The Growing Threat to Humanitarian Operations

Adrian King
Allen-Vanguard

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal
Part of the Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons, and the Peace and Conflict Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol14/iss3/21

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.
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 Samour...

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, 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 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 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 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.
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 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 of 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 supporters 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.

This was recognized in Iraq during the height of the insurgency, where foreign contractors were deliberately used to remove explosive ordinance 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 region of the proposed work activity. At the lower levels, the duty extends to managers and team leaders, to enacting and maintaining the security plan and providing local operating procedures and resources in managing the risks described.

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 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-

“...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 ...”

~ Al Somood, The Struggle® (jihadist propaganda)