



Remembering the humanitarians

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Nine years ago a bomb ripped through the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad killing 22 people including the UN's chief envoy to Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello. Later that same year a series of suicide bombings struck other targets in Baghdad including the International Committee of the Red Cross – the first attack [of this kind](#) in the ICRC's history. Since then August 19th has been designated [World Humanitarian Day](#) to remind us of those who put themselves at risk to provide humanitarian assistance to people in need.

This year's anniversary will commemorate the [highest annual incidence](#) of major attacks against aid workers worldwide yet recorded. In the years that have elapsed since the Baghdad bombings a number of trends and developments have emerged which profoundly affect how, where and in what circumstances humanitarian workers can provide assistance to populations in peril. In assessing these trends a series of major studies and recent research by the ODI's [Humanitarian Policy Group](#) reveals that a deteriorating security environment is just one of many obstacles which now stand between humanitarian workers and civilians caught up in some of the world's most dangerous conflicts.

Aid workers under fire

The most striking of these is targeted violence against aid workers. The past year marks a [peak in the number of aid workers](#) who became victims of killings, kidnappings and attacks which resulted in serious injury. Since 2003, the number of annual incidents of major violence against aid workers has more than doubled, as has the number of aid workers who have become victims. Incidents in Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and Pakistan account for approximately 60 per cent of all killings, kidnappings and serious injuries suffered by humanitarians in the past year. [Afghanistan](#) remains the country with the most incidents by far – 51 in the last year alone.

[Researchers who track contemporary trends](#) in aid worker security have concluded that the upsurge in attacks against workers can be interpreted as a consequence of their membership of an international aid community, perceived as Western in orientation and Western in its agenda. Portraying humanitarian aid as a Trojan horse used by Western political actors with

ulterior political motives has been cited by a number of regimes as a justification to block international aid efforts – most recently by the Syrian authorities in [resisting the provision](#) of international relief to an estimated 1.5 million Syrians in need.

In the years following the Baghdad bombings Western humanitarian actors have come under increasing pressure to provide aid in line with donor governments' [foreign policy aims](#). This is hardly new, aid contributing countries have long pursued policy objectives through foreign aid budgets, but since the advent of the 'war on terror' Western humanitarian endeavours have been increasingly co-opted into ['stabilisation'](#) and counter-insurgency strategies whereby security and stability have been the desired outcome of western-led military operations. When military forces are seen to lead strategies to defend Western-supported governments and win the hearts and minds of local populations, this often taints humanitarians by association and provides insurgents with highly visible – and in their eyes, legitimate – targets. The perception of being allied with the 'other side' has created considerable difficulties for humanitarian workers as experience in Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and Pakistan demonstrates.

Criminalising the humanitarians?

Humanitarian funding from donor governments has increasingly been made [conditional upon assurances](#) that it will not benefit proscribed groups. This has led to a fall in funding and fear of prosecution among humanitarians working in some of the world's most difficult areas – and where there is the greatest humanitarian need. The introduction of counter-terrorism legislation after 9/11 led to unease in the humanitarian community about the wide interpretation of what constitutes 'material support' and how their work could fall foul of counter-terrorism laws. Research found that legislation has had a considerable impact on humanitarian action since it can criminalise the transfer of resources to terrorist groups, irrespective of the humanitarian character of such action or the [absence of any intent](#) to support terrorist acts.

In the [case of Somalia](#), funding declined by half between 2008-11 following the designation by the US Government in 2008 of Al Shabaab, an Islamist group as 'terrorist' and subject to UN sanctions from April 2010. Fears that Al Shabaab was benefiting from humanitarian assistance led the Office of Foreign Assets Control to suspend over \$50 million in humanitarian aid for Somalia in 2009 – precisely the period when conditions for famine were taking hold. Until donor governments begin to place humanity over politics, the threat of criminal action will continue to undermine life-saving operations in the world's worst humanitarian crises.

In addition to counter-terrorism legislation and donor funding restrictions Western governments have aggressively sought to [criminalise engagement with specific armed groups](#)

limiting the opportunities for humanitarian actors to engage with militant groups in order to gain access to populations within their territory. This goes against long established principles of international humanitarian law which recognises that negotiating with all actors in a conflict is necessary to gain access to civilians affected by war. There is no legal requirement for parties to unconditionally permit humanitarian access and 'humanitarian space' is an ideal to which we aspire, but one that is rarely granted unconditionally. Humanitarian access has to be negotiated and earned. If aid workers are to be criminalised for 'talking to terrorists' how then can they negotiate agreements to provide assistance to populations within the control of armed groups?

In addressing some of these questions a [recent study](#) found that where once it was the UN that led the way on humanitarian negotiations with armed groups this has significantly diminished in recent years. After examining UN missions in Afghanistan, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, researchers concluded that the lack of engagement hindered efforts to obtain access to people in need and found that engagement with armed groups was 'limited, particularly at a senior level'. The dual nature of the UN as both a political and humanitarian actor continues to present particular difficulties for UN aid agencies since the UN's political role in some of the world's most contested environments places it squarely in the Western camp – at worst it is seen and named as an enemy target and at best as aligned with the political and security objectives of donor states. The number of UN staff who became victims of attack over the past year accounts for almost two thirds of all aid worker casualties.

[Paying the price: national aid workers](#)

The unprecedented level of violence against international aid workers has led to a scaling down of their presence, withdrawal of staff and relocation to more secure locations where they can conduct operations 'remotely' – the so called 'bunkerisation' of the aid industry, characterised by fortified buildings, security guards and barbed-wire topped perimeter fences. The diminishing access and withdrawal of international staff in some of the most dangerous areas has led to an increasing [reliance on national staff](#) and local organisations to remain when expatriate staff pull out. Host state restrictions on the access and movement of international staff and, in extreme cases, the [expulsion of international agencies](#) have intensified this trend and with it the outsourcing of aid delivery in dangerous terrain.

National aid workers make up the majority of aid staff in the field – upwards of 90 per cent. They also comprise the vast majority of aid workers killed, kidnapped or seriously injured in the past year. Yet the increase in the deployment of national staff has often been underpinned by the erroneous assumption that 'locals' are less likely than expatriates to be victims of violence. This is dangerously simplistic: individuals from another region or province are often

perceived by local populations to be outsiders and association with particular ethnic or religious groups, clan affiliations or economic privilege might be an additional risk factor. Perhaps it comes as no surprise then that the past year has marked a high point in the number of national aid workers who were killed, seriously injured or kidnapped as international agencies become increasingly risk averse. Again, this figure is the [highest recorded](#) and the disparity between the number of international to national aid worker victims – a ratio of 1:10 – is also one of the highest.

Aid workers have always operated in dangerous terrain - they are estimated to be in one of the [top five most hazardous civilian occupations](#). Also, the recording of fatalities is a recent development and the reporting of incidents has improved in recent years. [Research](#) has also challenged the conventional wisdom that access to people in need is diminishing. Rather, attacks against aid workers can be seen as a consequence of the expansion of humanitarian engagement in conflict-affected states; an increase in casualties would be consistent with this expanding 'humanitarian footprint'. The statistics should also be viewed in light of the humanitarian system's extended reach to conflicts within states. Simply put: more aid workers are operating in more dangerous places compared to the past.

Violence toward aid workers has very real consequences for the civilians they aim to help. According to the UN Secretary-General's last report on the plight of civilians in armed conflict, it is estimated that more than 26 million people fled conflict or disaster in the last year. The majority of casualties in today's conflicts are civilians, many of whom suffer deliberate targeting, indiscriminate violence, forced disappearance, torture and the deliberate withholding of humanitarian assistance. If the thin line of humanitarians cannot hold who will be left to stand between civilians and the horror of war? And who will remain to carry out the aid work, memorably described as 'injecting a measure of humanity always insufficient, into situations that should not exist'?

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