not to deal with the subject of CIMIC as an activity that stands on its own, but as a fully integrated part of the operational plan. Besides, this approach enables us to use examples from practice to give an idea of the many different aspects of CIMIC, which by some is seen as a panacea.

The most important objective of this article, therefore, is to share our experiences. The first part begins by stating the task that I received from my divisional commander, after which a short retrospect of our period, which ran from December 1997 until May 1998, is given. I will subsequently deal in some detail with the way in which we carried out that task. The questions that will be discussed there relate to the contribution that CIMIC can make to the realisation of the unit's mission and progress in the area. By means of concrete examples the concept of operations will be illustrated. In the last part I will try to present some tentative conclusions that can be instrumental in formulating lessons learned.

### 2. The Battalion

Before going on, it may be useful to explain how the battalion was composed and divided over the Area of Responsibility (AOR), an area of about 2,800 square kilometres in Bosnia. The battalion area was divided by the line of separation between the Republika Srpska and the Muslim-Croat Federation. The Serb part to the north was assigned to the Bravo team, whereas the Alpha team worked in the south. Both teams could dispose of armoured infantry and tanks, and the northern team, which had originally derived from a reconnaissance battalion, also had reconnaissance platoons in its organisation. At the location of Battalion HQ the elements of the battalion reserve, consisting of the battalion reconnaissance platoon, a heavy mortar platoon and a crowd and riot unit (a Royal Marines light infantry platoon), were accommodated. Furthermore, in the southern part of the battalion area the Logbase, which

contained the core of the logistics company, was located, along with the base of the Dutch contingent command. All told, the mechanised battalion had about 1,050 personnel, drawn from 57 different units of the armed forces.

### **3. The mission**

The battalion had to ensure a secure environment in the designated area and – insofar the capability allowed – support the other organisations that were involved in the rebuilding of Bosnia. The secure environment was mainly guaranteed by checking as strictly as possible the *entity armed forces* (EAF), the three local forces, that in the IFOR period (late 1995-1996) were still referred to as *former warring factions*. The guideline from the British divisional commander was clear: *zero tolerance*. This leaves little room for free interpretation and it was usually well understood by the three entities. In general, the task involved checking the compliance with all the stipulations that were laid down in the military chapter of the *General Framework Agreement for Peace* (GFAP), better known as the Dayton Peace Agreement. In the worst case this meant enforcing compliance with these agreements, if necessary with the use of violence. Thus, all movement of the three forces was bound by strict rules; no exercise or transport could take place without prior notification and permission from SFOR. The fact that the local population know that SFOR will not tolerate that military parties block the progress in Bosnia in any way, gives them the peace of mind to concentrate on constructive matters. That sounds simple but is not always easy to bring across to people. The local military parties know that SFOR is allowed to act in case of violation of the agreements and SFOR commanders always make it very clear that they will. What is crucial, however, is to convince the potential opponent that you will really act, and the longer a peace force is in a certain area, the more difficult that becomes. It requires of the new SFOR unit, from the first day of their arrival, a very resolute and professional execution of all activities. The first impression it makes determines to a large extent the success that can be attained in the six months to come. Respect has to be earned!

The second part of the task requires a more detailed discussion. SFOR was only one of the organisations that play a role in the international interplay of forces involved in the rebuilding of Bosnia. In very simple terms it can be said that the *secure environment*, which is SFOR's responsibility, is an important precondition for the successful execution of the other organisations' tasks. If, for instance, SFOR does not manage to guarantee safety during a visit of *Displaced Persons and Refugees* (DPREs)<sup>2</sup>, UNHCR cannot fulfil its task. Apart from this formal role there was an important secondary task, viz. the coordination with the dozens of *International and Non-Governmental Organisations* (IOs and NGOs) that operate in the battalion area. The objectives of these organisations are strongly divergent, but all will benefit from peace and quiet in the area. The exchange of information with SFOR allowed the giving of support to run more smoothly, but it also made it possible to gather extra information on the complex situation in the area.

### **4. A brief retrospect**

The battalion deployed to the area of operations shortly after elections had taken place. Our predecessors had done their utmost to monitor these elections adequately, as quiet proceedings were a major condition for the normalization of relations in the country. Our taking over and the initial phase of our tour, therefore, were directed at implementation of the election results. Soon a second development came up that was going to demand our attention more and more: the return of DPREs to the places from which they had been driven away or fled. In the beginning only orientation visits were made, but before long there were plans for the

definitive return to several locations in our area. And it did not end with plans only, the return really began. Not in large numbers in the beginning, but the success of the first return was essential for the confidence of other groups of DPRES.

The first disruption of this positive development took place in the night of 17 and 18 December 1997. In our sector two PIFWCs (Persons Indicted For War Crimes)<sup>3</sup> were arrested, one in Vitez and one in Ahmici. The arrest was carried out by an SFOR *special forces task force*. This seriously disrupted the peace and quiet in the area, in spite of the fact the action went flawlessly. The two PIFWCs were suspected of having been involved in the massacre of the Muslim population in the village of Ahmici on a dark night in April 1993. It had happened practically under the eyes of the British UN battalion in Vitez, just a few kilometers down the road.<sup>4</sup> Emotions among the local population after the nocturnal arrest ran high. Blockades were put up and the local radio called for demonstrations. The battalion was ordered to restore the disrupted relations as soon as possible.

A second disruption manifested itself in the relation with the three military parties in the area. The *train and equip* programme, developed by the Americans, began to take shape, but not without teething troubles. There was no coordination with SFOR. The programme was intended to bring about a balance of power among the three forces, so that they would not so easily resort to armed conflict against each other. Incidentally, the three parties appeared to think they were free to start on this programme without the permission of SFOR. This forced us repeatedly to apply the principle of *zero tolerance*.

As the judicial process at the International Court in the Hague progressed there were more and more requests on the battalion to secure the special investigation teams of the *International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia* (ICTY). They gathered evidence against the PIFWCs and checked the truth of the statements brought forward by all parties. In these actions, too, the village of Ahmici, where one of the arrests took place in December, regularly turned up.

A severe winter stayed away, which gave the population the chance to concentrate more on the near future in the coming year. The wish to return to their old homes was deeply rooted. When the first reconnaissance visits of DPs to their old villages and towns took place without too many great incidents, it became important to guarantee the *secure environment*. Certain parties in Bosnia benefit from the chaos in the country, so they have a great interest in disrupting public order and blocking progress. It occurred regularly that incidents were purposely set up in order to create a sense of insecurity among the population. The importance of acquiring a good insight in the objectives of all parties involved became increasingly evident.

## **5. The execution of the mission**

The task to ensure a *secure environment* in the designated area and, simultaneously, insofar the capability allowed, to support the other organisations involved in the rebuilding of Bosnia, must be seen as the long-term assignment for all SFOR battalions of the division (the *framework operation*). In an annex to the order the divisional commander indicates what specific emphases must be given. Special assignments, such as securing the arrest of PIFWCs, were issued in separate orders, in some cases under strict secrecy. That was not the case for the standard operation. He thought it of eminent importance that as many members of the battalion as possible knew about the principles and emphases of the execution of the task. As an illustration I have included my annex to the *Commander's Intent* for the second month of our period. In the first phase the emphasis was on making impression (“these men are not to be tampered with”), getting to know the area, making contacts, extending the network and, of course, preparing for the arrests and the consequences that would ensue from them.

**Annex D (Commander's Intent) to Operation Plan No. ../.  
Of C-11 (NL) MECHBAT (January 1998)**

**1. GENERAL**

After a flying start during which we were confronted by increased tension in the southern part of our AO<sup>5</sup> and the ensuing force protection measures, it is now time to make up the balance. We have familiarised with the contacts that we took over from our predecessors; we have also had the opportunity to leave our marks and we have got to know the terrain better. We have also experienced the difference between an event in our final exercise and reality. In short: we have come out of this first period stronger. We now have to carry on from here and fully concentrate on our assignments.

**2. MILITARY EMPLOYMENT**

Our main task is the checking of the EAF, so that they comply with the agreements in the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA). The consequences of the reorganisation of HVO and the ArBiH<sup>6</sup>, along with the fuzzy structure of the Train & Equip programme, necessitate an intensive monitoring in the southern part; random checks are not sufficient anymore. In the northern (Bosnian-Serb) part we must also have a complete picture, so that we are positive that all EAF are committing themselves to DPA. Only the conviction that SFOR is closely supervising all parties takes away all prejudice and offers a basis for (mutual) trust. This implies that every movement, every site inspection and every contact with representatives of the EAF must be meticulously prepared and executed.

Maintaining and increasing our level of readiness and particularly the preparedness for action through training and practice must be a standard part of our programme. The idea behind the employment of the battalion reserve is an example of that. Get to work with it! Show it to your environment, so that they see what we stand for. Invite them join in certain parts. But remain unpredictable as well; do not only patrol by day or in the evenings. Establish temporary posts and stay there for several days, of course after thorough preparation and reconnaissance. Our main task is to guarantee a secure environment, which will foster progress in Bosnia rather than stagnate it.

Only if we are fully credible with regard to the checking of the EAF and our military professionalism, will there be an opportunity for success in the rebuilding and support of civilian institutions.

**3. SUPPORT OF CIVILIAN INSTITUTIONS**

The civilian institutions can only do their job in a secure environment, which we guarantee through our presence and actions. Wherever possible we can support them: we have the means, the energy and an organisation that is able to translate planning into action (actions speak louder than words). I am fully prepared to employ the full extent of the battalion's resources, so also those of the logistics company, should a humanitarian organisation make a request for them. They know this by now and they will make more and more appeals on us for help. We have to be careful, though, not to fall into the dependency trap – we support, but it is they who are responsible.

A secure environment must be seen quite broadly. The return of the DPRES – the main issue of the coming months – will need all the support that we can give. Even if that means we have to resort to our fighting capacity, needless to say, always with a minimum of violence. We will have to see case by case what support is best suited to the situation. Through our liaison activities we can each time create the conditions by informing local authorities, CIVPOL and IPTF timely and pointing at their own responsibilities. But in the worst case we will intervene. That is extraordinarily difficult for the commander on the spot, but only then will our credibility stay intact. Before any visits take place we should be known, respected and familiar in the area.

We must help and encourage the local population to fend for themselves, but that principle may never be an excuse to stand by and watch when our efforts could make a difference. We will act upon each violation of the security of the local population and we will employ our means to guarantee a peaceful course of the visits and return of DPRES, even if this means the use of (minimum) violence.

#### 4. POINTS OF INTEREST IN OUR AO

The return of the DPRES has already begun, but it will greatly increase over the coming months, especially after the winter. This means we will have to prepare ourselves well. The difference between DPs and RES is that we will probably be better able to anticipate on the movements of the DPs, as they are still living somewhere in Bosnia, and want to return to their own, former houses or villages. The RES are abroad at this moment and will return without much prior notice. Because of that they may thwart existing plans of DPs, which is of course a major source of unrest, especially as there will be much financial support from the countries where the RES are at the moment.

This is one more reason to concentrate on the DPs. In order to make their return go smoothly we will have to know where they come from, where they want to go, where they want to make visits, what the sentiments are in the areas concerned, and whether there is enough housing capacity in those areas. All elements of the battalion have already started a first inventory. The LOs at team and battalion level are sounding their contacts and the patrols report on the situation in the villages. Our attention should not be directed at the large cities but the suburbs around them. Wherever possible we will improve the circumstances by means of projects, on the strict conditions, however, that the local authorities give their cooperation.

We intend to employ all our means. Projects support the civilian and international organisations in places where agreement has been reached on progress, in accordance with DPA. It seems that KNESEVO will qualify before long, so we must be ready to show some results there. The second municipality in this part of our AO, KOTO VAROS, still needs to be convinced, so that we can also give support there.

In the MKF sector<sup>7</sup> quite a few projects have been carried out and are still being developed. We can continue on that road, but the unilaterality with which the support has been given so far must decrease. Here, too, our projects must support those authorities that fully comply with all stipulations of DPA; an "open city"- declaration is not enough, in my opinion. They have to be truly an

open city and enable the return of DPs. We therefore have to check whether BUSOVACA, for instance, has already taken up and accommodated many DPs and whether they feel safe there.

Of course there are also projects that can go on, irrespective of the attitude of the authorities. They are projects that the whole population can benefit from, such as hospitals, schools, sports halls. This type of project is now being launched in the RS part of our AO, and through this we try to show the authorities that it is sensible to meet the criteria stated in DPA. Where the economy can be given a new impetus by, for instance, opening up remote villages, we can act. Sometimes our effort can be very down to earth, making use only of our own means; then we must certainly do it, on condition that we divide our efforts over the various entities. By making use of our info-ops and media channels we can also show this to all parties.

#### 5. SUMMARY

There is a lot of work to be done, and progress to be made, but there will also be disappointments. We have seen how vulnerable relations still are. We must also be able to show an understanding of this. One step back can sometimes be necessary and useful. 11 (NL) Mechbat is responsible for a secure environment in its AO, it maintains good contacts with all parties involved and militarily it remains at a high level by practice and training activities, by its unpredictability and reputation of good discipline. Remember that every military movement outside the base is in fact a message!

What is striking is that the fragment chosen is a mix of objectives, on the one hand, and guidelines on the execution, on the other. These guidelines are necessary to attain a unity of execution, not only within the Dutch battalion, but also with the units of other partaking countries. The borderlines between the areas of the units were not identical with the canton borders of Bosnia itself, and they certainly did not match the areas in which local military commanders had their responsibilities. The actions of SFOR personnel, therefore, had to show uniformity to a large extent, if only to prevent being played off against each other, an art that the various entities had mastered to perfection. Another important observation is that the military aspect of the assignment was completely interwoven with the more humanitarian task of supporting the other organisations in the area. Without the monitoring of the military forces, the peace and quiet necessary to restore faith in a better future are lacking.

#### 6. Military and humanitarian task

In this section I will try to illustrate by a number of practical examples how brittle and thin the line is between the two elements of the assignment. Right through the southern part of the Dutch sector runs the river Lasva, through the towns of Travnik and Vitez. The former city has been dominated of old by Muslims, the latter is known as a Bosnian-Croat enclave in Muslim territory. Vitez is identified as a hot spot in all threat analyses. Our predecessors had made an attempt to clean the Lasva, on request of the Travnik authorities. The Lasva was full of all sorts of waste, ranging from car wrecks to - as it appeared later - dumped ammunition. This latter fact was the reason that the Dutch cleaning operation had been abandoned by my predecessor. During my first visit to the mayor of Travnik he brought up the subject. It did not

come as a surprise, for the archive that had been handed down, showed that it was a recurrent item. The mayor asked me when we were going to finish the job. Well briefed by my CIMIC officer, I told him that he knew very well why we had abandoned the work, but that we were quite willing to give support to a cleaning action undertaken by the military personnel of the barracks in Travnik, in cooperation with their colleagues from Vitez. In the first instance that seemed a bridge too far, but after lengthy negotiations and endless patience of several functionaries from our battalion it worked out very well. Thus we brought together the former enemies.

An important lesson we learned from this action was that we made sure that in every following contact we had an idea beforehand who would have to bear the responsibility. Because of the enormous pressure that is put on the local administrators by the international community as well as their own, often short-fused, group, they have a tendency to hide behind SFOR or any other organisation. An impression of SFOR not keeping its promises is thus created and progress in the area is made dependent on SFOR action or inaction, whereas - as in this particular case- they themselves can and must take the responsibility. The British divisional commander used the term 'dependency trap' in relation to this phenomenon. A second important lesson concerns the importance of continuity. Six months is a long time to be from home, but the local population has all the time in the world and can afford - from whatever interest - to delay the progress desired so much by us. A good transfer of know-how and contacts is therefore essential. The excellent records of previously conducted conversations helped us to think up plans even before the first meeting with an administrator.

A second incident took place during the return of a Bosnian-Croatian family to an environment where mainly Muslims lived. Without any clear occasion the situation exploded. The visit had not been announced beforehand and the team responsible had not been able to take precautions. Afterwards it showed that the whole thing had been set up. The partial press that accompanied the family made an enormous fuss about it in the media. It was suggested that SFOR did support the return of Muslim families, but did not do anything for the other entities. In subsequent meetings it took quite an effort to give a more objective rendering of the incident in the local media. What helped us enormously was the fact that we could point out to them the positive effects of cooperation. An essential element of this cooperation is information; if you tell us beforehand, we will secure your visits in the same manner as anyone else's. Two weeks later another visit took place. There were many people about and the local press was there in full strength. A platoon post had been erected at the edge of the village a few days earlier and there was heavy day and night patrolling. On the hill opposite the village we set up the video-practice equipment, used for training tank crews, so that the whole visit could be recorded on videotape. These precautions proved to be adequate, to the disappointment, no doubt, of certain somewhat radical media. Actions like these were always supported by an information campaign, explaining what was going to happen or had happened, and most of all, why it was done the way it was done (information operation). Afterwards the unpleasant feeling stays: why was it necessary to make the first visit fail, bringing back the sense of insecurity among the own population. It is very important to find out what interests are at play for all the parties, but surprises cannot always be avoided.

An important lesson learned from this incident is that an even-handed attitude towards all parties is essential for the credibility of the peace force. Yet, there will always be certain parties that wish to put this impartiality to the test. Honest information and a way of operating that is clear for everyone, are good means to counter that situation.

A final word about NGOs. I have a great admiration for the sometimes highly idealistic organisations devoted to giving humanitarian aid. I also understand they are sometimes rather hesitant in their attitude towards the military personnel of a peacekeeping force. Where we can manage to improve the support by good coordination, much can be done, but the

dominant organisational urge of the military often does more harm than good. We have always welcomed those organisations that found the way to our camp and we helped them wherever we could, but the many others that chose to go their own, deserve as much respect.

## **7. Lessons learned**

There are several lessons from our experiences in Bosnia that can be taken into account and applied in a broader (in protracted operations) scope. Six months is too short a time to make clearly visible progress in a country that has been torn by ethnic strife since time immemorial. That fact alone must be a clear indication for commanders, and from that awareness they can formulate realistic targets for their 'tour of duty'. Targets that can only be reached beyond the limits of the six month-term of the mission of one commander, may only be set with the knowledge and approval of his successor or by order of a higher commander (national or international).

Progress is possible but requires continuity. The transfer of know-how and contacts from one battalion to the next is a good contribution to that end. It is important that the successive commanders show that they have integrated the experiences of their predecessors into their objectives and plans. A change in the way of operating is immediately noted in the immediate area in which the battalion is working. A later commander who brought up the idea to call in the help of the Dutch local and regional authorities, got the following reaction, 'That's what you did three years ago. Many promises were made, but we have never seen anything'. The credibility of the total Dutch contribution is at stake at such a moment.

Again and again we had occasion to ask ourselves why something happens in a given location at a given time. The interests of the various parties often give the clues to insight in why incidents occur as they do. It takes a huge effort to find out the agendas of all the actors. The intelligence organisation demands the continual attention of the commander, and this once again underlines the great importance of a careful transfer of gathered intelligence.

CIMIC activities must be fully integrated into the operational plan, as each mission confronts us with a multitude of actors. The fact that some of these actors recently were each other's opponents makes it even more complex. When planning, it is important to realize that while concepts like 'neutrality' or 'impartiality' have great value, circumstances and the assignments by order of the authorities sometimes require actions against one of the actors (partial, therefore). The example of the arrest of two Bosnian-Croatian PIFWCs illustrates this. Therefore it is better to use the term 'even-handedness' in the way of operating.<sup>8</sup> In operations such as these it is impossible to be fully impartial at all times, certainly in the eyes of the parties involved. They will always try to discredit the peace force. The commander has to make sure that negative effects of his actions are 'equally distributed among the parties' and that it is not always the same party that is portrayed as the scapegoat.

## **8. Conclusion**

Six months time is too short to make noticeable progress in a country where ethnic tensions go back since time immemorial. Progress is possible but requires continuity, and the transfer of know-how and contacts from one battalion to the next is a good contribution to that end. Again and again we have to ask ourselves why something happens in a given location at a given time. The interests of the various parties often give the clues to insight in why incidents occur as they occur. CIMIC activities must be fully integrated into the operational plan, as each mission confronts us with a multitude of actors. In the Balkans, the days are over that CIMIC was merely a PR instrument to demonstrate unity. The protracted presence of a

peacekeeping force cannot work without an intensive cooperation with the local population, its representatives and the IOs and NGOs on the spot.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> From *De Kroniek van Travnik* [The Travnik Chronicle] (1945) by Ivo Andric (1892-1975), author and Nobel Prize Winner, born in Travnik, Central Bosnia, situated in the sector of the Dutch Battalion.
  - <sup>2</sup> Displaced persons are those who, as a consequence of the war, have left hearth and home, but who are still somewhere in Bosnia. Refugees are those who fled and are now outside Bosnia. In connection with this the terms 'homeless' and 'refugees' are sometimes used.
  - <sup>3</sup> PIFWC stands for *persons indicted for war crimes*. ICTY has compiled a list of persons who have been indicted for war crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia.
  - <sup>4</sup> The events that took place in this period are described quite movingly in the book by the commander of the British battalion, Bob Stewart, *Broken Lives*. It is not in stock anymore. The book is available in the library of the Royal Netherlands Military Academy.
  - <sup>5</sup> AO stands for Area of Operations, comparable to the Dutch 'gebied van verantwoordelijkheid' (Area of Responsibility).
  - <sup>6</sup> HVO and ArBiH are the two armed forces of the Bosnian-Croatian and Muslim entities, respectively.
  - <sup>7</sup> Bosnia is divided into two parts, the Republika Srpska (RS) and the Muslim-Croatian Federation (MKF). Of old the three entities were living all over the country, but because of the war most Bosnia Serbs have gone to live in the RS and the other two groups in the MKF. The return to the former homes was one of the main objectives of the international community.
  - <sup>8</sup> The British use 'even-handedness' in cases like these, a term which, in my opinion, is more appropriate.