

## Providing aid in insecure environments: 2009 Update

Trends in violence against aid workers and the operational response

Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer and Victoria DiDomenico

### Key messages

- Attacks against aid workers have increased sharply since 2006, with a particular upswing in kidnapping.
- Surges in attack rates were seen especially for NGO international (expatriate) staff and UN local contractors.
- The three most violent contexts for aid work – Sudan (Darfur), Afghanistan and Somalia – accounted for more than 60% of violent incidents and aid worker victims.
- Attacks on aid workers in the most insecure contexts were increasingly politically motivated, reflecting a broad targeting of the aid enterprise as a whole.
- Despite some major strides in security management, aid organisations face significant dilemmas in certain threat environments, with short-term adaptations often compromising longer-term security.

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### Introduction

In 2008, 260 humanitarian aid workers were killed, kidnapped or seriously injured in violent attacks. This toll is the highest of the 12 years that our study has tracked these incidents. The absolute number of attacks against aid workers has risen steeply over the past three years, with an annual average almost three times higher than the previous nine years. Relative rates of attacks per numbers of aid workers in the field have also increased — by 61%. The 2008 fatality rate for international aid workers exceeds that of UN peacekeeping troops.

This HPG Policy Brief updates the findings from the 2006 report *Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: Trends in Policy and Operations*. Its analysis follows on from that report, providing the global incident data for the last three years. It identifies new trends and highlights

issues in the three most violent contexts for aid workers at present: Sudan (Darfur), Afghanistan, and Somalia.

### Methodology<sup>1</sup>

Like the 2006 report, this paper is based on data from the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSDB), created as part of an independent research project jointly conducted by the Overseas Development Institute in London and the Center on International Cooperation in New York, and kept current since then. The research team also conducted a new series of interviews with humanitarian programme and security professionals and drew upon recent additions to the literature. Starting in 2006,

<sup>1</sup> An extensive methodology detailing the definitions and parameters of the study can be found in the 2006 report, available at [http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/aid\\_insecure\\_environments.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/aid_insecure_environments.html).

the AWSO has also documented instances when insecurity has restricted access to populations in need of assistance.

The incidents recorded in the AWSO were compiled from systematic monitoring of public reports, augmented and verified by information provided directly from organisations and field-level security consortia. They comprise major security incidents affecting the staff of aid organisations working in humanitarian relief, defined as killings, kidnaps and attacks resulting in serious injury. For each incident recorded from 1997 to 2008, the dataset includes the number of aid workers affected (victims); their institutional affiliation (UN/Red Cross/NGO/other [donor government, international financial institute]); their nationality (national/international staff); the outcome of the incident (number of victims killed/injured/kidnapped); the tactic or means of violence (ambush/armed incursion, etc.); and the country or emergency in which the incident took place. Where possible, the motive for the incident was also recorded as it related to the victim's status as an aid worker (i.e., if the attack was purely economic or opportunistic in nature, whether political motivations were a factor, or if the victim's status as an aid worker was incidental or irrelevant to the violence, as in a crossfire or landmine incident).

In addition, the study benefited from extensive research to quantify the population of aid workers in the field over time. By calculating a reasonable estimate of this humanitarian 'denominator', the study has, for the first time, been able to show the relative rates of aid worker attacks, and track changes year to year.

### Caveats

Although there is still no universal platform to record security incidents within the international humanitarian community, on an agency level incident reporting has improved considerably over the past decade. Acknowledging that the earlier years may not as accurately reflect the number of incidents, especially for national staff, data comparisons are weighted more heavily to later years (post-2000), when both reporting and web-based media sourcing became more comprehensive.

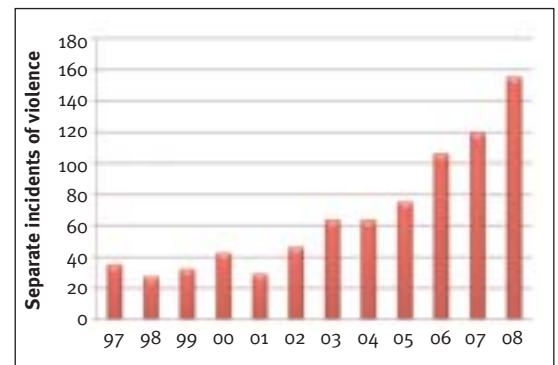
Like the incident data, the aid worker population estimate (our 'denominator') is retroactively refined and updated as new information comes in. For this update, the population estimate was recalculated and adjusted upwards from the previous one, although the overall rate of change over time remained largely the same. Readers should also note that the numbers cited here may differ from those found in other studies and reports of aid worker

violence, owing to variations in the definition of what constitutes an aid worker. For example, we do not count peacekeeping or human rights personnel or UN personnel outside of the UN aid agencies. However, we do count individuals that have been contracted to undertake work for an aid agency, such as drivers and guards. We also employ a distinct definition of 'major security incidents'. Kidnapping is counted here only if the victim was held for over 24 hours, and incidents are only recorded if they result in a death, abduction or serious injury.<sup>2</sup>

### Aid worker attacks: global statistics

Unquestionably, the number of attacks in which aid workers were killed, kidnapped or injured has risen significantly since 1997, with a particularly sharp increase over the past three years. Figure 1 shows the number of separate incidents during the years 1997–2008 in which one or more aid workers were seriously harmed by deliberate violence.

**Figure 1: Absolute numbers of violent incidents affecting aid workers**



The average number of major incidents for each of the past three years (127) represents an 89% increase from the prior three-year period, 2003–2005, and a 177% increase from the annual average going back to 1997. The comparative increase can be seen in Table 1.

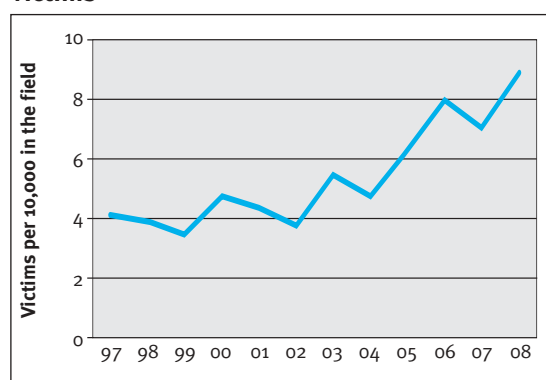
Of course, as humanitarian funding has increased and organisations have grown, so the size of the 'humanitarian footprint' has also increased. This does not explain the rise in incidents, however. When measured against the total number of aid workers in the field, the number of victims has outstripped the expanding aid worker population (which topped 290,000 in 2008), resulting in a rising rate of attacks per 10,000 workers, as shown in Figure 2.

<sup>2</sup> This study uses the term kidnapping, recognising that the terms *abduction* and *hostage-taking* are also common parlance. Although technically the terms are different, for the purposes of this study 'kidnapping' denotes any incident where the victim was held for over 24 hours, regardless of whether a ransom (or other) demand was made.

**Table 1: Summary incident statistics**

|                          | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | Annual averages |           |
|--------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-----------------|-----------|
|                          |      |      |      |      |      |      | 2003–2005       | 2006–2008 |
| Number of incidents      | 63   | 63   | 75   | 106  | 119  | 155  | 67              | 127       |
| Total aid worker victims | 143  | 125  | 172  | 239  | 206  | 260  | 147             | 235       |
| Total killed             | 87   | 56   | 54   | 86   | 79   | 122  | 66              | 95        |
| Total injured            | 49   | 46   | 95   | 87   | 84   | 76   | 63              | 82        |
| Total kidnapped          | 7    | 23   | 23   | 66   | 43   | 62   | 18              | 57        |

**Figure 2: Relative number of aid worker victims**



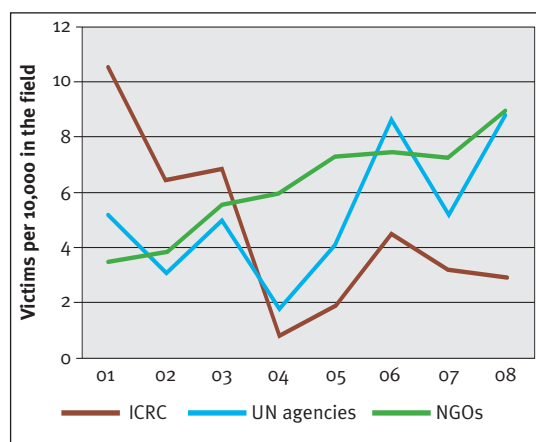
The 2006 report identified a trend in increasing casualty rates for national (locally hired) staff, relative to their numbers in the field, compared with international (expatriate) staff. This was attributed to organisations' increased use of remote management and outsourcing of aid delivery in dangerous environments, fuelled by the (often faulty) assumption that nationals are less likely to be victims of violence than expatriate staff. Over the long term this trend still holds, but the past three years have also witnessed a sharp increase in the rate of attacks against international staff, which heretofore had been declining. As subsequent findings illustrate, this is symptomatic of a growing politicisation of violence against aid operations in a small number of highly insecure contexts.

**Figure 3: Breakdown of national and international staff rates**



Of the three main categories of humanitarian organisation – UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)<sup>3</sup> and NGOs – only the ICRC showed a decline in attack rates over the past three years. Both NGOs and the UN saw a rise in attacks relative to their field staff numbers. The rise in attacks on UN aid workers is mainly attributable to the heavy casualties suffered by national staff and contractors, particularly truck drivers. The incident rate for the UN's international staff declined slightly, indicating that the marked rise in the casualty rate among international staff was borne primarily by NGOs.

**Figure 4: UN, ICRC and NGO rates**



ICRC rates have declined over the past few years, though caution is needed in making attributions here. The ICRC's field staff population is relatively small compared to the other two types of institution, which exaggerates the relative effects of small changes in numbers. It is noteworthy, however, that the ICRC has made significant progress in reshaping its security management strategy, including active dialogue with potential threat sources and an emphasis on its unique mandate as an independent and strictly neutral entity.

<sup>3</sup> Although the AWSI tracks attacks against the International Federation of the Red Cross and National Red Cross and Red Crescent societies their rates cannot be determined due to a lack of data on the number of personnel employed by the societies worldwide, and so are not included in the analysis.

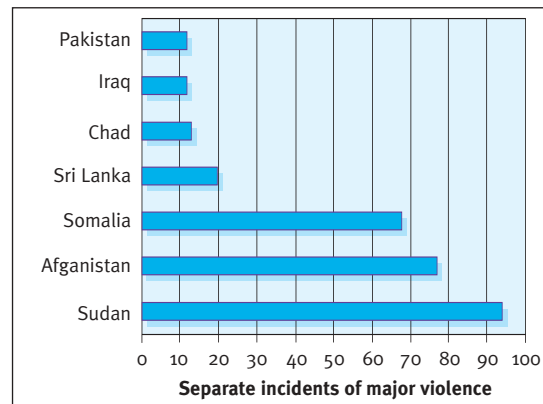
Looking at the attack rates of individual organisations does not reveal strong patterns that would suggest that certain profiles or approaches are more likely to be targeted. From a preliminary review of individual agency rates, it does not appear that organisations which we might expect to be more popular targets – faith-based agencies, vocal advocacy actors or US-based organisations, for instance – were experiencing a higher rate of attacks compared to the rest of the community.<sup>4</sup>

**Analysis**

*Concentration of incidents in a few high violence contexts*

Three-quarters of all aid worker attacks over the past three years took place in just six countries, all with ongoing armed conflicts (in descending order: Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Chad, Iraq and Pakistan). A closer examination of incident rates reveals that the spike over the past three years was driven by violence in just three contexts: Sudan (Darfur), Afghanistan and Somalia. This is a more pronounced clustering of incidents in a smaller group of countries than seen in previous years.

**Figure 5: Highest-incident countries 2006–2008**



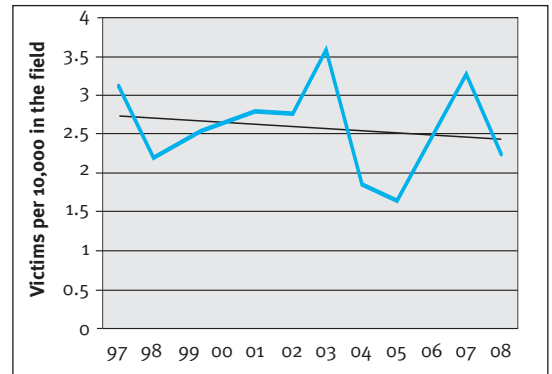
When controlling for aid worker victims in these contexts, the long-term overall major attack rate for humanitarians is actually declining, with an average of 2.4 aid worker victims per 10,000 over the past three years, down from 2.7 in the previous three-year period. Across the rest of the world, then, it would seem that the security situation for humanitarians is improving, albeit only slightly.

This finding represents both good news and bad for the international aid community. On the one hand, it suggests that improved security awareness and management may have helped arrest and possibly reverse the long-term general rise in

<sup>4</sup> A planned study looking at country-specific attack rates for organisations, factoring in details of their programming and presence, will be required to generate more definitive findings.

casualty rates that was evident in 2005. At the same time, however, it highlights the dearth of viable options to keep staff secure in the most volatile contexts, where humanitarian aid is most needed.

**Figure 6: Global rates excluding Afghanistan, Somalia, and Sudan**



Although complete, reliable numbers for the humanitarian aid worker population are not available for all three of these specific cases, we are able to ascertain that the attack rates are inordinately high relative to other settings. In Sudan (Darfur) in 2006–2008, the annual average attack rate was 27/10,000 (it has been decreasing from a high in 2006 of 66/10,000).

In Somalia, looking at just UN workers, the attack rate in 2008 was 40.9/1,000 in total, and 46.7/1,000 for Somali nationals alone (equivalent to a staggering 409 and 467/10,000). In Afghanistan, the increasing number of incidents and victims, combined with the fact that organisations are reporting a general retrenchment to provincial capitals and a shrinking of the overall field presence, suggest that rates are likewise far higher than average. These countries have in common a setting of active conflict, with broad swathes of territory where attacks can be perpetrated with impunity. While most attacks in Sudan are attributed to common banditry, in Afghanistan and Somalia criminality has colluded with political forces pursuing national (and in the case of al-Qaeda, global) aims. To perpetrators in these areas, targeting aid organisations can gain them access to economic resources, remove a perceived threat to control over a local area and/or make a potent political statement.

*Tactics*

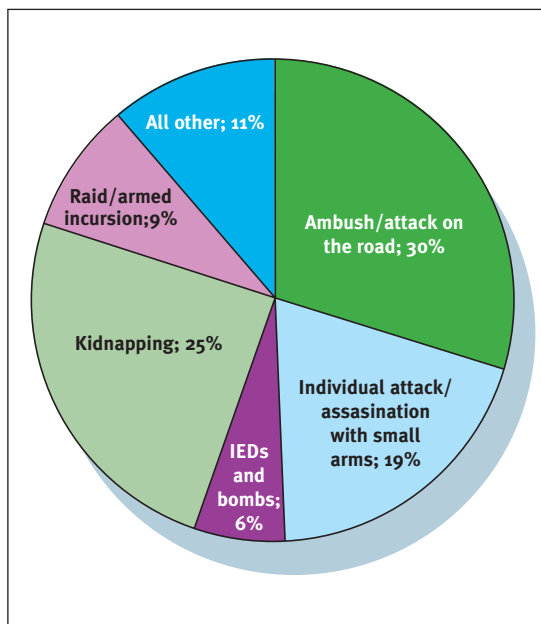
Kidnapping of aid workers has increased by over 350% in the past three years, a greater rise than any other tactic or method of violence. Kidnappers favour international staff over nationals as victims, because they are both more valuable in terms of ransom and make for a more visible political

statement. This has led in some instances, notably Afghanistan, to cooperation between criminal elements and political groups/militias, where a kidnapping will be perpetrated by opportunistic criminals who then seek to barter the hostage to a group seeking to advance a political or military agenda.

Six aid workers were killed in suicide bombings over the past three years, a tactic that did not affect aid workers before 2003. In Afghanistan and Iraq, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were used for the first time in attacks on aid workers.

The most dangerous location for aid workers in 2006–2008 remained the road, with ambushes (including carjacking, banditry and other vehicle-based attacks) by far the most common context for violence. The majority of kidnaps took place while the victim was travelling in a vehicle.

**Figure 7: Methods and tactics of violence against aid workers 2006–2008**

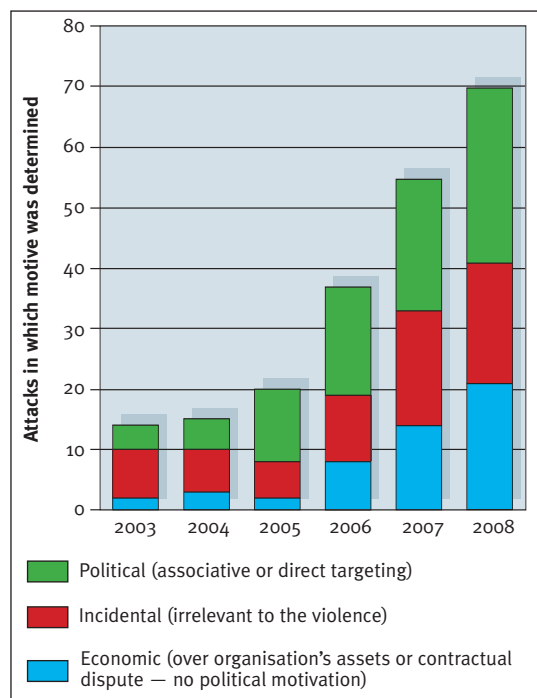


**Motives**

Taking into account the contexts where incident rates have been rising, the apparent targeting of internationals and the means by which violence is being perpetrated (i.e., the emergence of suicide bombings and targeted IEDs and the steep rise in kidnappings, which link criminal and political actors), it is reasonable to conclude that the increase in violence against aid workers seen during the past three years is at least partly politically oriented. For many incidents it is difficult to ascertain a motive; in 55% of the incidents recorded in the AWSD for 2008, for example, the motive is labelled as ‘undetermined’. For the remainder, however, reasonable determination can be made

based on incident reports and the judgments of the original reporting entities.<sup>5</sup> Of these incidents, the analysis reveals that political motivations have increased relative to incidents that were purely economically motivated, or in which the victim’s role as an aid worker was incidental to the violence. Politically motivated incidents rose from 29% of the known total in 2003 to 49% in 2008.

**Figure 8: Motives behind attacks**



According to the Afghanistan NGO Security Office (ANSO), a pronounced shift has occurred over the last two years in Afghanistan. In 2007, 61% of incidents were attributed to criminals and 39% to political opposition groups. The ratio switched in 2008, however, with 65% of incidents believed to be the work of armed opposition groups.<sup>6</sup>

The political targeting of aid workers by belligerents can be either associative or direct; that is, aid organisations may be attacked because they are perceived as collaborators with the ‘enemy’, be it a government, a rebel group or a foreign power; in other cases, the organisation itself may be the primary target, attacked for its own actions or statements, or to prevent or punish the delivery of aid to

<sup>5</sup> Incidents were classified as politically motivated based on a combination of the following factors: 1) first-hand determinations and evidence cited in the original incident report; 2) explicit statements and claims of responsibility by perpetrators; 3) tactics used (e.g., bombs, suicide attacks, targeted IEDs, etc.); 4) political/military actors known to be the perpetrators; and 5) a high degree of deliberate violence without apparent economic motive (i.e., aid workers killed or seriously injured with vehicles/facilities burned but not robbed).

<sup>6</sup> Afghanistan NGO Security Office, *ANSO Quarterly Data Report Q.4, 2008*, 2008.



a population. The idea of the danger of association with certain governments or armed forces has a particular salience with aid workers, most of whom endeavour to be seen as separate and distinct from political actors and activities, and believe that they can increase their security by demonstrating their organisation's independence and avoiding proximity to these actors.

The most recent evidence continues to show that even those agencies that make considerable efforts to disassociate themselves from political actors and project an image of neutrality have not been immune from attack, suggesting – and our qualitative research with aid organisations supports this – that associative political targeting may perhaps be less of a concern than direct or wholesale targeting. We would posit that aid organisations are being attacked not just because they are perceived to be *cooperating* with Western political actors, but because they are perceived as wholly a part of the Western agenda. It would seem that the undeniably Western nature and orientation of much of the international aid community is at the root of the insecurity aid workers face in countries such as Somalia and Afghanistan. Aid workers report that just a few years ago Afghan locals made distinctions between organisations, for instance between agencies that were working with the coalition force's Provincial Reconstruction Teams and agencies that were not. This apparently has yielded to an environment where all Western-based international humanitarian organizations are judged as partisan, save the ICRC, which, at least in Afghanistan, seems to have effectively staked out a special identity and neutral space for its work.

In these highly insecure environments, it seems, the provision of aid itself justifies attack, in that it represents an obstacle to the objectives of belligerent groups trying to gain or maintain control of the local area or to undermine central authority. Politically motivated violence can work in other ways as well, for example when governments passively allow or actively collude with attacks on aid workers in their countries whom they perceive as a threat to their power and control.

A protective environment of 'acceptance' for an organisation and its programming is easier to cultivate locally, and when the threatening parties have more limited ambitions. Mutual accommodation can and has been reached between aid organisations and governments or opposition groups in localised contexts, where doing so suits the objectives of both. For belligerents pursuing a national or even global agenda, however, such as those groups that align with al-Qaeda, the anti-

Western target becomes increasingly broad, and an aid organisation's efforts to distinguish itself or gain accommodation for its programmes do not carry much weight. Furthermore, in some remote areas aid workers represent the only or easiest target. In volatile situations, it is exceedingly difficult for an organisation to assess the level of threat they facing at any given time.

### **Operational adaptations and developments in policy and practice**

In keeping with the findings of our data analysis, agency staff interviewed for this study considered that the security environment in which they were operating had deteriorated over the past three years. Most interviewees cited operations in Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan (Darfur) as exceptionally challenging. Despite significant investment in security management, the policy and programmatic frameworks that guide aid agencies in these contexts appear inadequate to protect staff and operations from the rising number of attacks and new forms of threat. In addition, what seemed like highly promising new directions in the UN's security management have stalled in the face of organisational obstacles and the shake-up in the department in the aftermath of the bombing of UN offices in Algiers on 11 December 2007, in which 17 UN employees were killed.

#### *Security management: developments and challenges*

At the time of the publication of the 2006 report, aid agencies were grappling with a series of challenges regarding operational security. These included:

- The adoption and effective dissemination of security policy frameworks and procedures.
- A reliance on passive approaches to acceptance – whereby acceptance is assumed rather than brokered and maintained throughout the life of a programme.
- The need for a more systematic means to track and analyse security incidents, both within and between agencies.
- Human resource challenges such as high staff turnover and inadequate training, particularly for national staff members.
- Ad hoc approaches to security-related programming, such as remote management, and insufficient appreciation of the increased risks such approaches posed for local staff and partner agencies.
- A lack of criteria to determine when and how programmes should be curtailed or halted due to deteriorating security conditions.
- Inadequate inter-agency security coordination globally and ad hoc approaches in the field.

Over the last three years the security domain in aid operations has grown, and some of the issues raised in the 2006 report have begun to be addressed. The sector continues to professionalise, with more security posts being established at headquarters and in regional and field locations. Security budgets have reportedly increased or at a minimum have succeeded in reflecting stated needs for the majority of aid organisations. Many agencies now have established security policies and procedures, and some require these to be annually revised and submitted for review. Others have invested in security audits to analyse whether practice on the ground reflects organisational policies and procedures. Multi-national member organisations such as Save the Children and Médecins Sans Frontières, which previously had separate security management for each national affiliate, are developing common security frameworks, ensuring greater consistency in the application of security measures across the organisation. Agencies report that more staff, including national staff, have been trained in crisis and incident management, and have been given specific security training related to the more exposed roles that they undertake, such as drivers and guards. Attempts have also been made to increase the length of stay of field staff, particularly managers, with a view to reducing turnover rates. Much of this work has been carried out internally, although some agencies have also solicited assistance from private security providers, typically for security training, risk assessment and management support.

Our 2006 report documented a transformative policy shift within the UN, whereby the new Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) and the UN aid agencies were developing a programme-led approach to risk management. Taking as its starting point the priorities of the humanitarian intervention, this 'enabling approach' sought to institute the necessary security conditions to allow UN and partner programmes to continue operating in insecure contexts, rather than scaling back or evacuating. The Security Risk Assessment (SRA) model developed by UNDSS has however not yet been fully institutionalised, and there have been a series of significant setbacks. In particular, the findings of the *Independent Panel on Safety and Security of United Nations Personnel and Premises Worldwide*, commissioned in the aftermath of the Algiers bombing in late 2007, pointed to management failures among senior UNDSS staff; although not implicated, the Under-Secretary-General for Security resigned (at the time of writing he was continuing in an acting capacity until his successor was appointed).

The panel also made a series of recommendations regarding security management, including replacing the security phase system with the SRA; implemen-

tation of Minimum Operating Security Standards (MOSS) for UN offices in vulnerable locations; and improving the balance between programme delivery and security needs in some high-risk areas.<sup>7</sup> It is unclear how quickly these recommendations will be carried out given the uncertain leadership transition. In the interim, there is concern that the UN will become more risk-averse, with important implications for the security of its contracting staff, its partners and the wider implementing community. Meanwhile, although a number of NGOs have adopted the SRA methodology or other risk assessment frameworks and are undertaking risk assessments independently, it is unclear whether these are considered serious decision-making tools within the organisation, and such independent assessments lack the broader scope and participation of a UN-led SRA.

Overall incident tracking is increasing, and some NGO alliances are attempting to centralise incident management reporting across national affiliates. Nonetheless under-reporting continues, and the vast majority of medium-sized and small organisations have no or inconsistent means to track and analyse incidents. There is no fully functioning single mechanism in the UN for tracking, reporting and analysing incidents affecting the UN family and partner agencies. NGOs have also failed to set up a shared platform for inter-agency reporting. Overall, the aid world still does not appreciate the importance of joint incident analysis, and it is proving difficult to shift from an anecdotally driven information environment to one based on a more standardised, centralised approach to documenting and analysing security incidents. Agencies have sought to make it easier for field staff to report incidents, including keeping reporting formats as simple as possible, and to eliminate disincentives for reporting. For instance, some have assigned the responsibility of reporting to staff members outside the security management structure, so individuals do not feel that their jobs are threatened if an incident occurs, or alternatively reports have been tied to an insurance claim process so reporting is made more automatic (although this can create other reporting problems, particularly if insurance provisions only cover expatriate staff).

#### *Inter-agency security coordination*

Organisations remain wary about sharing information with others, and sometimes even with different parts of the same organisation. That said, there are some extremely positive examples of inter-agency security coordination in the field. The ANSO in Afghanistan, the NGO Safety Preparedness and

<sup>7</sup> The report, entitled, *Towards a Culture of Security and Accountability*, was issued on 9 June 2008 ([www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/terrorism/PanelOnSafetyReport.pdf](http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/terrorism/PanelOnSafetyReport.pdf)).

Support Project in Somalia (SPAS) and the Gaza NGO Security Office (GANSO) have all been welcome, and have attracted wide participation from agencies on the ground. In other highly insecure contexts, however, it has proved impossible to construct similar entities, and for the most part agencies still rely on informal means of coordination and information sharing. At headquarters level, the European Inter-agency Security Forum (EISF) and Interaction's Security Advisory Group (SAG) have facilitated dialogue amongst operational and security managers in Europe and the United States. Although they are more communication than coordination mechanisms, these arrangements have been valuable in encouraging and promoting good practice, as well as sharing lessons learned and providing country-specific information in near to real time. Finally, the important *Saving Lives Together* initiative, which was designed to provide a policy-level framework to improve security collaboration between the UN and NGOs, remains a worthy initiative, but has not received the resources it needs and uptake has been slow. Greater donor support is required.

#### *Trends in operational security*

The 'security triangle' paradigm of acceptance, protection and deterrence remains the conceptual basis for aid agencies' operational security. Within much of the aid community, the concept of acceptance – cultivating relations with local actors and communities – is still seen as an appropriate and effective approach to security, particularly for NGOs.<sup>8</sup> In some of the most insecure contexts, however, most security managers acknowledge that it is not a viable security strategy. This is the case when the threat is diffuse, such as in lawless environments where banditry is pervasive, or when it derives from belligerents pursuing national or global objectives, for whom the efforts and appeals of aid agencies will have little purchase. Security managers point out that, when the aid community effectively lacks the ability and interlocutors to engage in dialogue with threatening actors, as is the case for many in Afghanistan and Somalia, acceptance becomes impossible. This could explain why agencies that have worked in these countries for a decade or more are now being attacked.

Lacking alternatives, agencies working in highly violent settings have emphasised stricter security management and protective measures, such as moving in convoys, hardening physical security around their facilities and adhering to Standard Operating Procedures. After a major security incident a vicious cycle typically ensues, whereby staff are pulled back and consolidated at provincial levels,

<sup>8</sup> The 2006 report noted the particular security challenges for the UN humanitarian agencies in that they are not simply aid providers but also part of a larger entity with a clear political identity and role. Thus, it is inherently more difficult for UN agencies to cultivate acceptance as independent humanitarian actors.

contracting the organisation's field presence and further complicating efforts to build local acceptance and goodwill.

Many agencies have also reinforced their adherence to humanitarian principles, in particular the principle of independence. Humanitarian practitioners see independence as increasingly vital to their ability to negotiate access and to their overall level of security. This is done primarily by reducing the agency's reliance on institutional funding, especially if a potential donor is negatively perceived by the host community. How effective this is in maintaining the security of staff is, however, debatable. The ICRC has had some success in regaining the acceptance that its unique role bestows, but all manner of NGOs have suffered increasing attacks irrespective of their funding and partnerships. Perhaps more promisingly, a number of agencies have expanded their acceptance efforts from a focus on attaining local knowledge at the field level to identifying different levels with which to forge connections, for example establishing a dialogue with influential nationals in third countries, establishing regional cells to build background contacts and knowledge on regional trends, or investing in media communications with influential foreign broadcasters such as Al Jazeera.

Although typically considered as an exceptional and short-lived means of conducting operations, extreme low-profile approaches and modes of programming continue in Iraq and Afghanistan over four years after they were first introduced. In this approach, agencies operate without branding and limit their engagement with the host and even the beneficiary community. Most humanitarian agencies maintain that this stance, and its opposite, the use of a highly visible deterrent or counter-threat in the form of armed guards or escorts, is not a desirable strategy, but insist that they have little option apart from withdrawing aid programming altogether. While the use of commercially contracted armed protection, including guards and escorts, remains very much the exception and is confined to particular places, every major international humanitarian agency has paid for armed security in at least one operational context. In 2007, for example, approximately 22% of international humanitarian agencies reported using armed security services.<sup>9</sup> In countries such as Iraq and Sudan, humanitarian agencies have used private security sparingly, relying instead on minimising or suspending operations, withdrawing staff and remotely managing their programmes.

#### *Remote management and the transfer of risk*

Remote management in the sense that it is used here is employed to ensure that aid continues to reach the

<sup>9</sup> Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer and Victoria DiDomenico, *The Use of Private Security Providers and Services in Humanitarian Operations* (London: ODI, 2008) <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/hpg-publications/policy-briefs/33-private-security-providers-humanitarian-operations.pdf>.



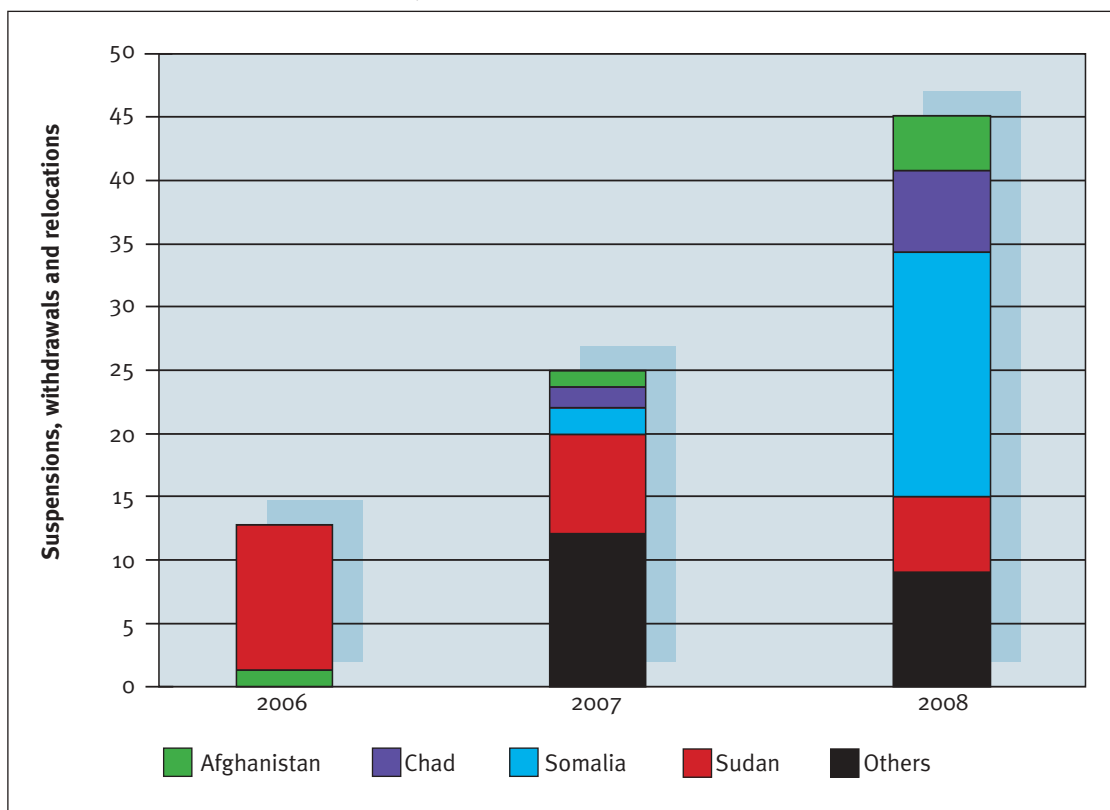
beneficiary population when security constraints inhibit traditional management methods. In this scenario, the organisation withdraws or limits the movements of its international staff, while shifting more responsibility to national staff or local partners. This approach is generally based on the assumption that local actors face a lower level of risk than international entities or personnel. As explained in 2006, however, this assumption is frequently false, and simply shifts the burden of risk to local staff and partners who often have fewer security resources and less training.

Today, agencies are more mindful of the implications of remote management, both for local staff and for engagement in a country in the long term. Remote management, though intended as a short-term expedient, can have a series of knock-on effects which make it difficult for the agency to re-engage later through more traditional means. These effects include reduced ground-level information, less credibility and lower levels of trust in the agency, as well as increased risks for local implementing actors. As one NGO interviewee noted, after a year of remote management in Somalia, threats against the agency’s national staff had increased as they became identified as decision-makers and resource handlers.

Agencies have had to take a hard look at what they are asking national staff and partners to do in

these insecure contexts. Most argue that their approach to local staff has improved, citing investment in security training, stress management, counselling and support, but most also acknowledge that more needs to be done. Partly in the rush to address the extreme disparity in international and national security provision, agencies are now keen to promote equity, and to ensure that all staff are treated the same. The point, however, is to differentiate. National staff, because of their job functions and their local relationships, require specific security measures that are proportionate to, but not necessarily the same as, those provided to international staff. Other issues raised include the fact that incidents are not documented as systematically for nationals, partly because the risk to the organisation is different. For example, injuries to a national staff member do not involve insurance issues, or advice to embassies or to families in another country. In some agencies, national hires are covered by separate policies, particularly regarding insurance (including medical evacuation and kidnap and ransom). Agencies have also had to consider developing policies and extending security provisions to partner organisations and beneficiaries, as the recipients of aid (for instance Afghan girls receiving education) have also come under attack. This opens up a new and even more complex set of challenges, and have often simply suspended programming.

**Figure 9: Contraction of aid activity/access following violent incidents**



*Access issues*

As security worsens, aid operations are often scaled back or withdrawn, affecting both the quality and quantity of assistance beneficiaries receive. As the 2006 report pointed out, measuring access is, however, a challenging pursuit. There are as yet no objective or robust means to comprehensively assess claims that access is declining, and views on this differ. While the overall footprint of the international assistance community might have shrunk in a given country, some agencies may have maintained or even increased their operational presence in response to the withdrawal of other agencies. ICRC, for example, maintains that it has increased its operational engagement in some very insecure contexts, and has done so with international staff and without armed escorts, armoured cars or military protection. Nonetheless, a review of incident reports in 2008 shows that, over the course of the year, at least 12 large NGO programmes were suspended in six different countries after serious attacks, affecting an unknown number of beneficiaries.

Of the 380 incidents in the AWSO for 2006–2008, 82 resulted in suspension, withdrawal or relocation, in 15 countries (Figure 9). While this is by no means an exhaustive survey, the available data do serve to highlight some trends in access. Each year saw nearly a doubling of the previous number of programme suspensions due to insecurity. The largest increase was in Somalia, with nine-fold growth over 2007, representing more than 40% of incidents in 2008. There were also notable increases in Afghanistan and Chad (both up nearly four times between 2007 and 2008).

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) has developed a tracking system to monitor and report access constraints, and this is currently being piloted in six insecure contexts.<sup>10</sup> Its reports indicate that, from January 2008 onwards, UN international staff presence in Somalia fell by 41%; the NGO international staff presence declined by 13% in south and central Somalia (SCZ), while increasing by 50% in Somaliland and Puntland. For one NGO, the decision to withdraw staff and close down its programme of therapeutic feeding affected 280 severely malnourished children. The agency also closed a surgical programme, providing emergency trauma and obstetric care, which had performed approximately 70 operations and 200 emergency consultations a month.<sup>11</sup>

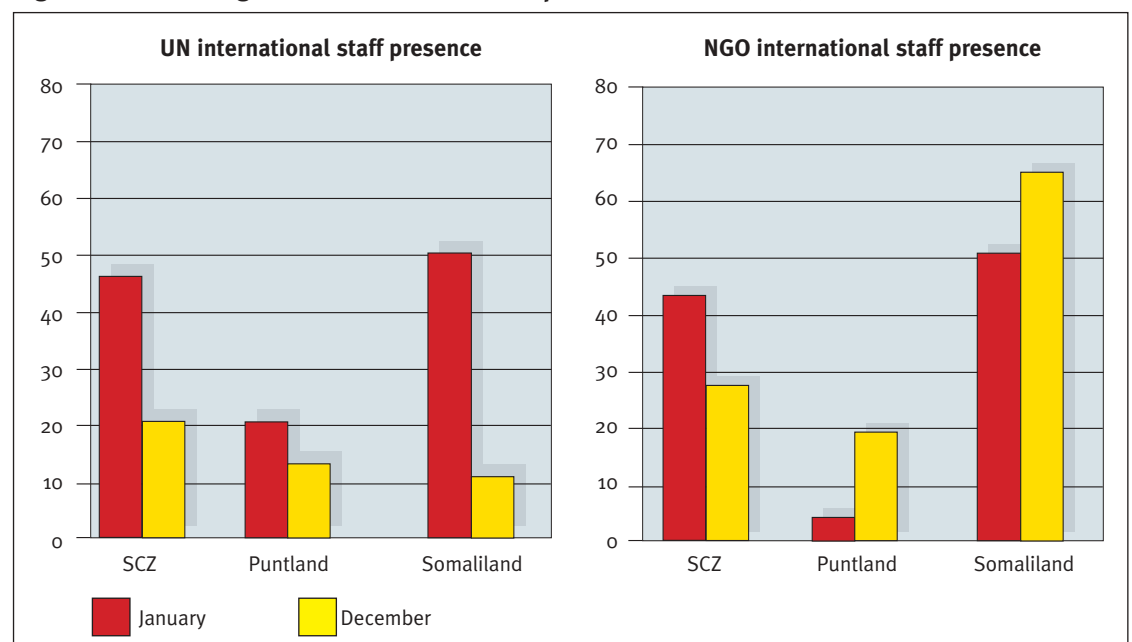
**Conclusion**

Aid workers in the most dangerous settings face few options. In places like Sudan (Darfur), Somalia and Afghanistan, the choice boils down to reducing or withdrawing essential aid from needy populations, or running intolerable risks to the lives of staff and partners. We do not disagree with humanitarians' efforts to disassociate themselves from political and military actors – doing so is a sensible and necessary step. If the greater portion of international humanitarian aid organisations were able to achieve independence and project an image of neutrality this would surely enhance operational security and benefit humanitarian action as a whole. However, it is important that organisations are not misled into

<sup>10</sup> OCHA, 'Access Monitoring and Reporting Framework' Somalia Report (unpublished document).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

**Figure 10: Declining access for UN and NGO personnel in Somalia, 2008**



Source: OCHA Somalia

believing that this in itself will result in increased security for their staff in the most insecure environments, at least in the short term.

In the 2006 report we made 23 recommendations for agencies and donor governments. Few have been fully realised, partly because many require a commonality of purpose and coordinated action across the humanitarian community that have yet to be achieved in the security arena. Individually, however, some organisations have made progress in a few important areas, including increasing security support to local staff, developing incentives to report security incidents and participating in inter-agency dialogue. We would urge continued action in all these areas, in particular a redoubling of efforts

to work together on incident reporting, tracking and sharing, and establishing additional field-level security services akin to ANSO and SPAS.

To evaluate the nature and level of threat in conflict environments, aid agencies must focus their incident analysis and assessment on identifying when the aid community has become a wholesale political target, and acceptance becomes ineffective. That said, while it is vital to seek security solutions for the most dangerous contexts, it is important that organisations do not let conditions in these contexts dictate security models elsewhere. In particular, an active acceptance strategy should be emphasised as an appropriate and principled approach in the majority of aid settings.

**Summary table: Aid worker attacks, 1997–2008**

|                           | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|---------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Number of incidents       | 35   | 27   | 32   | 42   | 29   | 46   | 63   | 63   | 75   | 106  | 119  | 155  |
| Total aid worker victims  | 73   | 69   | 65   | 91   | 90   | 85   | 143  | 125  | 172  | 239  | 206  | 260  |
| Total killed              | 39   | 36   | 30   | 57   | 27   | 38   | 87   | 56   | 54   | 86   | 79   | 122  |
| Total injured             | 6    | 15   | 15   | 23   | 20   | 23   | 49   | 46   | 95   | 87   | 84   | 76   |
| Total kidnapped           | 28   | 18   | 20   | 11   | 43   | 24   | 7    | 23   | 23   | 66   | 43   | 62   |
| Total nat'l staff victims | 40   | 52   | 40   | 70   | 62   | 68   | 116  | 101  | 158  | 213  | 171  | 211  |
| Total int'l staff victims | 33   | 17   | 25   | 21   | 28   | 17   | 27   | 24   | 14   | 26   | 35   | 49   |
| Nat'l staff killed        | 31   | 32   | 24   | 46   | 21   | 30   | 65   | 47   | 49   | 82   | 71   | 104  |
| Nat'l staff injured       | 4    | 14   | 14   | 20   | 17   | 22   | 45   | 40   | 91   | 75   | 74   | 63   |
| Nat'l staff kidnapped     | 5    | 6    | 2    | 4    | 24   | 16   | 6    | 14   | 18   | 56   | 26   | 44   |
| Int'l staff killed        | 8    | 4    | 6    | 11   | 6    | 8    | 22   | 9    | 5    | 4    | 8    | 18   |
| Int'l staff injured       | 2    | 1    | 1    | 3    | 3    | 1    | 4    | 6    | 4    | 12   | 10   | 13   |
| Int'l staff kidnapped     | 23   | 12   | 18   | 7    | 19   | 8    | 1    | 9    | 5    | 10   | 17   | 18   |
| UN victims                | 22   | 24   | 17   | 31   | 28   | 18   | 31   | 11   | 28   | 61   | 38   | 65   |
| ICRC victims              | 9    | 26   | 7    | 9    | 11   | 7    | 8    | 1    | 3    | 10   | 4    | 4    |
| IFRC victims              | 10   | 5    | 4    |      | 3    | 5    | 20   | 11   | 5    | 17   | 8    | 1    |
| NGO victims               | 31   | 14   | 37   | 49   | 48   | 54   | 84   | 98   | 134  | 145  | 143  | 185  |
| Donor/other victims       | 1    |      |      | 2    |      | 1    |      | 4    | 2    | 6    | 11   | 4    |

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