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Gambling Life and Limb: Humanitarian Hazards

Noncombatants, specifically journalists, war correspondents and humanitarian workers take extreme risks and make serious sacrifices while operating in conflict areas around the world. Despite being noncombatants, such individuals are often at the forefront of danger and share the risk of bodily harm with those on the front lines. This article discusses some of the recent casualties suffered by noncombatants in conflict and post-conflict regions.

On 23 October 2010, New York Times war photographer Joio Silva became a double below-knee amputee after stepping on an anti-personnel mine in Afghanistan a mere 300 meters (984 feet) from the U.S. base he had left earlier that morning.1 Embedded with a unit of U.S. infantry and an accompanying minesweeper team, Silva was traveling through an area near Arghandab when he accidentally detonated a mine, reportedly no bigger than a can of floor polish. In addition to Silva, three U.S. servicemen were injured in the incident and received concussions from the blast. Within seconds, field medics rushed to Silva’s aid and, fortunately, were able to prevent an excessive loss of blood, securing the photographer’s survival. Following his injuries, Silva was flown to Kandahar Air Field, the joint American/ NATO base in the region, for surgery before being sent to Bagram Air Base near Kabul and then on to a hospital in Germany. Doctors at Kandahar credited Silva’s survival to the rapid response of the soldiers from the unit in which he was embedded.2 Upon receiving treatment in Germany, Silva spent time at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C. (U.S.), for rehabilitation.

Known throughout the world as one of the top war photographers, Silva could be considered a legend. He belonged to the well-known “Bang Bang Club,” a name primarily associated with four photographers active within the townships of South Africa during the Apartheid period in the early 1990s. Silva and his colleagues gained popularity through their coverage of the violence during that period. One of those photographers, Greg Marinovich, the other surviving member of the group, associated with four photographers active within the townships of South Africa during the Apartheid period in the early 1990s. Silva and his colleagues gained popularity through their coverage of the violence during that period. One of those photographers, Greg Marinovich, the other surviving member of the group, was severely injured in the incident and received concussions from the blast. Within seconds, field medics rushed to Silva’s aid and, fortunately, were able to prevent an excessive loss of blood, securing the photographer’s survival. Following his injuries, Silva was flown to Kandahar Air Field, the joint American/ NATO base in the region, for surgery before being sent to Bagram Air Base near Kabul and then on to a hospital in Germany. Doctors at Kandahar credited Silva’s survival to the rapid response of the soldiers from the unit in which he was embedded. Upon receiving treatment in Germany, Silva spent time at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C. (U.S.), for rehabilitation.

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This past February, British photographer Giles Duley lost three limbs to an improvised explosive device while traveling with U.S. troops near Sangsar in Kandahar province in Afghanistan. Having been in the country for less than two weeks shooting photos for Camera Press, Duley was accompanying U.S. soldiers when he triggered an explosion. While he did not suffer any internal injuries, both of his legs were severed—one above the knee and the other below—along with his left arm below the elbow.5 After being flown to Kandahar Air Field for amputations, Duley was flown back to the U.K. to Queen Elizabeth hospital in Birmingham for further treatment.6 Prior to the injuries he received in Afghanistan, Giles Duley spent time as a fashion and music photographer before turning his attention to humanitarian work. In addition to working for Camera Press, Duley worked for Médecins sans Frontières. His photographs have been featured in Rolling Stone, the Sunday Times and Vogue.7 Moreover, Duley won the 2010 Prix de la Photographie Paris for his photograph of a southern Sudanese woman delivering a baby.8

After spending 110 days in the hospital, Duley was sent to a military rehabilitation facility at Headly Court for physiotherapy.9 He explained that the use of prosthetic legs “takes 260 percent more effort than walking with normal legs,” as a result, physiotherapy is intensive and activities include rowing, swimming and weight lifting.10 Despite having suffered a triple amputation, Duley has vowed to return to work, stating that he has received hundreds of e-mails encouraging him to come back once he has recovered. In addition, Duley told reporters he actually vowed that his injuries would not prevent him from returning to his field of work.11 In fact, Duley stated that he was “incredibly lucky,” and that, while he survived thanks to the “brilliant” efforts of the U.S. troops, another person who suffered nearly identical injuries a week later did not live.12

Amid fierce fighting in the streets of Misrata, Libya, Tim Hetherington and Chris Hondros were killed by a rocket-propelled grenade in a firefight involving Libyan rebels and pro-Qaddafi forces on 20 April 2011.13 Tim Hetherington, a British citizen, was well-known for co-directing the Afghan war documentary Restrepo, nominated for an Oscar.14 Chris Hondros was an American with a distinguished career, known for winning the Robert Capa Gold Medal for war photography.15 Documenting the conflict of the Libyan civil war, Hetherington and Hondros were photographing frontline combat and were not wearing protective gear when they were struck by the blast of the RPG. Allegedly, customs officials have attempted to stem the flow of protective jackets and helmets into the country from neighboring Egypt,16 and this may have played a part in why the two were not

An unintended consequence of this requirement for security is that journalists may perceive both armed personnel and unarmed noncombatants as hostile. This situation is exacerbated by attempts to prevent journalists from living in areas too dangerous for non-combatants, such as those on the front lines. This article discusses some of the recent casualties suffered by noncombatants in conflict and post-conflict regions.
Humanitarian Workers

On 8 October 2010, the death of U.K. citizen Linda Norgrove brought attention to the vulnerability of humanitarian aid workers in Afghanistan, a tragic outcome of one of many kidnappings involving humanitarian workers in the country.1

An increase in violent encounters between aid workers and militant groups reveals a fading distinction between the occupying force and those involved in humanitarian aid, a division the Taliban does not honor. Deaths among aid workers have noticeably increased in recent years: in 2002, a total of 85 workers were killed, whereas 225 aid workers were killed in 2010.16

Although many nongovernmental organizations remain financially independent from state entities, many contracts with U.S. government agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development are nonpartisan organizations.17 An unintended consequence of funding from USAID to operate in conflict zones—mainly in Afghanistan and Iraq—NGOs are required to work in tandem with the military and receive grant funding to protect staff belonging to a group known as Tearfund.18

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Aid awaiting distribution in Libya. Photo courtesy U.N./David Ohana.

Similarly, Somali aid workers and journalists have been increasingly targetted. Conflict involving the Transitional Federal Government and Somali militaries in opposition to the TFG has created a dangerous work environment for Somali journalists.21 In 2008, Amnesty International reported that journalists have been targeted specifically in an effort by each side to suppress coverage of the violence.22 Additionally, Amnesty International pursued several cases in which humanitarian workers were killed and found that, in the majority of the 46 cases studied, workers were deliberately targeted with the intention of suppressing known human rights violations.23

Deminers

Hardly free from the dangers faced by journalists, photographers and humanitarian workers, deminers have become increasingly subject to the risks involved in their efforts to clear landmines and being targeted by insurgents. In fact, the U.N.-affiliated Mine Action Coordination Center for Afghanistan reported that 17 deminers were killed in 2010 while another 35 were injured and 73 abducted.24 Demining vehicles often resemble vehicles used by security forces, therein attracting opportunistic attacks on behalf of insurgent forces. This tactic has led to fatalities caused by misidentifying deminers as targets; however, deminers are also targeted deliberately. In several incidents, insurgents seemed interested in maintaining certain areas as mined, on account of having placed mines themselves or because they benefit from security forces being unable to use the area. As a result, insurgent forces have attacked and killed NGO deminers intentionally.25 Alternatively, deminers have also been killed by IEDs, which can be construed as either purposeful or accidental as IED victims are often targeted indiscriminately.

Conclusion

While many areas of the world desperately require humanitarian support, there are those who will stop at nothing to stifle the flow of aid or silence those who report on the harsh realities in these areas. Alternatively, there are also those who risk life and limb to provide much-needed support to these areas, be it through aid or through publicizing situations that would otherwise go unnoticed to the majority of the world. Without the dedication and vigilance of these individuals, scores of desperate populations will continue to suffer and their cries for help will not be heard.

~Blake Williamson, CISR staff
See endnotes page 80

In Remembrance: Shingairai Chimuriwo-Tichawangana

Shingairai Chimuriwo-Tichawangana, affectionately called “Shingie” by friends and colleagues, died at the Avenues Clinic in Harare, Zimbabwe early in the morning of 16 March 2011. Her death was the result of injuries obtained during a car accident the previous night. The accident, which occurred while Shingie was traveling home from a work function, was caused by a drunk driver who failed to yield at the intersection of Enterprise and Ridgeway roads in Harare.

At 30 years old, Shingie was the youngest employee of the NPA Zimbabwe’s Program Coordinator in 2004. Shingie was passionate about promoting justice and equality, and her work at NPA involved empowering women, children and the poor of Zimbabwe.

A memorial service was held at Celebration Centre in Borrowdale at 10 a.m. on 18 March 2011. Following the service, Shingie was buried at Glen Forest Cemetery. She is survived by her husband, Fungai James Tichawangana.

~Dan Baker, CISR staff
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At 30 years old, Shingie was the youngest employee of the Norwegian People’s Aid office in Zimbabwe. She started work part-time with NPA in the 1990s and in 1993, traveled to Bergen, Norway to study in a year-long program for her master’s degree. She returned to Zimbabwe in 2001 and became NPA Zimbabwe’s Program Coordinator in 2004. Shingie was passionate about promoting justice and equality, and her work at NPA involved empowering women, children, and the poor of Zimbabwe.

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