Insecurity Insight

Data on People in Danger

**Humanitarian staff security in armed conflict**

Policy implications resulting from changes in the operating environment for humanitarian agencies

*Insecurity Insight Policy Brief*

Christina Wille and Larissa Fast

The number of aid workers killed and injured has risen to unprecedented levels in recent years. In 2011, the deadliest year on record for aid worker fatalities and injuries so far, on average one aid worker was injured every three days and one killed every five days. This represents a three-fold increase in deaths and a six-fold increase in injuries since 2001, when the death of an aid worker was reported every two weeks and injuries to a staff member every five weeks. Numbers of fatalities and injured personnel increased noticeably after 2006 (see figures 1 and 2). Some of the increase may be due to advances in information technology, more consistent incident reporting, and greater awareness of security issues. The overall trend, however, is not in doubt.

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**Figure 1**

Absolute numbers of reported deaths among international and national staff, 1996-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>International Staff</th>
<th>National Staff</th>
<th>Unspecified Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996-2000</td>
<td>17 (46%)</td>
<td>7 (19%)</td>
<td>15 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2005</td>
<td>9 (13%)</td>
<td>47 (66%)</td>
<td>15 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2010</td>
<td>68 (15%)</td>
<td>325 (71%)</td>
<td>64 (14%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>International Staff</th>
<th>National Staff</th>
<th>Unspecified Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996-2000</td>
<td>13 (68%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>5 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2005</td>
<td>28 (47%)</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
<td>238 (63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2010</td>
<td>64 (14%)</td>
<td>28 (47%)</td>
<td>104 (23%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Figure 2**

Absolute numbers of personnel injured among international and national staff, 1996-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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The dramatic increase in aid worker fatalities and injuries occurred against the background of an overall decrease in armed conflict-related deaths over the past decades. According to the Human Security Report (HSR) 2009/2010, the number of armed conflicts has declined, as have battle-related deaths per armed conflict and the indirect civilian death toll from elevated mortality during periods of armed conflict. However, more recent data not available at the time of the publication of the 2009/2010 Human Security Report show a small rise in battle-related deaths since 2006 (see figure 3). No corresponding figures are available for the numbers of indirect deaths since then. The decline in armed conflict deaths was accompanied by an increase in annual humanitarian aid spending among bilateral donors from about one billion USD during the 1980s to five billion in the 1990s, and over ten billion since 2010.

Figure 3  **Number of reported battle-related deaths and reported number of security events affecting the delivery of humanitarian aid, 1996-2010**

Number of battle-related deaths are shown on the left axis and number of security incidents affecting the delivery of aid on the right axis

![Figure 3](image)

Sources: UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset v.5-2012, Uppsala Conflict Data Program, www.ucdp.uu.se, Uppsala University, accessed 21 February 2013, and Insecurity Insight Security in Numbers Database (SiND) as of September 2012.

Figure 4  **Amount of bilateral donor spending on humanitarian aid (in USD billions) and reported number of security events affecting the delivery of humanitarian aid, 1996-2010**

Amount of aid in billion USD is shown on the left axis and number of security incidents affecting the delivery of aid on the right axis

![Figure 4](image)

As the Human Security Report pointed out, an increase in humanitarian activity is one of the key factors helping to reduce the number of people who die in armed conflict. Numerous studies, such as epidemiological surveys of refugee and IDP populations, have shown the direct and positive impact of humanitarian work upon conflict-affected populations by demonstrating, for example, the rapid decline in mortality rates following the provision of humanitarian aid.4

In this policy brief, we argue that the increasing victimisation of aid workers is the flipside of the success of humanitarian efforts to reduce the number of deaths in armed conflict. Thus the protection of aid workers is linked to the protection of civilians more generally. Peacekeeping and humanitarian missions have saved lives, but they also place aid workers in greater danger.

Three additional reasons help to explain the increased numbers of aid workers being killed and injured:

• a general increase in interventions in the form of peacekeeping missions and humanitarian aid in highly volatile contexts;
• a slight increase in the battle-related death toll since 2006; and
• the location and nature of fighting during some of the most recent high intensity conflicts.

This policy brief summarises findings on the impact of urban armed conflict and the use of explosive weapons on humanitarian security. The main data are presented in the report ‘Operating in Insecurity’, which analyses shifting patterns of insecurity for aid actors between 1996 and 2010 using the SiND data (Wille and Fast 2013).

The Security in Numbers Database (SiND)

The SiND is a collaborative project between Insecurity Insight and ten humanitarian agencies. It combines detailed information on security incidents from SiND partner INGOs with media-reported data for all humanitarian providers, including the UN and Red Cross organisations. (For more, see http://insecurityinsight.org/projectshumanitarian.html).

The SiND defines a ‘security event affecting humanitarian work’ as an incident that affects staff, infrastructure and/or the ability to deliver aid. It includes deaths, injuries, and kidnappings of staff, damage to infrastructure or aid agency property, as well as measures taken by agencies or external actors that affect the planned delivery of aid (e.g. suspension of programmes or inability to deliver food or medical care as intended due to insecurity). Security incidents are the result of the interplay between an agency’s presence (and thus exposure to insecurity) and vulnerability (influenced by security measures, including acceptance strategies, and individual behaviours) as well as the perpetrator’s capability (referring to the ability of the perpetrator to take action against an aid agency) and intention (which may be indiscriminate or deliberately targeted and driven by various motives). The information is compiled in an event-based relational database that records and analyses key characteristics of each event: the ‘Six Ws’ – who did what to whom, where, when and with what weapon.
As of 30 September 2012, the database contained 3,177 events dating back to the mid-1990s. Of these, 747 (25%) are defined as ‘severe events’ in which at least one staff member was killed, injured or kidnapped between 1996 and 2010. These 747 events affected 2,084 staff members and resulted in 565 deaths, 529 injured, and 896 kidnapped aid workers. The remaining 75% percent are non-severe events, which include threats, damage to property, loss of infrastructure, or the inability to carry out programming as intended. The findings from this policy brief are based upon the 747 severe events in the SiND, of which 73% come from media reports.

- **Humanitarian aid providers are increasingly affected by active fighting**

Armed conflicts that took place between 2006 and 2010 had a greater impact on the well-being of aid workers than those between 1996 and 2005. Between 2006 and 2010, reported deaths and injuries sustained during periods of active fighting – defined as events occurring during military engagement between two or more conflict parties, or as a result of shelling or bombardment during a period of intensified violence – rose among humanitarian staff as compared to previous years. The SiND does not include any records of aid workers killed or injured in active fighting between 1996 and 2000. In contrast, between 2006 and 2010, 80 such events were recorded. Moreover, the nature of conflicts in which humanitarian workers are killed or injured has changed. The 11 severe incidents recorded during periods of active fighting between 2001 and 2005 tended to occur in the context of highly localised military confrontations, such as between rebels and government forces or even infighting between refugee populations. Such events were reported in Liberia, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Chad. Between 2006 and 2010, aid workers were injured and killed in such local skirmishes in Afghanistan, Somalia, and the DRC. Additionally, since 2006, 47 of the 80 severe events during active fighting that involve the death of or injury to a staff member occurred during intensive military campaigns covered by the global media, such as the Sri Lankan armed forces defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in northern Sri Lanka in 2009 and the Israeli Defence Forces ‘Operation Cast Lead’ in the Gaza Strip in 2008-2009. This suggests that humanitarian providers are more present during periods of active fighting and therefore more exposed to insecurity today than in the past, particularly during periods of intensified violence.

Available information on humanitarian aid spending supports this observation. Humanitarian funds for the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) rose to over 700 million in 2009 from around 300 million in previous years, and declined back down to 300 million in 2010. In Sri Lanka, humanitarian aid increased from around 190 million USD in 2007 to over 200 million USD in 2008 (229 million) and 2009 (207 million), yet decreased to 186 million USD in 2010. Both were locations in which aid workers died in military campaigns in 2008 and 2009, the years of highest spending for each location. Moreover, humanitarian aid spending is highest in countries experiencing both conflict and natural disasters: Pakistan, Somalia, and Afghanistan were the highest recipients of net humanitarian aid in 2011. These countries are also some of the most dangerous for aid workers.
We suggest that this trend is the result of an increasing public expectation that vulnerable populations should receive assistance during periods of intensified violence. Media coverage of human suffering contributes to sustained public support and pressure for assistance, especially during acute humanitarian crises. In addition, donors are increasingly determined to engage in fragile and conflict-affected states and aid agencies are less inclined to withdraw from high-risk contexts. As a result, more aid providers deliver services in the midst of active fighting and highly volatile contexts.

- Humanitarian aid providers increasingly experience severe security incidents in urban environments

Although more than half of all events affecting the delivery of aid continue to occur in rural areas, the proportion of events in cities of more than 100,000 people (defined as ‘urban events’) has grown from around 15 percent (1996-2000) to nearly 30 percent of all events (2001-2010). In absolute numbers, events from urban areas increased sevenfold between 2001-2005 and 2006-2010 (see figure 5).

This trend may be partly a reflection of global urbanisation. According to UN statistics, since 2009 the number of people living in urban areas has exceeded the number of those living in rural areas. Rapid urbanisation has increased the absolute numbers of highly vulnerable people in urban areas, including refugee populations. According to anecdotal evidence from service providers, humanitarian agencies have responded with more urban support programmes. In addition, the increase in urban events likely reflects higher levels of crime, which increasingly affects aid agencies. As analysis of urban security events has shown, ordinary crime is an important subcategory of security events (Wille and Fast 2010). This analysis identifies security events from urban warfare as an important new trend. Active fighting in urban or other populated areas, such as refugee camps that are more akin to an urban environment, presents a particularly potent security challenge for aid workers.
The use of explosive weapons in populated areas affects humanitarian staff security and well-being and affects their ability to deliver aid to the civilian population.

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas is one reason for the rising death toll among humanitarian workers between 2006 and 2010. Since 2006, explosive weapons have killed 26 aid workers during periods of active fighting, a phenomenon not reported previously in the SiND. Between 2006 and 2010, the use of explosive artillery shells, mortar rounds, and bombardment employed in military campaigns caused 30 percent (22 of 72) of aid worker fatalities reported during active fighting.11 This is a recent development that contrasts with the period 2001-2005, when firearm use was responsible for all fatalities during active fighting.

The rising death toll from shelling and bombardment has reduced the statistical impact of other explosive weapons on humanitarian aid. During the 1990s, landmines were responsible for 66 percent of events in which explosive weapons killed an aid worker, usually in rural environments, but this proportion fell to 3.9 percent for the period 2006-2010. Unrelated to developments in urban warfare, the practice of suicide bombing has increased to approximately nine percent of events in which explosive weapons were used for the period 2006-2010 (up from zero in 1996-2000).

The decline in the impact of landmines on the safety of humanitarian workers is a positive development that likely reflects years of global effort to reduce the use of landmines around the world. The use of explosive weapons, especially in urban or other populated areas, as part of military campaigns remains a concern with respect to the delivery of humanitarian aid. The blast and fragment projection caused by explosive weapons affects civilians and aid workers in the vicinity of the explosion and the nature of such weapons makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the user to distinguish between a neutral humanitarian provider and a military target. Explosive weapons have the capacity to damage or destroy infrastructure, increasing both the need for humanitarian aid and making its delivery more difficult. Explosive weapons tend to leave behind unexploded remnants, which also hinders humanitarian access. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has raised this issue, in particular with respect to the provision of healthcare during armed conflict.12 Explosive weapons account for an increasing share of the global burden of conflict and place aid workers at particular risk.
Implications

Since the end of the Cold War, interventions in the form of peacekeeping missions and humanitarian aid have reduced the death toll resulting from armed conflict. Humanitarian efforts have positively affected this trend, but have exposed agencies and their staff members to the risks of operating in more dangerous environments. As a result, increasing numbers of aid workers pay the ultimate price.

The greater presence of aid workers combined with slight rise in battle deaths since 2006 and changes in the location and weapon use in violent contexts have contributed to the rising toll of deaths and injuries among aid workers during periods of intensified conflict. These trends must be understood in order to devise effective security and policy responses. The nature and severity of the problem goes beyond the capacity of individual agencies to respond, and requires concerted action by the international community within a broad policy framework.

Priorities for action include:

For policy makers
- The security of aid workers is usually framed in terms of occupational hazards and legal obligations related to the ‘duty-of-care’. Interpreting security concerns for aid workers within the context of the protection of civilians opens the door for a broader advocacy campaign related to the protection of all civilians. Thus, advocacy about the protection of aid workers could and should be framed within the broader context of the protection of civilian populations (see Fast, nd), particularly with regard to the use of explosives.
- Advocacy about the protection of civilians has so far neglected the detrimental effects of the use of explosive weapons in populated urban areas on the security on humanitarian aid providers and the added implications for the well-being of civilians. The rising death toll of humanitarian aid workers from explosive weapons during military campaigns supports calls for increased controls on the use of indiscriminate explosive devices, particularly in urban areas.

For aid donors
- Donors need to appreciate the dynamic nature of contextual risks for humanitarian workers who remain engaged on the ground during periods of armed conflict. Consequently, they should review their operating requirements and financial instruments to ensure that they contain appropriate provisions for the cost of effective and flexible risk management that allow humanitarian agencies to respond to a rapidly evolving context, and to include security management contingencies that reflect these needs.

For humanitarian agencies
- Humanitarian providers should be conscious of ‘victim costs’, in particular for national staff, to ensure life insurance and other benefits are available to families of staff members working in areas of intensified conflict.
References

Fast, Larissa. nd. Aid in Danger: Reclaiming humanity amidst the crisis in humanitarianism. Forthcoming book manuscript.


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2 Human Security Report Project. 2010. Human Security Report 2009/2010: The Causes of Peace and the Shrinking Costs of War. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press and Simon Fraser University, Human Security Report Project. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) defines an armed conflict as ‘a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory over which the use of armed force between the military forces of two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, has resulted in at least 25 battle-related deaths each year’ (p. 5). Battle-related deaths refer to those deaths caused by the warring parties that can be directly related to combat activity. For the UCDP, this includes traditional battlefield fighting, guerrilla activities (e.g. hit-and-run attacks/ambushes) and all kinds of bombardments of military bases, cities and villages etc. Urban warfare (bombs, explosives, and assassinations) does not resemble what happens on a battlefield, but such deaths are considered to be battle-related. The target for the attacks is either the military forces or representatives for the parties, though there is often substantial collateral damage in the form of civilians being killed in the crossfire, indiscriminate bombings, etc. All fatalities – as well as civilian – incurred in such situations are counted as battle-related deaths’ (p. 6). UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset Codebook: Definitions, Sources and Methods for the UCDP Battle-related Death Estimates. Version 5.0, August 2012. Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University. [http://www.pcr.uu.se/digitalAssets/120/120451_codebook-ucdp-battle-related-deaths-dataset-v.5-2012.pdf](http://www.pcr.uu.se/digitalAssets/120/120451_codebook-ucdp-battle-related-deaths-dataset-v.5-2012.pdf), accessed 6 March 2013.


8 For example the OECD has established the ‘New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States’ process to assist bilateral donors in developing consistent approaches for assistance to weak states. [http://www.oecd.org/international%20dialogue/anewdealforengagementinfragilestates.htm](http://www.oecd.org/international%20dialogue/anewdealforengagementinfragilestates.htm).


10 For discussions of the changing urban context for humanitarian interventions see for example the blog on the ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action) website. [http://www.alnap.org/ourwork/urban.aspx](http://www.alnap.org/ourwork/urban.aspx).

11 Ten were killed by artillery, four by missiles, two by aerial bombs and one from a mortar. There are four additional deaths from explosives during periods of active fighting, three from unspecified event in active fighting, and one from a grenade.


13 The UN Secretary General Report on the Protection of Civilians has mentioned the use of explosives of civilians in populated areas and the impact on infrastructure and healthcare buildings, as well as safe corridors to ensure access for humanitarian providers. The crucial link between the inability to distinguish between a humanitarian and military actor when using explosives in populated areas yet needs to be made. UN Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict. 22 May 2012. S/2012/376. New York: UN Security Council. [http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_4150.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_4150.pdf)

14 Victim costs refer to the losses that victims suffer, whether tangible (e.g., financial) or intangible (e.g., pain and suffering). See Christopher Finucane. 2013. The cost of security risk management for NGOs. EISF Report. London: European Interagency Security Forum (EISF), p. 9. [http://www.eisf.eu/resources/item.asp?id=7488](http://www.eisf.eu/resources/item.asp?id=7488)