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Safety and Security: Creating an Enabling and Conducive Environment for Humanitarian Assistance

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# Safety and security of humanitarian personnel

The United Nations and its humanitarian partners continue to operate in a global security environment that is increasingly dangerous, complex and challenging. The security situation is now marked by hybrid threats from multiple actors and by the intersection between terrorism and crime. Insecurity is expanding to new areas while conflicts remain unabated in other places, with a severe impact on the loss of lives and displacement of civilian populations.

The security environment is unlikely to improve in the near term. The World Humanitarian Data and Trends 2015 and the Global Humanitarian Overview 2016, issued by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat, have cautioned that a continuation of instability in specific countries is likely. The analysis shows a steady increase of political conflicts since 2006 and the lack of durable political solutions. In addition, an assessment of the global security environment for the next five years, conducted by the United Nations Department of Safety and Security, has concluded that armed conflict and violent extremism will continue to shape the future global security landscape. The assessment indicates that unrelated threat actors, who are enabled by the use of the internet and social media, intend to create more instability and violence worldwide.

As evidenced in the significant increase in direct attacks against their personnel and premises, United Nations organizations and their humanitarian partners are now operating at the frontlines of conflicts. At the call of their respective governing bodies, personnel are operating in some of the most dangerous places in the world, delivering life-saving or critical programmes in conflict zones marked by aerial bombings, heavy weapons or small arms fire and terrorist attacks, especially in populated urban areas; including in Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, the Syrian Arab Republic, Somalia and Yemen, where many Member States have ceased civilian activities. The deterioration in the security environment similarly affects NGO humanitarian personnel. The United Nations organizations and NGOs have all paid a heavy price in lives as a result of the worsening security situation.

Increasingly, humanitarian programmes and activities are now associated with the acceptance of very high residual security risks to humanitarian personnel. In addition to the daily missions into high risk areas, since 1 January 2016, the USG for UNDSS has approved over 300 missions to areas associated with very high risk in Libya, Iraq, Somalia, Syria and Yemen.

As highlighted in the annual data published in the Secretary General’s report on the Safety and Security of Humanitarian Personnel and Protection of United Nations Personnel, direct attacks against UN personnel and premises have increased threefold from 2014 to 2015. Locally recruited personnel accounted for 64% of all personnel affected by safety and security incidents, making them the primary victims of acts of violence against UN personnel. A total of 23 United Nations civilian personnel lost their lives and 99 more personnel were injured due to direct acts of violence, compared to 15 and 65 respectively in 2014. Furthermore, while the number of casualties from United Nations NGO implementing partners has decreased by 50 percent from 92 fatalities in 2014 (the data, based entirely on voluntary reporting to UNDSS is likely incomplete) casualties continue to take a heavier toll on NGO personnel than on United Nations personnel.

The protection of aid workers and health-care personnel remains a matter of deep concern. In particular, it is essential that all parties ensure the protection of health workers and health facilities in conflict situations to enable them to provide care for the local population, as emphasized by the General Assembly in its resolution 69/132 and by the Security Council in its most recent resolution, 2286 (2016), in which the Council strongly condemned, inter alia, acts of violence, attacks and threats against medical personnel and humanitarian personnel exclusively engaged in medical duties, their means of transport and equipment, as well as hospitals and other medical facilities.

The United Nations continues to make every effort to engage host Governments to protect human rights and respect the privileges and immunities of United Nations personnel. One important approach is to encourage more Member States to become parties to relevant international conventions, notably the Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel (1994), signed by 92 parties, and its Optional Protocol (2005), to include applicable provisions in their agreements concluded with the United Nations and to fully comply with those conventions and provisions. In addition, through the Secretary-General’s Human Rights Up Front initiative, human rights issues, including the protection of humanitarian and United Nations personnel, are regularly discussed with Member States.

Greater attention to humanitarian security has resulted in the creation of a series of policy frameworks, organizations, working groups, and databases among humanitarian actors. With support provided by Member States, the United Nations has significantly strengthened the security risk management process and the programme criticality framework tool. The programme criticality framework was reaffirmed as a system-wide mandatory policy in early 2016. In addition to increased participation in platforms and networks, most humanitarian organizations have increased the size of their security teams in high-risk environments and, on the global level, developed or revised related guidelines. However, these developments remain focused upon and embedded within international humanitarian entities rather than among national and local organizations that are so often present at the front lines.

Increased attention has also been given to humanitarian security analysis, and several organizations and platforms have emerged to tackle this issue. This has improved analysis of security risks, though existing data sources remain relatively fragmented and appear less capable of capturing incidents involving national humanitarian workers in certain contexts. Furthermore, progress in integrating security-related and programmatic decision-making has been relatively limited, with only a small number of organizations effectively combining the two.

Gaining acceptance is essential to the security of humanitarian workers and the creation of a permissive security environment. In recent years, there has been a growth in acceptance-focused research, access and acceptance position papers, and dedicated access and negotiation personnel/units within various entities. Several initiatives, for instance, have sought to analyze and build humanitarian capacity to engage with non-state armed groups. Despite progress, the emphasis on acceptance has not always filtered down to the country office and sub-office levels, where understandings of acceptance—and familiarity with organizations’ acceptance policies and guidelines—can at times be generally limited.

Building and maintaining acceptance by all relevant actors for humanitarian action should be a core component of an organization’s overall program and its security management strategy. Investment in the capacities and skills for humanitarian dialogue, outreach, and negotiation are needed, particularly given the current security environment.

Security risk management must be recognized as an integral part of programming and integrated into every level of humanitarian operations at the strategic, operational and programmatic levels. We need to ensure security considerations and related cost implications are integrated at the outset in program design, planning, and budgeting; this should include the prioritization of critical programs in situations of high risk, balancing security risks and humanitarian delivery to allow legitimate and justifiable decisions at every level of decision making, including through the consistent application of the programme criticality framework. Organizations with flexible resources are among the best able to stay and deliver given that they can invest in the requisite infrastructure, hardware, logistical assets, and other support to manage security and maintain operations.

A “security culture” needs to be embedded in both the mind sets and modes of operation, integrating security into the day-to-day thinking and decision making in order to enable the better delivery of humanitarian assistance. Organizations need to explicitly define and consciously determine their threshold of acceptable risk related to the criticality of programmes and ensure that all staff are aware of the organization’s risk threshold in each setting and are operating on the basis of informed consent.

A combination of training, enhanced physical security, risk management measures, threat and risk analysis, and a strengthened policy framework have enabled the organizations of the United Nations security management system to better protect their personnel and humanitarian partners. Through recruitment and training measures, UNDSS seeks, and will continue, to ensure that the profiles of security personnel deployed in humanitarian operational settings possess a sound understanding of humanitarian programming and acceptance-based practices. However, the Organization is increasingly being asked, and expected, to do more. This additional activity will require the Department of Safety and Security to continue to enhance its specialist capabilities, seek innovations and remain flexible and responsive to stay ahead of the fast-paced changes in the security environment.