

# Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: Trends in Policy and Operations

Summary of quantitative analysis

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CIC BRIEFING PAPER

A project of the **Center on International Cooperation, New York University**  
In collaboration with **The Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute**

This briefing paper presents a summary of data findings and recommendations from a full report available at [www.cic.nyu.edu](http://www.cic.nyu.edu)

## International aid work: a hazardous endeavor

Since 1997, over 500 humanitarian aid workers have lost their lives to violence around the globe. Rising numbers of attacks against aid workers recently in places such as Sudan and Sri Lanka will make 2006 one of the deadliest years in a half-decade that has already seen unprecedented levels and changing tactics of violence against humanitarian operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

**Table 1: Yearly breakdown of major violent incidents against aid workers, 1997-2005**

	Total Incidents	Total aid worker victims	Per 10,000	Killed	Wounded	Kidnapped	UN	ICRC	NGO	National	Nat'l per 10,000	International	Int'l per 10,000
1997	34	77	4.8	39	8	32	26	9	31	43	2.8	34	20.2
1998	26	69	4.5	36	15	18	24	26	14	54	4.0	15	7.9
1999	31	66	4.2	29	15	20	16	8	38	41	2.8	25	15.2
2000	41	94	5.3	58	25	11	31	10	51	74	4.7	20	10.9
2001	29	94	5.1	27	20	47	28	11	52	66	4.0	28	14.0
2002	47	88	4.4	38	23	25	17	7	58	73	4.0	15	7.7
2003	62	145	6.3	86	49	8	31	8	86	118	5.5	27	13.2
2004	66	140	5.7	60	55	24	18	0	107	109	5.0	31	14.1
2005	72	174	6.9	61	95	17	24	4	139	159	7.1	15	6.0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>408</b>	<b>947</b>		<b>434</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>576</b>	<b>737</b>		<b>210</b>	

By any measure, international aid work is a dangerous profession. When compared to the ten most hazardous civilian occupations in the US, as measured by highest on-the-job death rates, humanitarian aid work came in at number five—after loggers, pilots, fishermen and structural iron and steel workers. Unlike other hazardous civilian occupations, however, the risk to aid workers comes mainly in the form of intentional violence.

A serious incident against a civilian aid organization has the potential to shake the confidence not only of the organization affected, but of the entire international aid community. The aid program invariably loses impetus, and can come to a complete halt. When one agency reduces its presence or withdraws following an attack, others often follow, either passing responsibilities over to local partners or leaving the beneficiary population to cope alone.

## The purpose of this study

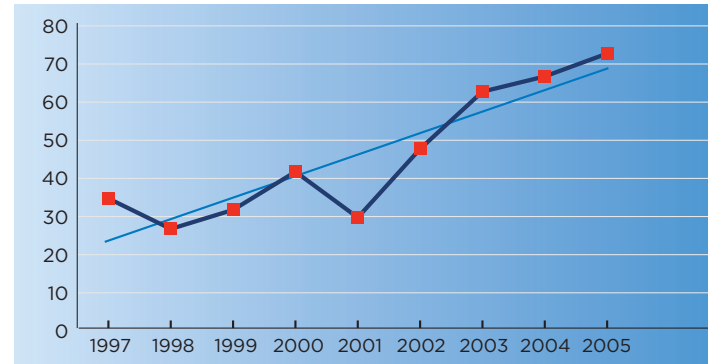
Despite widespread perceptions of mounting threats to aid worker security, the lack of hard data has made it impossible to determine whether in fact violence against aid workers has increased relative to their numbers in the field. This gap in knowledge has meant that impressions and anecdotal evidence have driven operational security policy, and important trends may have been missed. To address this issue, the Center on International Cooperation and the Humanitarian Policy Group launched a joint study in 2004 to provide a quantitative analysis of the changing security environment for civilian aid operations, and to examine the related trends in security policy and operations. As the cornerstone of this effort, the researchers compiled the most comprehensive global dataset to date of reported incidents of major violence against aid workers—defined as killings, kidnappings, and armed attacks resulting in serious injury—from 1997 to 2005. Incident data was drawn from public sources and augmented by internal organizational information provided to the study.

# Main findings

## A marked increase in violent acts against aid workers in absolute terms

Since 1997, the absolute numbers of reported major acts of violence committed against aid workers have risen sharply, with the increase growing steeper in the second half of the decade. On average, annual incidents nearly doubled (a 92% increase) from the period 1997-2001 to 2002-2005. All told, 408 separate acts of major violence were perpetrated against aid workers over the nine-year period, involving 947 victims, including 434 fatalities. By the third quarter of 2006, the death toll had risen to 501.

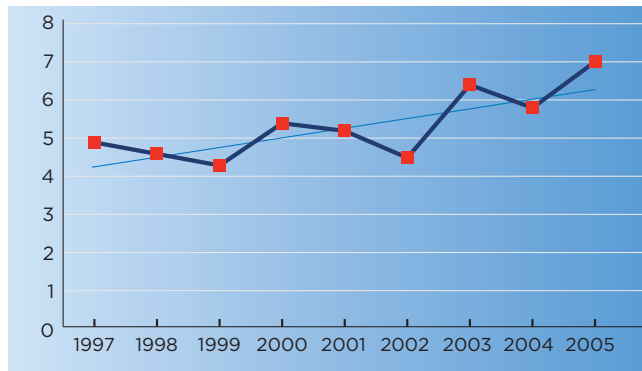
Figure 1: Trend in absolute numbers of incidents, 1997-2005



## ...however, a slighter increase in relative terms

When the number of victims is compared to the expanding population of aid workers, however, we see that security for aid operations is not deteriorating as badly as the above numbers would seem to indicate.

Figure 2: Trend in overall incidence: victims per 10,000 aid workers in the field

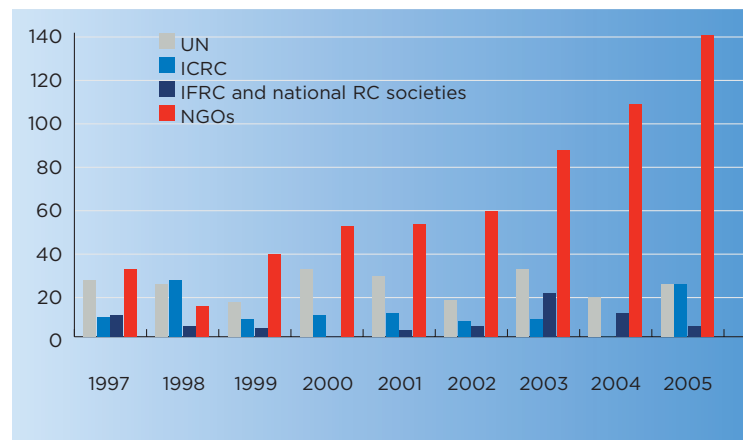


The study calculated the total aid worker population to have risen by 77%, from an estimated 136,000 aid workers in 1997 to roughly 242,000 in 2005. Using these estimates, the annual number of victims per 10,000 aid workers in the field averaged five in the first half of the period and six in the second. Moreover, in the most dangerous contexts the overall incident rate decreased over the time period. In other words, even as incidents in these contexts were rising, they were outstripped by the number of field staff being deployed.

## Fewer incidents for UN and ICRC, while NGOs and national Red Cross experience increasing casualties

UN and ICRC aid workers once showed the highest percentage of victims per staff member in the field, but in the past few years both have seen a decrease in major violent incidents likely due to tightened and improved security measures taken after the Baghdad bombings in 2003. NGOs, on the other hand, have endured increasing numbers of these incidents in absolute, relative, and proportional terms (an increase of 161%). When comparing the incidence rates between the institution types this divergence is less dramatic but still observable.

Figure 3: Trends in total numbers of victims by institution, 1997-2005

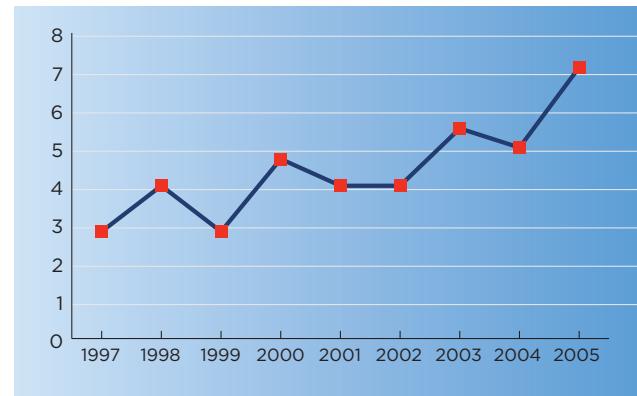


## National staff at increasing risk

The majority of aid worker victims (78%) are nationals of the country in question. The average number of national staff victims more than doubled over the time period, from an average of 56 victims per year in the first half of the period, to 115 in the second. Additionally, in the six areas with the highest absolute numbers of violent incidents against aid workers, the relative risk to national staff appears to be rising significantly year to year, while that of international staff is declining.

Globally, the incidence rate for internationals is stable or declining, while it is growing for national staff. In the six most violent contexts, the statistical analysis points overwhelmingly to a general trend wherein it is becoming increasingly dangerous for national staff and, surprisingly, safer for international staff.

Figure 4: National staff victims relative to their numbers in the field



“Humanitarian agencies have largely failed to consider the ethics of transferring risks to national staff or local NGOs”

## “remote management” — a dangerous practice?

Findings from field research and interviews with over 300 humanitarian workers suggest that a large factor driving the higher casualty rates of national staff is a common program adaptation to insecurity known as “remote management” or “long-arm programming.” In these scenarios, organizations withdraw or limit the movement of their expatriate staff members as security declines, while national staff and/or national partner organizations take on a larger share of the service delivery. Organizations that do this typically assume that their national staff and partners face lower risk than internationals in these environments—an assumption the study found was often faulty. Not only do many agencies fail to adequately assess the risks to national aid workers, they also provide nationals with a far lower level of security resources, including training and equipment.

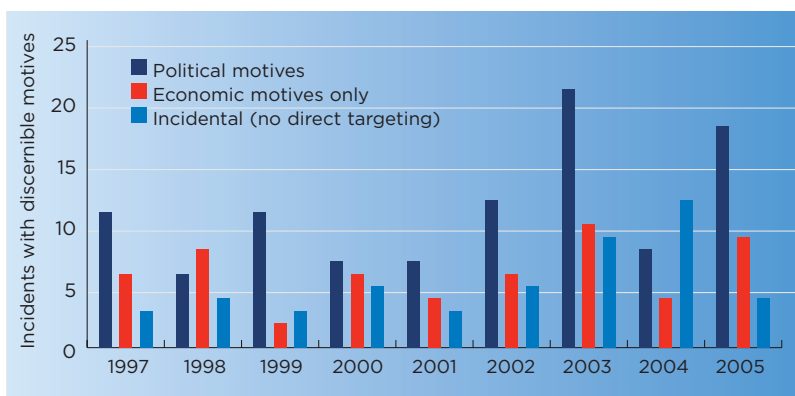
The remote management approach, while common, is undertaken in a mostly ad hoc and reactive fashion by the majority of aid organizations that use it. Remote management can allow vital relief operations to continue, yet it also creates a number of challenges. Apart from the risk transfer to national aid workers, these include less efficient and strategic service delivery, the potential for corruption, and accountability concerns. Agencies generally accept that program quality will suffer under remote management, but have expended little energy towards examining the practice, planning, and innovating programming approaches to mitigate the negative effects. Agencies have also largely failed to consider the ethics of transferring risks to national staff or local NGOs. Viewed against the significant rise in the relative risk to national staff, this practice raises serious questions for the international aid community, especially when the program in question is not a life-saving intervention.

# The politics of aid worker violence

## Most victims deliberately targeted, with political targeting on the rise

In the vast majority of incidents aid workers were deliberately targeted, rather than randomly exposed to violence as in crossfire or landmine explosions. Where perpetrators and

**Figure 5: Relevance of aid workers' status to motives of attack**

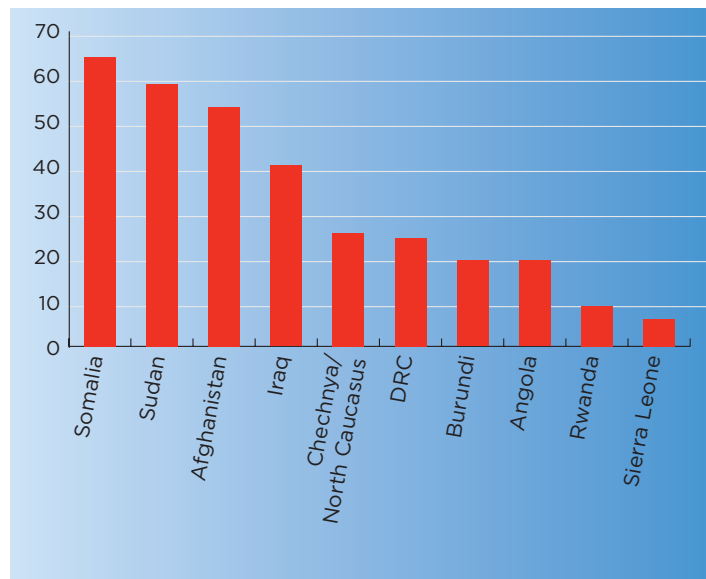


intentionality could reasonably be determined (roughly 59% of total incidents), those with political motives attached outnumbered those that were purely economic in nature. Politically motivated incidents also rose during the second half of the time period, exceeding the rise in (purely) economic incidents.

## Somalia and Sudan show highest levels of violence against aid workers

Many have speculated that the two “outlier” cases of Afghanistan and Iraq skew the picture with relatively high numbers of security incidents. While they assuredly contributed to the total rise in incidents in the second half of the time period, particularly in 2003 and 2004, they are by no means the only drivers. In terms of total number of incidents, and in incidents relative to staffing numbers in the field (with the exception of Iraq 2003-2004), Somalia remains the most violent context for aid operations. In incident numbers over the time period, Somalia is followed by Sudan, with Afghanistan and Iraq coming in at numbers three and four respectively.

**Figure 6: Countries/regions with the highest number of major security incidents, 1997-2005**



## Aid worker violence does not correlate with intensity of conflict, or presence of specific political/military actors

Statistical analysis of the incident data reveals that the most dangerous operational environments for aid workers are not those with the highest level of overall violence, as measured by conflict-related deaths per year.<sup>2</sup> In fact, incidents against international staff show a slight increase in areas where there is no active conflict, and where a UN-sanctioned peacekeeping force is present, most likely indicating a sense of increased security leading to freer movement and possibly less vigilant security measures taken by internationals. Also potentially surprising, overall there were no statistically significant correlations between aid worker violence and the following conflict variables:

- Presence of great power (e.g. US) military forces;
- Presence of global terrorist cells; and
- Use of the “integrated mission” approach by the UN.

Taken together, these findings suggest that, while there is no correlation between violence against aid workers and the specific politico-military factors examined, political targeting is indisputably occurring, and appears to be on the rise. The perception of aid workers’ association with political processes clearly exists in the minds of local belligerents. Seeking not to heighten this perception is thus a legitimate concern.

### New dimensions to the security triangle

In highly insecure environments, aid organizations have recently displayed some shifts in emphasis and new adaptations within the three components of the “security triangle” paradigm: *protection* (reducing vulnerability), *deterrence* (presenting a counter threat) and *acceptance* (cultivating a familiar and trusted relationship with the local community and lines of dialogue with conflict parties).<sup>3</sup>

The acceptance model, while still the foundation of the security approach of the Red Cross/Red Crescent and most NGOs, has been increasingly difficult to pursue in higher risk environments. Acceptance strategies are costly in terms of staff time and resources, and especially hard to achieve amid the highly fluid local dynamics of conflict. As a result, some agencies have chosen to adopt protection approaches such as almost “clandestine” modes of programming, where all organizational identification is removed from staff and vehicles, and even the beneficiaries are unaware of who is providing the aid. Others have gone the opposite route, adopting highly visible deterrent measures, such as the use of armed escorts. Both modalities, while protecting staff in the short term, run the long term risk of increasing insecurity by fueling suspicion and mistrust, and by distancing the agency from sources of information that might otherwise enhance its security.

## Weighing risk and response

2 Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University (2006) ‘Definitions, Sources and Methods for Uppsala Conflict Data Program Battle-Death Estimates.’

3 Van Brabant, Koenraad (2000) Operational Security Management in Violent Environments: A Field Manual for Aid Agencies, Good Practice Review 9. London: Humanitarian Practice Network, ODI.

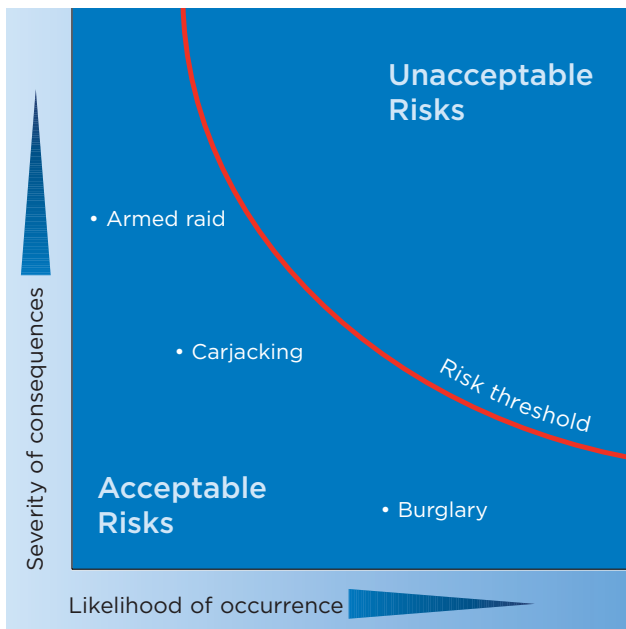
## What is an “acceptable” risk?

If security management means controlling or reducing risk to an acceptable level, aid agencies are still grappling with the question of where the threshold of “acceptable” lies. A commonly used risk threshold graphic asks managers to plot the likelihood of threats on one axis, and the severity of their consequences on the other, with an eye towards defining a “comfort zone” in which programming may take place.<sup>4</sup>

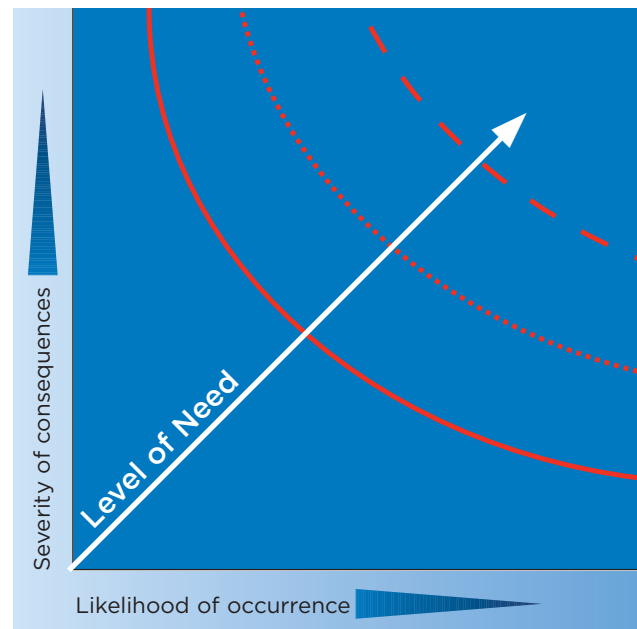
Yet it does not make sense to speak of risk thresholds as if they were fixed and static. Risk assumption must vary according to the severity of need on the ground. In other words, an organization may decide that it is not worth risking staff lives to deliver non-essential aid in areas of active combat, but if people were dying of starvation or an epidemic in the same area the risk would then become acceptable.

There is something disingenuous, however, in the discussion of risk acceptance within humanitarian organizations. Despite working in some of the world’s most dangerous places and acknowledging a high level of risk, no organization would be prepared to say openly that the loss of even one staff

**Figure 7: Example of typical risk threshold analysis**



**Figure 8: Adapted risk thresholds, accounting for criticality of need**



**As the level of need increases, humanitarian agencies should shift their risk thresholds outwards, in effect accepting a higher level of risk.**

member would be acceptable in meeting program goals — let alone estimate “force depletion” rates and casualty thresholds, as is done in military planning. However courageous, aid workers are not soldiers, and nothing in their mission or their organizational culture would allow for such a calculus. What this means in practice is that risk is acceptable only when hypothetical; as soon as someone is killed that risk becomes intolerable, and the remaining aid workers are generally pulled out.

4 Van Brabant, Koenraad (2000).

# Conclusions and key recommendations\*

## Data remains patchy. It is imperative that incident reporting improve so that we have a better understanding of the trends and operational impact.

Agencies should develop incentives for field security incident data reporting, making use of existing joint software platforms.

Agencies should increase the sharing and storing of “desensitized” incident information and analysis, based on indicators agreed.

Donor governments should establish an inter-governmental forum to share security information and develop more common orientation across UN agency executive boards and proposal guidelines on security issues.

## The politicization of aid has added to the perception, if not the actual insecurity of agencies.

Donor governments should address the implications for partner agencies of branding/visibility policies, as well as the pressures placed on agencies to respond or stay engaged in contexts based on strategic interest, rather than according to need.

## Local aid actors have become important implementers in insecure contexts, and appear to be increasingly targeted for violence.

Identify and support an equitable level of security inputs for local staff and partners, including proportionate representation in security training and briefings and the provision of security materials in national languages, as well as access to security assets.

Given that insecurity is likely to persist in some contexts, and local actors will remain at the forefront of service delivery, donor

governments should consider mechanisms for partnership similar to those in natural disaster preparedness and mitigation.

## Relief work is changing in insecure contexts, and program adaptations should address the long-term impacts on the welfare of the population and security of local aid workers.

Incorporate security-related adaptations such as remote management options into program planning and preparedness exercises, and develop criteria covering when to deploy them (ideally, within an interagency security forum at the field level, so that plans can be shared and coordinated).

Develop guiding principles and a practical knowledge base on remote management and other adaptations in programming used when international access declines. Guiding principles will include considerations of how to accurately assess risk to local staff.

Where possible, explore programmatic ways to emphasize and invest in local response capacity rather than simply project delivery.

Donor governments should engage systematically with the implications of remote management in terms of costs, quality and impact.

## States have significant responsibilities.

Support the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) in its dialogue with UN member states over a clearer set of guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of host governments for aid worker security.

Donor governments should assist in efforts to better define the roles and responsibilities of host states, and support UNDSS’ efforts to encourage host states to live up to their obligations (through the Host Country Agreement).

\*See the full paper for a more in-depth discussion of policy findings and related recommendations.



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