

News Brief

New Human Rights Safety Bracelet

In 2009 Russian human rights worker Natalia Estemirova was abducted in front of her home in Grozny, Chechnya and murdered in Ingushetia, Russia. In response to her murder the organization Civil Rights Defenders (CRD) created the Natalia Project—an effort to distribute and monitor a bracelet that sends out a distress signal when the wearer is in danger. Designed for those working in conflict areas, the bracelet is one component of a comprehensive security program using satellite navigation technology to send signals to the smartphones of those in close proximity (who are previously assigned by the bracelet-wearer to receive alerts) and CRD's headquarters in Stockholm, Sweden.^{1,2,3} CRD verifies the alarm and ensures appropriate messages are posted to social media in accordance to a predefined, customized security protocol. Security protocols vary depending on the user and situation; CRD intends to determine how best to react to an emergency situation by evaluating possible scenarios and relevant actors in area.¹

The wearer can manually activate it, and the bracelet automatically sends out a distress signal if forcefully removed. CRD can disable a false positive, however, by verifying whether the user is in danger. CRD encourages the wearer's online community to monitor the bracelets

via social media.^{1,4} Optimistic about the bracelet's potential to save lives, CRD Executive Director Robert Hardh points out that wearing the bracelet in a dangerous area is akin to “walking around with millions of people on your arm.”⁵

A commercially available option that “combines wearable GPS devices with alert function, mobile monitoring interfaces and smart-phone applications” can be purchased from PFO Technologies, the manufacturer of CRD's bracelet.⁶ The special security features discussed above are unique to CRD's Natalia Project, but PFO's commercial product includes GPS and other safety features that the demining industry would find useful.^{1,7} Although kidnapping of deminers is not generally a frequent occurrence, it does happen. For instance, members of the Movement of the Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) abducted 12 deminers in Senegal in May 2013.⁸ That same month, the Taliban in Afghanistan kidnapped 11 deminers.⁹ Safety bracelets would have easily tracked those kidnapped and quickly alerted authorities to the problem.¹⁰

The CRD bracelets have been tested, and the first five were ready for local human rights defenders (people working on human rights issues who are threatened and harassed by their own governments or security services) in the North Caucasus in May 2013.¹ CRD hopes to provide 50 more by the end of 2014.³ Bracelets associated with the Natalia Project will go to those working in the most dangerous areas within CRD's existing networks in East Africa, Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Southeast Asia.^{1,10} ©

~ Blake Williamson, CISR staff



Photo courtesy of Civil Rights Defenders.