

Advancing the protection of aid workers

Side event – Protection of Civilians Week

20 May 2024

With the participation of the Permanent Representation of France to the UN in New York, the Permanent Representation of Switzerland to the UN in New York, the Permanent Representation of Canada to the UN in New York, the Permanent Representation of Brazil to the UN in New York, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the United Nations Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS), Legal Action Worldwide, Action Against Hunger International and Nonviolent Peaceforce.

Background

Amidst the backdrop of widespread conflicts and escalating humanitarian crises worldwide, protecting humanitarian workers is essential for delivering aid to those most in need. Efforts to ensure their safety and security have long been a focus within the humanitarian community. However, despite clear international humanitarian law obligations to protect humanitarian workers and to prosecute war crimes, attacks persist. In 2023, the number of aid workers¹ killed more than doubled in two years, from 118 aid workers killed in 2022 to 261 in 2023.² 78 aid workers were kidnapped and 196 wounded worldwide in 2023.³

New and improved approaches to enhance the protection of aid workers are required, in particular with regards to national staff members. The overwhelming majority of humanitarian staff killed or injured, as reported by the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO), are national humanitarian workers.⁴ They are typically the first to deliver aid in challenging environments, with often less measures to ensure their protection. As threats increase and protective measures are more difficult to implement in the areas where aid is most urgently needed, many humanitarian organisations find themselves lacking the requisite experience, knowledge, or capacity to effectively manage the security of their staff members.

International humanitarian law enshrines a clear obligation to protect humanitarian workers and to prosecute war crimes. Humanitarian organisations and their staff members, especially national ones, are necessary for the delivery of essential aid to civilians during conflict. Attacks on aid workers can constitute war crimes, and, due to the impact aid workers have on civilians' access to life-saving aid, can also be elements of a crime against humanity or genocide. The

¹ “‘Aid workers’” are defined as the employees and associated personnel of not-for-profit aid agencies (both national and international) that provide material and technical assistance in humanitarian relief contexts. This includes both emergency relief and multi-mandated (relief and development) organisations: NGOs, the International Movement of the Red Cross/Red Crescent, donor agencies and the UN agencies belonging to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (FAO, OCHA, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN-Habitat, WFP and WHO) plus IOM and UNRWA. The aid worker definition includes various locally contracted staff (e.g., drivers, security guards, etc.), and does not include UN peacekeeping personnel, human rights workers, election monitors or purely political, religious, or advocacy organisations”, <https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/about>

² Statistics are from <https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/>, checked on 16 April 2024.

³ Statistics are from <https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/>, checked on 16 April 2024

⁴ See: <https://ngosafety.org/our-network/>, checked on 25 March 2024.

UN Security Council has passed ten resolutions urging states to ensure that unlawful killings of aid workers do not remain unpunished.⁵ However, to date, they have continued with almost total impunity.

Access to justice for aid workers plays an essential role in combatting impunity for unlawful attacks against civilians, thus contributing to enhancing the protection of civilians more generally. But various barriers prevent aid workers from accessing justice, impacting staff members differently depending on their country of origin. Among other obstacles, aid workers fear retaliations against them, their co-workers, or their organisation if they file formal complaints. They also have limited access to legal assistance, leading to a limited knowledge of the avenues available to them. Those range from seeking civil remedies to criminal accountability, in domestic, regional or international forums, depending also on the capacity of the national criminal justice system. These factors, and others, lead to impunity for the perpetrators and silence for the victims. Moreover, as with all IHL and human rights violations and abuses, the limited number of legal proceedings aiming at holding the perpetrators accountable for serious violations can lead to more attacks on humanitarian aid workers as well as the civilian communities they work in.

Outcome

This event will bring together key UN, NGO and Member States' representatives to discuss key recommendations to enhance the protection of humanitarian workers in armed conflict. The discussion will address the following key issues:

- What are the challenges faced by humanitarian organisations and States to improve the protection of aid workers, and the gaps in the current measures?
- Why is accountability a key element in the protection of aid workers and the security risk management of organisations, and how can we improve access to justice for aid workers when they are the victims of attacks?
- How to reinforce security risk management mechanisms and capacities and ensure they are sustainable, specifically with regards to national and local actors?
- How can acceptance strategies be better used to increase the protection of aid workers, including through integrating accountability strategies, and changing approaches to access to communities and armed groups?

Date and location

The event will take place on 20 May 2024 from 1 pm to 2.30 pm, at the Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the UN, 633 Third Avenue, 29th floor, New York.

Please click [here](#) to register to participate in the event.

⁵ S/RES/1502(2003), on the protection of United Nations personnel, associated personnel and humanitarian personnel in conflict zones, 26 August 2003; S/RES/2175(2014), on the protection of humanitarian personnel and UN and associated personnel in armed conflict, 29 August 2014; S/RES/2286(2016), on healthcare in armed conflict, 3 May 2016. Also S/RES/1265(1999), S/RES/1296(2000), S/RES/1674(2006), S/RES/1738(2006) and S/RES/1894(2009) on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, S/RES/2417(2018) on the protection of civilians including mention of unlawfully denying humanitarian access as warfare tactics, 24 May 2018, S/RES/2573(2021) on the protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, 27 April 2021.

Speakers

Opening Remarks:

- Ambassador Pascale Baeriswyl, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the UN in New York
- Nathalie Estival-Broadhurst, Deputy Permanent Representative of France to the UN in New York

Panellists:

- Hanin Ahmed, Women and youths rights activist and co-founder of Omdurman (Sudan) Emergency Response Room (ERR)
- Chibuzo Okonta, Executive Director, Action Against Hunger (AAH/ACF)
- Gilles Michaud, Under Secretary General for Safety and Security (UNDSS)
- Edem Wosornu, Director, Operations and Advocacy Division (OAD), Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)
- Antonia Mulvey, Executive Director, Legal Action Worldwide (LAW)

Focal point

For additional information concerning this event, please contact:

Camille Delbourgo, LAW, Programme Manager, delbourgo@legalactionworldwide.org