

Easy Targets

In conflict zones throughout Asia and the rest of the world, development professionals are doing their jobs in increasingly dangerous environments

BY Joe Cochrane

Being an aid worker in Somalia in the 1990s was a bit like being a high-stakes gambler on a losing streak: the odds always favored something bad happening. Daily specials included being harassed or robbed at roadside checkpoints manned by criminal gangs, occasionally being beaten by thugs, suffering a concussion or broken bones in a car accident, or contracting dengue fever, cholera, or any of a dozen other diseases common to the area.

Incredibly and cryptically, veteran aid workers in Somalia look longingly back on the 1990s as the

good old days, compared with the unprecedented levels of violence and murder they have faced in recent years. Today, it is nearly impossible

SECURITY ISSUES United Nations trucks carrying food and emergency supplies drive through the town of Vavuniya in Sri Lanka in October 2008. The UN resumed aid supplies to the then rebel-held northern areas after receiving guarantees for the safety of aid workers. The 25-year war between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels ended in 2009.

to conduct sustained humanitarian operations there, they say.

“Agencies now have a threat-to-benefit matrix on their operations,” explains an Australian aid worker based in Africa, who asked not to be named because it might endanger his relief work.

In Somalia in 2008 alone, 35 humanitarian workers were killed, 18 were seriously injured, and more than a dozen others were abducted. The shocking levels of violence dropped last year, but the reason gave no cause for celebration: there were very few aid workers left to target.



PICTURE CREDIT: AFP

"There were 140 incidents every 2 days in 2008: roadside bombs, abductions and assassinations—hardened pre-meditated crimes, not the opportunistic robbery on the side of the road," he explains. "It's a completely different set of threats that are now facing humanitarian workers."

And Somalia is just the beginning of the story.

AID WORKERS TARGETED

In Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and other countries with conflict zones throughout Asia and the rest of the world, humanitarian workers and development professionals are laboring in increasingly dangerous environments. Since 1997, the number of attacks in which aid workers were killed, kidnapped, or injured has risen dramatically worldwide, according to a 2009 report by the Center on International Cooperation and the Overseas Development Institute. There was a sharp increase in these incidents, particularly kidnappings, from 2006 to 2009.

In Somalia, 2008 is believed to be

the worst year on record, with 260 aid workers killed, kidnapped, or seriously injured in violent attacks around the world. By comparison, there were only 32 such incidents a decade ago.

Afghanistan, Somalia, and the Darfur region of Sudan together account for more than 60% of violent incidents and aid worker victims, according to the report.

"Relative rates of attacks per number of aid workers in the field have also increased by 61%," the report states. "The 2008 fatality rate for international aid workers exceeds that of UN [United Nations] peacekeeping troops."

The statistics are telling. In the past 12 years, attacks against UN personnel and many of the private

IMPROMPTU PALLBEARERS Hospital workers carry the coffin of one of three female international aid workers killed in an attack claimed by the insurgent Taliban in August 2008 in the province of Logar, some 50 kilometers south of Kabul, Afghanistan.

nongovernment organizations (NGOs) with which they are associated have risen, but incidents involving the staunchly neutral International Committee of the Red Cross have fallen.

"The UN flag no longer ensures protection. That's what you hear in the corridors of power," says Graeme Membrey, a senior security adviser with the UN Department of Safety and Security based in Jakarta. "And I'm not just talking about the UN, but those whom we partner with—all the major NGOs."

Membrey attributes the shift from seeing humanitarian workers as neutral angels of mercy to legitimate targets to the end of the Cold War. "East versus West," he explains, was replaced with smaller conflicts related to nationalism, ethnicity, and religion.

"All of a sudden we had less formalized security structures. From that, you end up getting a weakening of law and order, and people take advantage of that," Membrey says. "Iconic symbols, such as the UN flag or NGO banners, are no longer secure but a target."



PICTURE CREDIT: AFP

POLITICALLY MOTIVATED ATTACKS

Sudan had the largest number of separate incidents of violence between 2006 and 2008, with more than 90. Most were attributed to common banditry. In places like Afghanistan and Somalia, however, bandits are now colluding with or have been replaced by extremist political and religious forces with national ambitions. In the case of the Al Qaeda terrorist group, the goals are global.

"Attacks on aid workers in the most insecure contexts were increasingly politically motivated, reflecting a broad targeting of the aid enterprise as a whole," notes the report by the Center on International Cooperation and the Overseas Development Institute.

And the increasingly political motive in attacks on humanitarian operations, according to aid workers, is in some cases based on a hatred of the West.

"Aid agencies see attacks as a reflection against them, rather than their operations, and the rules changed after [the] 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States," says the Australian aid worker, pointing to Somalia as a prime example.

"They're upset at the West, the policy, the 'war on terror,' the perceived invasion of Islamic countries," he says. "So who do they have to target? Aid workers bare the brunt of this."

According to the report, six of the seven worst countries for major violence against aid workers between 2006 and 2008 were Muslim-majority nations: Afghanistan, Chad, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia and Sudan. The seventh was Sri Lanka, where a long-running war between the Sinhalese Buddhist-majority government and Tamil Hindu rebels ended in 2009.

HOMEGROWN VIOLENCE

The spike in attacks against aid workers is related to the perceived "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West, but usually has homegrown roots, sources say.

"These are all countries where there's

"The 2008 fatality rate for international aid workers exceeds that of UN peacekeeping troops"

—Center on International Cooperation and the Overseas Development Institute

ongoing violence connected with Islamic movements. It's places like that where we have both extremists and people associated with 'Western' organizations," explains Stephanie Bunker, a spokeswoman for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in New York. "Religion plays a role, but also there are political conflicts in places like Pakistan. This is a struggle between state and non-state actors who are jousting for power, influence, territory."

Statistics compiled by the UN involving its personnel show thousands of incidents in non-Muslim countries across the globe—ranging from routine break-ins and thefts to serious problems, such as intimidation, assaults, kidnappings, and murders.

However, others say it is no coincidence that Muslim nations—Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Somalia—are among the most dangerous in the world for humanitarian operations. All are considered targets in the United States "war on terror."

"There is a religious element to it because [aid workers] are seen as tools of Western governments," says the Australian aid worker in Africa, who also worked in Afghanistan and Pakistan. "They are a force multiplier for the military. They want to clear, hold, build, to win the hearts and minds."

POLITICIZING AID

Holly Ritchie knows a thing or two about being perceived as a Western lackey. The 33-year-old Briton was once an investment banker, but gave it up to fulfill her dream of doing development work. She earned a master's degree in international development in Holland, worked in a shelter in Brazil, and eventually found her way to Afghanistan in 2004 to work for the British group Afghanaid.

"It was totally purposeful and deliberate," Ritchie says of her journey. "It's been incredibly interesting. You're at the forefront of what's going on in the world of global politics. At the same time, it's a fascinating country."

Now a Kabul-based freelance consultant, Ritchie's fascination with Afghanistan is bridled by the fact that she is not nearly as safe as she was when she first arrived. The escalation in fighting between the NATO-backed government and the Taliban insurgents means that about half of the country is now effectively off-limits to her.

She says she was not surprised by the statistics on increasing attacks against aid workers: "The problem with aid is that it is neutral, but today it gets confused with political agenda."

In Afghanistan, she adds, aid workers are perceived to represent much more than their organization; they are seen as representing the West. "Five years ago, there was no problem with a Western face, but today you're seen as non-Afghani and potentially part of an invasion force... or a spy."

Ritchie now has to assess whether it is safe to travel to areas for work or to contract with certain local NGOs. Being an independent consultant, she says she has the luxury of operating low-profile and traveling in unmarked vehicles, unlike UN colleagues.

"Working with the UN, I felt 100 times more nervous, even though you have the great big cars and bullet proof windows," Ritchie says. "You



UNDER THREAT A man working for a United States-based Christian charity is brought to a field hospital after a militant attack near the town of Oghi in the Mansehra district of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) in Pakistan on 10 March 2010. Militants armed with guns and grenades stormed the offices of the charity organization. The attack was blamed on Islamist rebels.

killing the Secretary General's Special Envoy to Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and more than 20 other UN personnel.

The next year, the UN Department of Safety and Security went from a small office to a full department, with a deputy secretary general, Membrey says. "That to me is a reflection of where we are in the world."

The response has allowed the UN and other NGOs to stand their ground in hotspots around the world, to be out helping people. The complexity of the threats they face is enormous and varies from country to country.

According to Membrey, aid organizations are seeing the need for more direct on-the-ground control over security, as well as better coordination in conflict zones with the UN "so the NGOs can focus 90% of their time on aid."

"The key is to get out from behind the barricades and win hearts and minds," he says.

To wit, the UN and international aid groups would do well to get on the same level as those they are trying to help, Ritchie explains. "If you go around in bulletproof cars with police escorts, it [negatively] changes the way that aid work is carried out."

In the debate between increased security concerns and the desire to be closer to the people they are trying to help, international humanitarian aid workers once again find themselves with no easy answers. ■

are supposed to be safe...but you go around in these big white vehicles. You might as well put a big red flag out the window."

Aid workers, analysts, and security experts are quick to point out that locally hired humanitarian workers face far greater dangers than international staff because they permanently live in strife-torn areas and do jobs that international staff cannot do because of security issues. By one estimate, for every one international aid worker killed in the line of duty, eight national staff are killed.

"They are the true heroes, working for 20 to 30 years. It's kind of disgusting. If you have 12 national staff killed, no one says anything. But if one or two international staff are killed, there's a big uproar," the Australian aid worker says.

SECURITY BEFORE DEVELOPMENT

Oddly, in conflict-torn zones the security costs are often so high that they eat into monies targeted for assistance and development projects.

Scott Richards, a field security officer in Afghanistan for the Asian Development Bank (ADB), says that while ADB staff maintains a lower profile than aid workers, they are also slowed down by the lack of security.

"We have trouble getting out to see our projects," he says, which include a railway being built to connect the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan border to the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, and a ring road in western Afghanistan.

"The biggest way it negatively affects ADB's mission is it increases our costs. Not just ADB [offices] but each one of our projects requires an additional security component," Richards says. "There are costs that are being incurred that would otherwise be put into development."

In the medium term, however, aid and development groups have little option but to spend more on security, given the increasing risks to their personnel. The watershed incident for the UN was the suicide bombing of its Baghdad headquarters in August 2003,