The Growing Threat to Humanitarian Operations

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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.

“‘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 (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 jihadist 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 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 populations’ access to aid must be balanced against underwriting 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. Though committed to their vocation, these aid workers 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 effective-ly 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 protection 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 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 cases, predict a continuum 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. The evidence shows that, in most cases, attacks are targeted directly at the demining personnel and not randomly, as some believe. In the majority of cases, attacks are targeted directly at the 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.

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.

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