
The Year of Living Dangerously: Attacks on Humanitarian Aid Workers in 2003

Humanitarian aid workers experienced more fatal attacks¹ in 2003 than in any prior year. The upsurge coincides with an increase in terrorist tactics targeting UN and non-governmental organization (NGO) activities. Of the 76 humanitarian aid workers reported killed in 2003, 43 were victims of terrorist-style or terrorist-affiliated attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan. The security threat to this profession will remain high; attacks and assaults against civilian aid workers have been on the rise throughout the first two months of 2004, compared with the same time period of 2003. As of March 7, 2004, ten aid workers have been killed in Afghanistan this year, compared to 13 killed in Afghanistan in all of 2003.

Where once the symbol of the Red Cross or affiliation with a humanitarian organization conferred “neutrality” and provided some protection from deliberate attack, belligerents now view humanitarian aid workers as “soft targets” for attack and assassination. In Iraq and Afghanistan, these attacks have been carried out by insurgents associated with al-Qaida or the former Taliban and Baathist regimes as intentional acts of terror, designed to undermine hope of humanitarian progress and intimidate humanitarian aid organizations. The UN and several NGOs withdrew international staff and suspended some humanitarian activities for several months in Iraq and Afghanistan in response to attacks. NGOs funded by or associated with the United States or Britain do not appear to be singled out for attack. Local staff working for NGOs and international organizations that assert neutrality (such as ICRC) seem to be victims of these attacks simply because they are easier targets with less security protection.

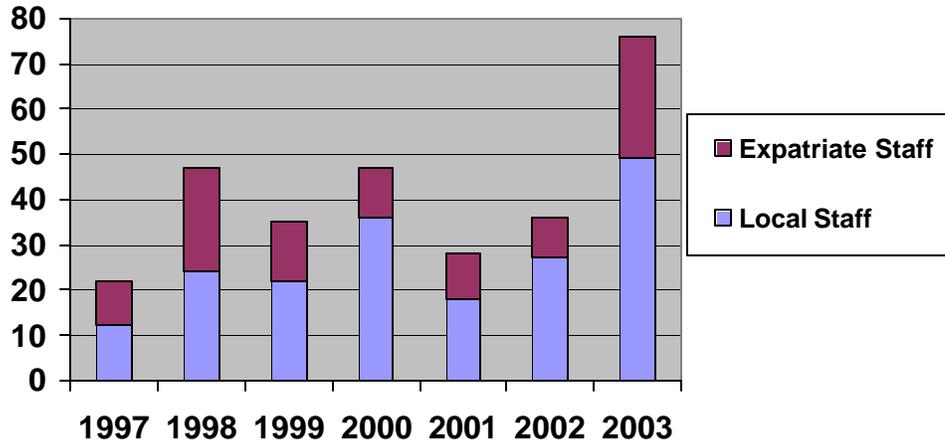
In addition to the terrorist-style attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq, evidence indicates that humanitarian aid workers in other countries are being deliberately targeted by armed groups opposed to humanitarian activities to assist local populations. So far in 2004, two local leaders of a Colombian NGO aiding displaced persons were assassinated because of their work. A group of eight UN and NGO personnel working together in Sudan on an emergency response mission in the south were deliberately attacked in February by armed militia; fortunately all managed to escape.

■ Attacks Escalating

Data on reported violent and fatal attacks against humanitarian workers since 1997 indicate the majority of the victims are local staff employed by NGOs. Actual numbers are undoubtedly higher because incidents against local staff tend to be under-reported compared to incidents involving international and UN personnel.

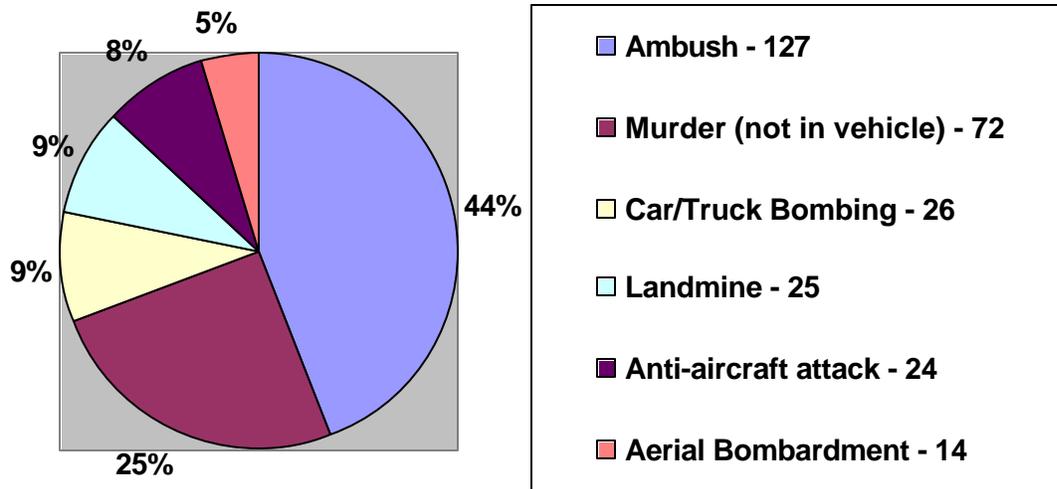
¹ For purposes of this paper, counted fatalities include all UN civilian and NGO employees (both expatriate and local staff, including drivers, guards, and translators) killed in the line of duty as the result of vehicle ambushes, murders, bombings, anti-aircraft attacks, and landmines. Counted fatalities also include all victims killed in attacks on UN or NGO-identified buildings and aircraft who might not have worked specifically for humanitarian aid organizations.

Reported number of humanitarian aid workers killed in acts of violence 1997 – 2003



Over the past seven years, most humanitarian workers have been killed during ambushes on vehicles and aid convoys, usually in remote and rebel-controlled areas where they are delivering supplies or conducting assessments. Deaths as a result of landmines make up 9% of the reported fatalities of humanitarian workers. Increased investment in vehicle protection (bullet-proofing, armor-plating, etc) and defensive driving training could reduce the number of these fatalities.

Types of Fatal Attacks Against Humanitarian Aid Workers killed in Action 1997 – 2003



Sources: UN Security Coordinator and public reports from the UN, NGOs and the media

Since 1997, Angola has accounted for the highest number of aid workers killed, mostly as a result of anti-aircraft attacks on two UN planes by UNITA in 1998 and 1999 and numerous deaths as a result of landmines. Afghanistan and Iraq rank second and third.

Countries with the Highest Number of Aid Workers Killed (1997 – 2003)	
Country	Number of Fatalities
Angola	58
Afghanistan	36
Iraq	32
Sudan	29
Democratic Republic of the Congo	18
Rwanda	17
Somalia	16
Burundi	11
Palestinian Authority	7
Uganda	7
Serbia and Montenegro (Kosovo)	5
Liberia	5

■ Security Measures Need Overhaul

The largest single attack in 2003 was the August 19th suicide truck bombing of the United Nations field office headquarters in Baghdad that claimed 23² lives and injured over 150 persons. An independent panel commissioned by the UN to investigate this bombing concluded, in its October 20, 2003 report, that the UN security management system had failed to take adequate measures in light of intelligence provided by the Coalition Provisional Authority and the increase in security incidents, including the car bomb that killed 18 people at the Jordanian embassy in central Baghdad on August 7. The panel further concluded that the UN's current security management system is dysfunctional and lacks accountability in its decision-making. It recommended that the entire UN security management system be reformed.

Over the past several years, reports of the UN Secretary-General to the UN General Assembly on the safety and security of UN personnel have recommended new procedures and coordination structures to enhance staff security. The Secretary-General has proposed measures to improve security, including appointing a Secretary Coordinator at the Assistant-Secretary-General level, allocating resources to hire of field and headquarters security officers, more training and counseling for general staff, and devising mechanisms to ensure consistent funding for the UN Security Coordinator. These mechanisms, such as the Trust Fund for the Security of UN Personnel and inclusion of staff security programs in the annual UN Consolidated Emergency Appeals, remain critically under-funded. The UN Minimum Operation Security Standards (MOSS)--intended to provide minimum requirements for the UN's field security management system, increase the security consciousness of UN personnel, and establish UN Country Team responsibility and accountability standards--have had slow and uneven implementation at the country level.

² This number includes the 19 UN staff (11 international and 8 nationals), as well as non-UN staff visiting the UN headquarters.

Understanding that NGOs are responsible for their own protection and can not rely on the host government, the UN, or peacekeeping or coalition military forces, the NGO community also is devoting increasing attention, resources, and training to the safety and security of their aid workers. InterAction, a consortium of U.S. NGOs, has created an NGO Security Coordinator position and a Security Advisory Group, which meets every couple of months to develop policies and training programs on NGO staff security. The NGO RedR also has developed training programs and security coordination systems to enhance security for NGO staff. The Afghanistan NGO Security Office (ANSO), managed by the International Rescue Committee, monitors and reports on security incidents in that country. In Iraq, the NGO Coordinating Committee for Iraq (NCII) operates a similar project. The Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID/OFDA) and the European Community Humanitarian Organization (ECHO) have been primary donors and promoters of these initiatives.

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