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Security and Humanitarian Action – IASC Discussion Paper

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Introduction

Events in Afghanistan, Indonesia, Liberia and Iraq have exposed the security challenges faced by humanitarian organisations. The reality of humanitarian staff being deliberately targeted has also changed our security paradigm. The renewed scrutiny given to the humanitarian's security, provides an opportunity to seriously examine current approaches for crisis situations and take steps to strengthen or revise them as required.

Within the United Nations (UN) there is some frustration with the current security system, but approaches have been strengthened in recent years and agencies remain committed to working through the existing security mechanism managed by the UN Security Coordinator (UNSECOORD). This paper seeks to address how security can be managed more proactively to enable a humanitarian response in crisis situations. The term "humanitarian" is used very broadly, and includes life-saving development and protection activities that are appropriate in an emergency response.

This paper does not address other steps that need to be taken, nor does it seek to duplicate recommendations that have been raised in other reports on safety and security, such as the report submitted by the Ahtisaari Panel to the Secretary-General on 22 October 2003. Both these reports merit additional evaluation in terms of their impact on the activities of humanitarian actors.

The UN's Current Focus - Risk Reduction & Consensus Based Decisions

The ability to maintain a presence in times of crisis is directly linked to current approaches to security, which from the UN perspective, are based on 'risk reduction' and consensus-based decisions in the field.

Over the last five years the UN has strengthened its approach to the security of its staff and its operations considerably. Much emphasis has been given to the elaboration of a "framework for accountability" for UN field security, which focuses on procedural and technical measures, including the promotion of Minimum Operating Security Standards (MOSS). These standards, agreed at the country level, establish the basis for security

planning, training and equipment requirements, and are seen as a means of reducing exposure of UN staff to risk. As such, security measures are primarily focused on risk reduction of individuals' exposure to danger, rather than enabling the agencies to meet the needs of the populations at risk. This has been a successful approach to addressing traditional threats, in so far as there have been significant reductions in UN fatalities and injuries related to security incidents – the attacks on the UN Headquarters in Baghdad notwithstanding. Nevertheless, risk reduction has, as a policy, also resulted in the withdrawal of UN international staff and a reduction in travel and activity at times in variance with other humanitarian actors operating in the same area.

Consensus is another principal characteristic of the UN's approach to security in the field. Different UN actors take different views of sustaining a presence in times of crisis. Those with humanitarian capacity, and/or those who can continue working, often prefer to remain. Others with less pressing activities are often prepared to withdraw. The UN Designated Official is responsible for ensuring the security of this diverse group. While the Designated Official can override the consensus of the Security Management Team, given the organisational culture where consensus is valued and unity of purpose is a priority, security discussions are inherently conservative. The result may often lead to the dilution of the humanitarians' focus, and security decisions that are influenced by inter-organisational compromise, with often inordinate delays, rather than the humanitarian imperative and the need for the Designated Official to take decisive and timely decisions – collegially when possible, unilaterally if necessary.

Precedents & Exceptions

While withdrawal of all UN international staff in times of serious crisis is the norm, recent history has shown variations in approach. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the UN undertook extraordinary security measures to maintain a presence. Other examples where UN international staff remained deployed in highly insecure situations include eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sri Lanka and currently Iraq. This is in contrast to Afghanistan under the Taliban, when the UN withdrew its international presence for extended periods to minimise the possibility of legitimising an internationally unacceptable regime. Further, these examples show that political will, rather than technical considerations, can be a major enabler for 'staying on' or 'staying out'.

Proven Alternatives - Risk Management and Collective Security

Risk reduction and the search for consensus limits the impact of crisis response, impeding assistance to victims and humanitarians' right to provide it. There is an alternative, which has been applied by the UN system on an exceptional basis as mentioned above, and which is applied by successful humanitarian actors outside the UN system, such as the ICRC and many major NGOs. This approach is characterised by the question "how can we stay?" This is in contrast to the risk reduction approach, which seeks to define "why we must leave." The "how can we stay" alternative is based on risk management rather than risk reduction, and a commitment to collective-security across the humanitarian system, rather than a focus on individuals' security within different organisations. This approach does not mean that humanitarian staff must keep an international staff presence *in situ* at all cost. It does, however, focus on the needs of the

beneficiaries, rather than the needs of the humanitarian staff. It also acknowledges that one of the most important functions of humanitarian response is protection of civilians, which is linked to international staff presence, and seeks where feasible to maintain some international staff presence under adequate security arrangements.

Risk management

Risk can be viewed as a measure of uncertainty regarding the achievement of organizational objectives, or a hazard and the related loss it might cause. Achieving objectives without incurring unacceptable losses, requires a risk management approach, which includes consideration of:

- *threats and hazards* (activities, tasks, operations, tools or agents that are significant sources of personal/physical negative consequences - or the threat);
- *risk factors* (measurable or observable manifestations, trends or characteristics that either indicate the presence of risk or tends to increase exposure);
- *risk measurement* (the evaluation of the magnitude of risk);
- *risk assessment* (the identification of risk factors, the measurement of risk, and the process of prioritizing risks);
- *contingency planning* (examination of one uncertainty and consequence/loss at a time and develops responses to that uncertainty/loss/consequence; eventually it is the sum, fully integrated, of all such plans that deal with many different uncertainties/losses; certain events might trigger a particular subset of the contingency plan to be executed).

Threat and risk assessment are at the heart of risk management, and -- particularly in high-risk situations -- must go hand in hand with the programme planning of interventions. These inter-dependent planning and decision-making processes need to be conducted in accordance with a sound methodology. They must also be carried out on an ongoing basis, primarily in the field on a site-specific basis as no generalised solution can effectively address the many unique aspects in threat, risk, security preparedness and capacity.

Risk acceptance is an informed decision to suffer the consequences of likely events, and is a matter for senior management. The amount of acceptable risk should be determined beforehand. Risk reduction is about application of risk management principles to reduce the uncertainty/likelihood or consequences of an event, or both.

Risk management takes as a given that humanitarian actors in the field and staff at headquarters have a deep understanding of their context and the threats and risks that characterise their environment. Rather than an individual's situation, this approach focuses on environmental considerations. It calls for three kinds of measures:

- **Perceptions** - A key element in the new approach to Threat and Risk Assessment must be improved analysis leading to better understanding of how host communities in complex political and conflict situations perceive humanitarians. While humanitarians might perceive their actions as impartial and neutral, it does

not necessary mean that the host communities perceive them as such. Understanding and influencing current perceptions about the work and presence of humanitarians in certain environments, including the Middle East, must be key aspects of an enhanced risk management approach to operations. Effective management of perceptions also requires clear and agreed delineation of military, political and humanitarian roles and activities in a crisis situation. There is a range of possible steps that could be taken to address these concerns, including engaging more systematically in dialogue with counterparts in insecure environments, developing and implementing a code of conduct for aid workers and their interaction with beneficiary populations, and pro-active public information programmes. It is important to note that changing perceptions is a lengthy process. This is particularly true in societies that we do not understand, or in situations where governments or armed factions (including terrorists) are adamantly opposed to the message we are trying to pass.

- **Security arrangements** – Agreeing on procedures and security coordination measures to be employed by the wider humanitarian community, while working within the existing security framework. These are often basic and operational (e.g. establishment of communications networks and protocols).
- **Prevention** – Enforceable ‘conditionalities’ regarding the work of the humanitarian community (e.g. agreed triggers for suspension of activities). Other important elements of prevention include robust information and political analysis and situational forecasting, as well as pro-active deterrence efforts such as public information programmes to promote understanding and acceptance of the role of humanitarian actors.

Collective Security

The second component of a proactive approach to managing security is the collective approach.

Beneficiaries and parties to a conflict view humanitarians as performing apparently similar activities. The actions of one humanitarian actor therefore directly influence the standing of the others. This implies a high degree of communal responsibility among humanitarian agencies, which should be reflected in their approach to security.

The broader the group employing protection measures (e.g. communications, transportation and other protocols for example) the more efficient those measures become. The collective approach to staff security can be particularly important in pre-empting grievance-based security incidents. Discrepancies between organisations in the treatment of local staff and communities are a common motivation for violent action. Adopting similar approaches to staff and local communities, done in a systematic and methodological way, can help mitigate that motivation. Piecemeal and isolated actions by individual organisations have much less effect.

Unlike the current consensus-based approach, collective security implies that those involved are appropriately equipped and experienced to carry out humanitarian work. The emphasis on a reduced group of organisations, each with humanitarian capabilities, also implies a high degree of communal responsibility and allows for consistency of action. With this approach humanitarian workers must be more disciplined in adhering to the guidelines and principles established by the Security management system and any protocols developed at the field level.

Furthermore, a collective approach enriches humanitarians' understanding of their operating context through the sharing of information. In turn, a richer understanding of context allows for more effective analysis of risk. One natural corollary of this approach would be to strengthen the current accountability framework for security by supplementing the proceedings of UN Security Management Teams with the experiences of non-UN humanitarian actors.

The collective approach among a reduced number of agencies also complements existing risk reduction strategies, in that a smaller group of actors is easier to manage from a security perspective. Reducing the range of organisations present in a crisis needs to be done on the basis of relative contribution to the priority humanitarian needs in tandem with the total numbers of international personnel who can, with the resources available, be afforded adequate protection against the heightened risk.

The Way Forward

Following recent events in Afghanistan and Iraq, humanitarian organizations will very likely be reviewing their own approaches to security. While this is the responsibility of individual agencies, there is also a need to work collectively in order to better address the security environment in which we operate. This collective action could include a shared understanding of our mutual obligations regarding perceptions of our work. It should also include a commitment to addressing all attacks on humanitarians at the highest level, in order to reverse a burgeoning culture of impunity. These are only two examples. Building from past and recent experience, including the 2000/2001 work of the Inter-Agency Working Group Staff Security Task Force, IASC Members and Standing Invitees should identify all key elements of a collective approach to security and means for their implementation. These actions should not result in another layer of security management procedures but should allow us to better provide assistance to those in need.