Violence Against Aid Workers in Conflicts

Headline points from Necessary Risks
Sources: Agencies, country-level platforms, data scraping

“Major incidents” = killings, kidnappings, and attacks resulting in serious injury

"Aid workers" = employees and associated personnel of not-for-profit aid groups providing material and technical assistance in humanitarian crises.

- Date
- Location
- Victims information: gender, institutional affiliation, national or international staff
- Outcome of incident: killed/wounded/kidnapped
- Means of violence: e.g., shooting, IED, airstrike
- Context of attack: e.g., ambush, armed incursion
- Perpetrator: name and type of armed group, or individual
- Motives: economic/political/incidental)
- Summary report (public details, anonymized)

www.aidworkersecurity.org
Figure 1: Major security incidents, 2009–2018

*Figures verified as of 19 June 2019.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian aid workers (global)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US combat forces</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law enforcement officers (US)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Percent fatalities by means of violence, 1997-2018

- Complex Attack: 3%
- Landmines: 4%
- Bodily assault: 5%
- Kidnap/killing: 8%
- Explosives: 13%
- Aerial bombardment: 16%
- Shootings: 51%
Number of victims by tactic/context, 1997-2018

- Detention/beating: 42
- Mob violence: 97
- Combat/crossfire: 489
- Individual attack: 683
- Raid: 799
- Ambush/road attack: 1,803
National aid workers

- 90 percent of the victims
- Attack rate climbing relative to internationals
- Fatality rate 3X higher
- Shows reliance on partner organisations and remote ops
Conflict types, post World War II

- Internationalized internal
- Internal
- Interstate
- Extrasystemic
Contending with non-state forces

- Lack entry points for IHL education and advocacy
- Are more decentralized = less cohesion and weaker chain of command
- Equate IHL with Western global order
- Incentives to attack humanitarian operations and personnel
  - Association with the enemy—seen as legitimate targets
  - Control of local populations
  - Political – visibility, propaganda opportunity
  - Economic gain – access to goods, materials and cash
  - Practical – may be the only, or easiest, target to strike
Negotiations - IHL as an instrument, not an ideal

A pragmatic, transactional approach to negotiating access involves:

• Universalizing and localizing the norms and principles (no dogma)

• Understanding the interests and incentives of counterparts, which are not static

• Staff skills-building in negotiation
  • Peer-to-peer learning, e.g. NRC course
  • Centre of Competence case examples
“I can’t think of one situation where IHL was used for a negotiation tactic or strategic framework for dealing with access. MSF has moved to a transactional framework on how, and on what, parties will agree.”

—MSF senior staffer
Organizational impediments to secure access

- Incentives to grow large in organizational size but not scope of operations
- Maturing sector—age and growth often come at the expense of innovation and flexibility
- Fragmented sense of responsibility to meeting needs
- Senior staff devolve responsibility for negotiating access to local staff/partners
What has worked

• Investment in outreach and dialogue with ANSAs. This requires:
  • independent/flexible funding
  • Independent operational capacity that MSF and ICRC have, as well as rep and benefits they provide)

• Staff skills and capacities for practical negotiations

• Acknowledgement that compromise is unavoidable in contested contexts, and clear guidance for making these decisions
What agencies can do

• Do not rely on ‘symbolic’ protection
• Do not assume risk can ever be reduced to zero
• Be explicit about the level of risk you will accept, for which program activities
• Be systematic in assessing threats and calculating risks
• Continually update your assessments and mitigation measures
• Requires building field staff capacity and staff in situational analysis, outreach and communications and practical negotiation techniques
States’ responsibilities

• UN Charter

• Host State Agreements
  • Not articulated in any detail
  • Not operationalized on the ground

• State failure/fragility a major risk factor for aid worker violence
  • Higher numbers of attacks in countries whose governments scored lower in political and economic effectiveness, legitimacy, and RoL

• Aid workers want ‘ambient security’ not armed protection

• Focus on big picture: resolving conflicts, pressuring state belligerents to adhere to IHL
Professionalism in humanitarian action

- Professionalism ≠ corporatism, bureaucratization, risk aversion
- Mastery of skills and accumulation of knowledge
- Continual improvement
- Principles, practical tools and techniques that can be trained
- Professionalizing security ≠ specialist silo removed from programming/human element
- Professionalism: ethical framework decoupled from the interests of the aid organization or personal altruism of the individual
- Focused on doing the job as well as possible for the people you are serving