

# Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

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Volume 14  
Issue 3 *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*

Article 21

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October 2010

## The Growing Threat to Humanitarian Operations

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### Recommended Citation

King, Adrian (2010) "The Growing Threat to Humanitarian Operations," *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action* : Vol. 14 : Iss. 3 , Article 21.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol14/iss3/21>

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# The Growing Threat to Humanitarian Operations

Deminers and other humanitarian-aid workers around the world, though previously viewed as off-limits, have become targets of distrust and even violence by certain groups. This article explores the reasons for this shift in ideology, and what action humanitarian organizations must take in order to protect their personnel.

by Adrian King [ HMS, Ltd. ]

The days of showing respect to civilian humanitarian-aid personnel and organizations in the field are long gone, so that even the once sacrosanct International Committee of the Red Cross is no longer safe from attack. In recent times, increased rhetoric against the United Nations and humanitarian-aid agencies, mainly from *jihadist* groups (such as those in the call-out box below), has led to a long overdue appraisal of the vulnerability of aid workers and U.N. peacekeeping personnel as the global security situation deteriorates and risk of violent attack increases.

and its allies, to suppress Islam, spread Christianity in the Muslim world, and support an invasion and occupation strategy directed toward Muslim countries. These views can be seen in the Afghan Taliban's monthly magazine, *Al Samood*.

One only has to look at the grim record of attacks against personnel working for U.N. agencies and other humanitarian-aid organizations to appreciate the fragile and, at times, near non-existent nature of security measures taken in the field. Humanitarian organizations and personnel must understand that deprived

*“The UN is also standing with the enemy against Muslims what about the standing Muslim matters like Palestine, Chechnya, Cyprus ... and other Muslim matters, all these are evidence of the oppression of the UN against Muslim countries ...”*  
*Al Somood, The Struggle<sup>1</sup> (jihadist propaganda)*

## The Developing Mindset

Since the rise in international terrorism, providing aid has become more of a high-risk occupation than ever before. Military operations both in Afghanistan and Iraq have fueled the ill-informed and biased speculation of the *jihadists* and stirred suspicion of Western motives in these and other regions, with aid workers often seen as agents of military powers. Both the United Nations and aid organizations are now viewed in some areas of the world as being part of a Western agenda, led by the United States

populations' access to aid must be balanced against underlying security threats where, as a consequence, the susceptibility and accessibility of aid personnel and their local employees is increased, and the risk of violent compromise in certain locations is ever more likely.

## Valuable Human Assets

Personnel engaged in humanitarian work are dedicated to the work they do and the people they serve. Thoroughly committed to their vocation, these aid work-



U.S. Army soldiers assigned to the 203<sup>rd</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion of the Missouri Army National Guard use a tracked excavator to remove tons of rubble and debris as rescue workers search for victims at the United Nations Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator building in Baghdad, Iraq, after a truck bomb destroyed much of the building on 19 August 2003.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MASTER SERGEANT JAMES M. BOWMAN, USAF

ers venture into areas and situations considered by most to have an unacceptable risk of attack or at least confrontation with hostile groups. These groups, for one reason or another, do not appreciate or support the aid work carried out, and because of their beliefs, view humanitarian-aid workers and those who support them as viable targets for aggression.

In the demining world, work is often conducted in countries where the underlying security situation is unstable or where low-level conflict is in progress. However, exceptions exist. In Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia for example, mine-action activities continue effectively despite widespread and ongoing violence, where no peaceful resolution is in sight and the situation may escalate at any time. In the case of Afghanistan, NATO maintains that its in-country presence is for the purposes of stabilization and infrastructure development. Unfortunately, this gives the impression that the “war” has been won when it is apparent that ever more violence occurs daily in communities and organizations throughout the country.

Sanctioning the deployment of U.N.-armed military personnel to a country or region in crisis not only shows that violence is expected, but that weapons used for pro-

tection are essential to the success of legally mandated work in agreement between national governance and the United Nations. The question then has to be asked, in view of this decision to deploy an armed force, on what basis do nongovernmental organizations and private and commercial companies deploy their personnel to such areas, where the risk of attack is high and the level of protection offered is generally not commensurate with the threats that may be encountered?

As previously alluded to, many individuals are “called” to intercede on behalf of the victims of crisis through their vocation and belief, but what is their level of responsibility, both to themselves and to those who will support them in-country and be formally engaged by them in the conduct of their mission? And perhaps more importantly, what is the responsibility of the organizations that employ humanitarian workers?

The posed questions are not meant to undermine an individual's integrity or an organization's justification for carrying out humanitarian work, but to provoke discussion on the criteria used to guide risk assessment. This assessment should be conducted with the expatriate professionals and the local nationals involved at varying levels, from humble driver to mission manager.

### Process and Procedure

The Geneva Conventions of 1949<sup>2</sup> are the legal basis for categorizing humanitarian work; they guarantee protection for humanitarian workers provided that they are not party to the conflict. The Conventions do not, however, give right of access to conflict areas; and although combatant attacks on humanitarian personnel are prohibited, providing escorts is not a requirement, including where other factions may pose a threat to safety.

This article does not provide an analysis of all attacks on U.N. or other aid personnel, but in analyzing demining specifically, it is possible to draw a loose analogy from the evidence gathered through attacks and, in some

conflict and enabling infrastructure renewal and a return to normal life activity. For the majority, mine action would be seen as an essential and normal part of a country's post-conflict recovery process, and many would perhaps struggle to understand why people would oppose such action taking place. The reality is not so simple, however, and in assessing the chronological data of attacks on demining personnel, one has to surmise that a political motive is often the basis for the incident. In Afghanistan, the Taliban see the United Nations and other aid organizations as collaborators with NATO's International Stabilization Force and corruptors of the Muslim religion, views echoed by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

*“The UN is a tool of American global politics, duping people by claiming that it is a neutral international organization, where it is in fact a criminal American institution; the presidential election in Kabul is evidence enough of this. This organization has not been established to support and help people, and since it was established, it has taken part and contributed to war crimes ...*

*In the same way the invader forces will be forced to leave Afghanistan; this institution called the UN must leave for good ...”*

*~ Al Somood. The Struggle<sup>1</sup> (jihadist propaganda)*

cases, predict a continuance of the trend in some countries and regions. Since 2003, more than 50 mine-action personnel have died from non-mine related injuries, the majority in Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> The evidence shows that, in most cases, attacks are targeted directly at the demining workers and not randomly, as some believe. In the majority of the incidents, the attacks were carried out using small arms and improvised explosive devices, the latter of which are a well-known threat in Afghanistan and a growing threat globally, and which allow precise targeting without exposure to retaliation or identification of the perpetrator(s) at the incident scene.

### Deminers as Targets

Mine action is an activity built on military breaching and explosive ordnance disposal skills to remove area explosive hazards, thus allowing repatriation of displaced persons and communities following the con-

For these reasons, attacks on the United Nations and humanitarian-aid workers, including demining personnel, are justified in the perpetrators' minds, but aid workers' links with sponsors and other organizations may further strengthen motives, as in the case of the lethal attack on deminers in Kandahar province on 11 April 2010, where the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) sponsored the victims' demining activity. This extra “link” (i.e., the sponsorship) may provide an additional motive for an attacker to target one aid group over another and should possibly be part of the risk-assessment process.

Another possible motive for attacking deminers in Afghanistan and elsewhere is because mine action removes resources from the Taliban's arsenal. Their use of explosive remnants of war as main charges in their IEDs, or even as a viable ammunition source, is well known.

This was recognized in Iraq during the height of the insurgency, where foreign contractors were deliberately used to remove explosive ordnance from stockpiles and former battle positions in an attempt to interrupt the chain of activities that led to building IEDs to attack Coalition troops.

### Protecting Deminers

As employers, humanitarian demining organizations have a duty of care and responsibility toward their personnel. Top-level personnel must thoroughly investigate the risk of attack and assess and mitigate against apparent threats in the country and

the growing threat levels, aid organizations in general should take a more responsible stance in providing levels of security. If it is known that attacks are likely and that reprisals may also be visited on local workers as a result of mine action or any other humanitarian activity, the decision to deploy at all should be questioned.

The United Nations, which oversees demining and other contracts, should perhaps also play its part by ensuring organizations and individuals are aware of the inherent risks of working in a particular country or region and that they are taking the proper security precautions. Person-

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nel validation should begin prior to arrival in the country and should include checks to make certain that employees are sufficiently briefed and trained on safety issues, and provided with the resources, including procedures and equipment, to safely conduct their work. However, this should only happen after an organization understands the risks involved and has determined whether it is prudent to allow the commencement or sustainment of humanitarian demining activity in a specific area. ♦

The threshold for conducting or suspending mine-action operations due to security concerns is usually a responsibility of the mine-action coordination center, if present in-country, normally on advice from a number of internal and external agencies. Yet is this enough? Is it sufficient, and is it justifiable in high threat-level locations such as Afghanistan and Somalia? Surely with

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*see endnotes page 82*



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