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Rethinking humanitarian security

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The bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad in August 2003, and the attack on the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)'s main office in the city the following October, have jolted humanitarian agencies into rethinking and reorganising their security arrangements. Senior officials in the largest agencies speak of a 'paradigm shift' in the threats facing humanitarian organisations. For years, and in ever-increasing numbers, Western humanitarian organisations have operated in inhospitable regions. They have faced threats and constraints, and have suffered their fair share of casualties, often as a result of the direct targeting of aid workers. Now, it is argued, aid workers everywhere in the world have become a chosen, deliberate and direct target of terrorist groups. In response, aid agencies' security management systems have been subjected to unprecedented levels of scrutiny and review.

Investing in security

Since the end of 2003, more than \$100 million is estimated to have been spent on revamping the security arrangements of the UN and other aid agencies. Most of this money has gone on protecting agencies' premises, both at headquarters and in sensitive areas, against armed intrusion and bomb attacks. The UN has completely revised its security management structures, bringing together its security coordination mechanism (UNSECOORD) with units responsible for staff security at the Department for Peace-Keeping Operations (DPKO) and for the protection of UN premises. A new post, Undersecretary-General for the Department for Security and Safety (DSS), has been created; the current incumbent is Sir David Veness, a former senior officer in the British police. The ICRC is also reviewing its security doctrine, and is re-examining the notion that acceptance by all stakeholders of its principles and working methods is a sine qua non for its continued presence in a conflict area. The agency is facing up to the fact that neutrality and independence, even if consistently practiced and forcefully proclaimed, do not guarantee acceptance and respect by all armed groups.

A changing political context

Why does humanitarian work seem more difficult and dangerous than in the past? Some argue that part of the reason is that humanitarian actors are no longer neutral. Of course, international agencies have always been perceived by some parties as stooges of neo-colonial or neo-imperialistic designs. During the

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Cold War, few organisations were truly politically neutral in their choices of beneficiaries, or in their decisions about which regions they wanted to help. More recently, claims to political neutrality have been further weakened as many humanitarian agencies have associated themselves ever-more closely with broader concepts of human security, and have deepened their links to their governmental donors.

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The most significant threat to the actual and perceived neutrality of humanitarian organisations has been agencies' calls for military interventions to stop systematic and large-scale human rights abuses, and to open up humanitarian space. Humanitarian agencies have often blamed the military for claiming a humanitarian mantle for themselves; agencies cringed and cried foul, for example, when military and political actors argued that their interventions in Kurdistan, Somalia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) were being waged as 'just humanitarian wars'. At the same time, however, some agencies are seen to have bowed to political pressure and subordinated their action to military or political considerations.

This trend towards the integration of political, military and humanitarian objectives has come to a head in Afghanistan and Iraq. In these countries, humanitarian emergency programmes, reconstruction and development projects were explicitly integrated into the security strategies of the United States, the European Union and NATO. The military assumed direct responsibility for providing humanitarian aid, or for subcontracting reconstruction and development projects, often because humanitarian agencies could not and would not risk venturing out on their own, or because they refused to act under the protection of intervention forces.

Managing risk

There is now increased recognition that, without a clear separation between military/political purposes and actions on the one hand, and humanitarian deeds on the other, humanitarians will be associated with third-party militaries, and will thus be at increased risk of attack. But how real is the new security threat? It is noteworthy that virtually all reputable international agencies are committed in Sudan and Indonesia, both contexts where one would expect Western agencies to be at increased risk from religious extremists. So far, no security incidents in Sudan can be linked to a global threat. Equally, no agency appears to have been impeded in its work elsewhere as a consequence of its association with the coalitions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

International agencies probably overreacted to the attacks in Baghdad in 2003. But that does not mean that a review of security management was not long overdue. Most agencies admit that they have insufficient knowledge of the contexts in which they operate, that they lack local networks and information sources and that most of their international staff are not familiar with local customs, language and culture. Agencies now recognise that it would be naïve to presume acceptance, and therefore security, just because they are able to satisfy urgent needs and because they abide by internationally accepted codes of conduct.

More often than not, the security incidents suffered by aid agencies are due to foolish mistakes by ill-prepared individuals, and to faulty appraisals of local conditions. These individual errors need to be understood in the context of overall systems and organisational policies. Few agencies have the resources to provide adequate language training, or a sufficient depth of expertise among their staff to cover all contexts where they operate. Few can afford to resist

donor pressure to get engaged in breaking emergencies before they have assessed the risks in depth. Field staff are supposed to take snap decisions daily: whether to send a truck convoy from A to B, go to a meeting with an unknown interlocutor bearing a message from some armed group, send an evaluation mission into an unknown area, reject a demand for help from an aggressive individual or group deemed outside of assistance criteria, or hand over belongings, including cars and radios, to an armed gang at a check-point.

Defining acceptable risk: organisational obligations and liabilities

During their field training, staff were probably told that they should always weigh security risks against the urgency and importance of the mission, and its chances of success. This calculation is the essence of risk management, and it is precisely what most humanitarian organisations are struggling with. Risk management involves establishing an appropriate infrastructure and culture and applying a logical and systematic method of establishing the context, identifying, analysing, evaluating, treating, monitoring and communicating the risks associated with any activity, function or process in a way that will enable organisations to minimise losses and maximise their institutional objectives, and their compliance with their mandate.

Most agencies accept that they do not have a clear idea of what their risk threshold actually is. Most say that the safety and security of their staff is one of their primary institutional objectives, and will admit that there are risks involved in sending people to hazardous places. But almost all also say that no humanitarian act is worth the death of a single aid worker. There is a contradiction here: on the one hand, agencies accept that aid work is a risky business; on the other, their corporate communications and mission statements proclaim mandates, values and goals that stress the good that will come from their commitment. UNHCR is to my knowledge the only humanitarian agency to openly address this contradiction. UNHCR's review of its security policy, published in September 2004, states that:

Given the danger in the environment in which UNHCR must operate if it is to protect and assist refugees, it is inevitable that staff members will be hurt and killed. It has happened in the past and it will happen again.

The question of how organisations frame their responsibility with regard to the security of their staff has hard-edged implications. The ways in which organisations manage risk and apportion accountability when things go wrong have implications for corporate responsibility. Who is to blame if there are casualties? What happens if bereaved parents and victims of terrorist attacks lodge claims against an organisation on the grounds that it has failed to take the necessary protective measures, or has failed to properly implement its own security regulations? The UN's insurance policy against malicious acts (MAIP) of January 2003 clearly states that 'claims will only be accepted under this policy if the organisation and/or the Insured Person concerned has demonstrated to UNSECOORD that it has complied with all UNSECOORD security guidelines'. Considering the complexity of the UN's security rules, that is a tall order.

Conclusions and implications

To sum up, humanitarian agencies face some key challenges in managing the risks confronting their staff. Agencies need to define their risk threshold, provide appropriate security rules and regulations and adequately train their field staff so that they can apply them. They need to establish consistent risk management procedures throughout the organisation, and set clear rules for

accountability. They need to provide adequate insurance cover for their staff, and protect managers against liability claims. They need to invest the appropriate resources in selecting and training the managers to whom they entrust decisions regarding security. And they need to review their rapport with the military to establish a constructive working relationship. This is a demanding agenda. It is also a necessary one.

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