

Forum: Economic and Social Council

Issue: Protecting humanitarian aid workers operating in protracted and frozen conflict zones.

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TOPIC INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian aid workers play one of the most important, yet dangerous jobs in healing the wounds caused by an armed conflict. However the environment in which they operate is becoming increasingly hostile towards them. Although they are protected as non-combatants under international law they are increasingly being targeted and extorted by combatants seeking to weaponise humanitarian aid access and weaken civilian populations. This targeting against them has denied aid to populations desperately in need.

These threats are severely amplified in protracted conflicts, such as Syria or Sudan, where decades of instability have led to a total collapse of state institutions. This exposes workers to a mix of both state and non-state actors operating with a complete disregard for international law. In frozen conflicts, while there may be no active conflict, aid workers are faced with severe diplomatic hurdles, such as visa delays and strict counter terrorism regulations, purposefully preventing them from operating.

A particularly alarming trend is the shift in combatants attacking aid deliverance organisations. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), more than 90% of personnel casualties are from locally recruited personnel. Even more worrying is the fact that most attacks are carried out by militaries bound to international law, not regional warlords and insurgents. This has led most humanitarian groups to abandon the existing protection systems out of fear of being deliberately targeted.

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Armed Conflict

An armed conflict is a situation in which there is sustained fighting between states or between a state and organised armed groups. Armed conflicts are important to this topic because

humanitarian workers often operate in areas where fighting, attacks and insecurity can directly threaten their safety.

Frozen Conflict

A frozen conflict is a situation in which active armed conflict has been brought to an end, oftentimes via a standoff, but no peace or other political framework resolves the conflict to the satisfaction of the combatants. Therefore, legally the conflict can start again at any moment, creating an environment of insecurity and instability.

Humanitarian Aid

Material or logistical assistance provided for humanitarian purposes, typically in response to humanitarian crises. The primary objective of humanitarian assistance is to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity.¹

Humanitarian Aid Workers

A humanitarian aid worker is an employee or volunteer of a non-profit aid group who provides material, logistical, or technical relief to people affected by disasters, conflicts, or other crises.²

Impartiality

Impartiality means that humanitarian assistance is provided based on need, without discrimination based on factors such as nationality, race, religion, political beliefs or other characteristics. This principle is important in conflict zones because aid workers are expected to assist people affected by different sides of a conflict according to their needs.
ICRC — Fundamental Principles

International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is the set of international rules that seek to limit the effects of armed conflict by protecting people who are not, or are no longer, participating in hostilities and restricting the methods and means of warfare. IHL is directly relevant to this topic because it

¹ "Unterm." Unterm.Un.Org, <https://unterm.un.org/unterm2/en/view/59171aec-7207-4d95-b851-7b7b6d7b27ea>

² CDC. "Humanitarian Aid Workers." Yellow Book, 22 Apr. 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/yellow-book/hcp/travel-for-work-other/humanitarian-aid-workers.html>

provides important protections for humanitarian personnel carrying out their work during armed conflicts.³

Protracted Conflict Regions

Regions which are experiencing prolonged armed violence longer than a traditional conflict. Oftentimes such conflicts can last several decades and involve numerous parties.⁴

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Historical background

The origins of humanitarian aid

The first modern organization to provide humanitarian aid was the red cross, established by swiss businessman henry dunant after witnessing soldiers left to die on the battlefield. In 1863 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was created with the aim of providing aid to soldiers. One year later the first Geneva convention was signed to establish certain guidelines for legal armed conflicts. This period establishes a principle known as "humanitarian contract" which states that if humanitarian aid providers remain impartial to the conflict, the combatants would respect their actions and not explicitly target them.

WW2 and cold war

After witnessing the horrors of WW2 the international community signed the 1949 Geneva convention formalising the protection of aid workers. The United Nations (UN) was created creating specialised agencies on human rights. During the early stages of the cold war the situation remained largely unchanged until 1967 when the Nigerian civil war was fought, when international NGOs(Non-Governmental Organisations) like Doctors Without Borders began speaking out against these actions, thus challenging the inherent neutrality of third party organisations until this point.

³ INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS. "What Is International Humanitarian Law?" International Committee of the Red Cross, International Committee of the Red Cross, 30 Dec. 2014, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/what-international-humanitarian-law>

⁴ "Conflict | UNDRR." Www.Undrr.Org, <https://www.undrr.org/hips-cluster/conflict>

Rwandan genocide

The 1994 Rwandan genocide is widely considered one of the biggest failures of the up to that point established humanitarian aid system. The international community's inability to stop the massacre combined with the use of refugee camps by militias to regroup, lead to the establishment of the red cross/red crescent code of conduct, a guideline for the successful delivery of humanitarian aid combined with a professionalization of the sector and a more logistical approach to aid delivery, drastically reformed the system.

21st century post 911

Since the 2000s the work environment for humanitarian aid workers has drastically deteriorated and the risks associated with humanitarian relief have increased. This can be traced back to three main factors. The first and most important one is non-state actors disregarding international and humanitarian law. The second is post 9/11 counterterrorism measures which have criminalized the deliverance of humanitarian aid in conflict zones controlled by terrorist organizations. Finally the last reason is the increased deliberate targeting of aid workers in order to weaken the population.

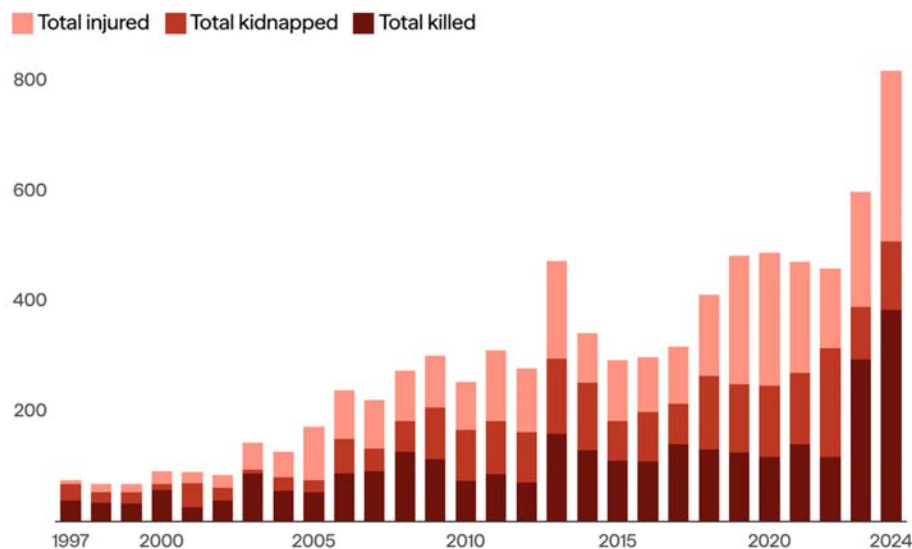


Figure 1: Statistic depicting the attacks on humanitarian aid workers⁵

⁵ Graphed by UNOCHA. "Attacks on Aid Workers Worldwide'(1997-2024) Across Battlefields, Aid Workers Are Targeted More Than Ever | Council on Foreign Relations." Cfr.Org, 19 Aug. 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/across-battlefields-aid-workers-are-targeted-more-ever>

The above graph shows all aid worker deaths that occurred worldwide from 1997 to 2024. The spike in 2013 can be attributed to the escalation of the Syrian civil war. The more concerning pattern is the major increase seen in recent years. This can't be traced back to a single conflict but rather a multitude of factors including the Sudanese civil war and the Israel - Gaza war.

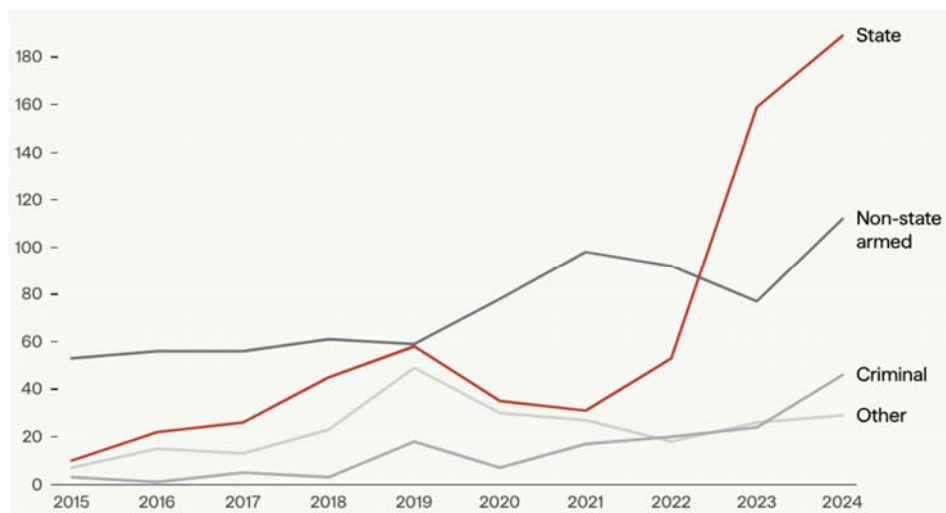


Figure 2: "Number of violent incidents against aid workers by perpetrator" (2015-2024)

This graph depicts the perpetrator of each attack on aid workers and it reveals an even more worrying trend. According to UNOCHA the violence is mostly being perpetrated by states themselves, even those who have ratified international humanitarian law. In past conflicts, these violations typically came from local militias or other groups that weren't bound to the conventions, such as the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Now, it is state militaries, which are legally bound by the conventions, who are launching the attacks. This poses a significant issue, since many humanitarians have stopped declaring themselves on the field and trusting the already established systems to protect them, especially in protracted conflict zones, since doing so would essentially paint a target on their back for militants to act upon.

Why this is happening

This increasing disobedience from state actors is owed to them not having an incentive to obey international law. There are many factors at play, including whether countries feel that they can win, even when following international law and whether they have something to lose by disregarding it. In the Ukraine-Russia war for example members of the Ukrainian army have

stated that they don't disregard international law because they "don't want to be like Russia". Obeying the law differentiates Ukrainians from their adversary and keeps them in broad international favor. On the contrary the Sudanese Civil war has been a race to the bottom with both parties committing horrid atrocities, against each other, as well as aid workers.

For countries participating in conflicts which have gathered more attention, like Israel and Russia, what is lacking is external pressure. International law relies on other states enforcing it. International counts like the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) have limited enforcement mechanisms, while the UN Security Council (UNSC) is plagued by conflicts of interest between its permanent members.⁶



Figure 3: Picture depicting the damage on a vehicle during an Israeli air strike on April 2, 2024⁷

Major protracted conflicts currently happening

Many conflicts around the world have continued for years without a clear or lasting resolution, leaving humanitarian workers operating in places where the situation can change very quickly. In countries such as Sudan, Syria, Yemen and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, humanitarian organisations continue to provide food, healthcare and other essential support even though violence and insecurity remain ongoing. This creates a difficult situation for aid workers, as they are still expected to reach people in need while dealing with unstable front lines, armed groups and limited access to certain areas. The lack of a lasting political solution means that these risks can continue for years, making the protection of humanitarian workers an important part of maintaining aid operations.

⁶ "Across Battlefields, Aid Workers Are Targeted More Than Ever | Council on Foreign Relations." *Cfr.Org*, 19 Aug. 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/across-battlefields-aid-workers-are-targeted-more-ever>

⁷ "Damage Done by Israeli Airstrike to Vehicle." *Getty Images*, 2 Apr. 2024, <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/palestinians-are-standing-next-to-a-vehicle-in-deir-al-news-photo/2126121537>

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Syrian Arab Republic

The Syrian Civil war is one of the most important case studies on the weak points of the modern aid deliverance system. The nation has faced major challenges regarding aid protection with both actors targeting clearly marked aid infrastructure. Over 900 medical and humanitarian operatives have been killed in Syria over the course of the crisis. Furthermore the central government in Damascus has historically denied travel permits, restricted the legal ways for NGOs to register themselves and forced them to operate only in specific areas allowed by the state. This forced the UNSC to pass resolutions to allow humanitarian access into areas controlled by the rebels without state approval, through specific corridors. However these corridors would often get deliberately targeted in order to prevent the flow of aid.⁸

Federal Republic of Somalia

Following the collapse of the Government in 1991 Somalia entered decades of instability, leading to the rise of Al-Shabaab in the early 2000s, which has viewed humanitarian organisations as foreign intervention leading to the ban of many major international relief organizations, even when the country was going through severe famines. Furthermore those allowed to operate are faced with disproportionately large registration and passage fees, leading many NGOs to abandon operations in Somalia altogether. Following 9/11 counterterrorism laws got even stricter leading to NGOs still operating being criticised by the international community for cooperating with Al-Shabaab, which was classified as a terrorist organization. This ultimately forced the UN to pass exemptions from the counterterrorism laws in areas controlled by Al-Shabaab.

Switzerland

Switzerland's foreign policy has played a central role in global humanitarian work. As the birthplace of the Geneva Conventions and of the red cross it has historically been in favor of protecting IHL. It also acts as a middle ground for warring parties to negotiate an end to their conflicts. In May 2024 Switzerland led the negotiations on SC resolution 2730, resolution targets threats like state disinformation and deliberate bureaucratic hurdles.

⁸ "Medical Personnel Are Targeted in Syria." Physicians for Human Rights, <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/medical-personnel-are-targeted-in-syria/>

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

The ICRC is an independent humanitarian organisation with a specific mandate to protect victims of armed conflict. It works to monitor, report and protect humanitarian aid workers worldwide. Furthermore it mitigates violations against humanitarian aid personnel and creates mandates to ensure their wellbeing. Because it operates on the frontlines its personnel face significant risks. Additionally the misuse of red cross emblems by warring parties and direct ambushes and attacks on its convoys have made it increasingly difficult for it to operate, since it relies on neutrality rather than armed forces to protect its convoys.

European Union (EU)

The EU through its Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and International Aid Operations (ECHO) is one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid worldwide. However it doesn't just act as a donor, rather it also functions as a negotiator by leading diplomatic efforts to enforce IHL. In recent years the EU has prioritized expanding accountability mechanisms for attacks on civilian infrastructure, and funding security training and equipment for local NGOs. However domestic budgetary constraints and shifting priorities sparked debate over how sustainable the EU's aid system really is.

The United States of America (USA)

Historically the USA has been one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid worldwide, with most of it being administered by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The US maintains strict legal regulations regarding counter-terrorism sanctions, as well as material support to international terrorist organisations. This can complicate operations in protracted conflict zones, especially those controlled by non-state armed groups (NSAGs), as aid organisations, both local and international risk de-funding by most commercial banks. Furthermore the US has drastically cut back on humanitarian aid globally after president Trump took office.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
February 9 1863	Establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross with the aim

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	of providing humanitarian aid to victims of armed conflict.
August 22 1864	First Geneva Conventions are held to establish guidelines for modern warfare.
August 12 1949	Adoption of the four Geneva Conventions, establishing basic international protections for civilians and medical personnel during wartime.
December 9 1994	Adoption of the Convention on the Safety of United Nations and associated Personnel by the UN General Assembly
July 17 1997	Adoption of the Rome Statute by the International Criminal Court to officially classify intentional attacks against personnel, installations, materials, or vehicles involved in aid deliverance as potential war crimes
August 19 2003	A bomb attack on the UN headquarters in Baghdad results in the death of 22 people. This later leads to the creation of world humanitarian aid day.
May 23-24 2016	World Humanitarian Summit, reveals that the majority of aid worker casualties are local and demands the coverage of their security by international bodies.

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

UNSC Resolution 2730

UNSC Resolution 2730 urges Member States to protect aid personnel under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), remove administrative blockades and counter disinformation targeting aid groups. Adopted in 2024, the resolution is particularly relevant to protracted and frozen conflicts because humanitarian workers can remain exposed to threats even when active fighting has reduced or stopped. It also calls on states and parties to conflicts to respect the neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian organisations, allowing them to carry out their work without being

treated as a political or military threat. This is important because aid workers often need to operate in areas controlled by different groups and rely on both sides respecting their humanitarian role.⁹

Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel

The Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel is a political declaration committing states to enforce IHL, guarantee unhindered access, ensure equal safety standards for local and international workers, and enforce legal accountability for violent attacks. This is especially important because local humanitarian workers often continue working in their own communities even when international organisations have reduced their operations because of security concerns. The declaration therefore recognises that protecting humanitarian personnel should apply equally to both local and international staff. It also places greater emphasis on accountability, meaning that attacks against aid workers should not simply be treated as unavoidable consequences of working in a conflict zone.¹⁰

UNSC Resolution 2157

UNSC Resolution 2157 demands that all parties to conflict permit unhindered humanitarian access and requires states to investigate and prosecute incidents of violence against relief workers. This is important because humanitarian organisations cannot protect or assist civilians if they are unable to safely reach areas affected by conflict. In protracted conflicts, restrictions on humanitarian access can continue for years, meaning that aid workers may repeatedly face checkpoints, blockades, threats or attacks while trying to reach the same communities. The resolution therefore supports both immediate access to people in need and greater accountability when humanitarian personnel are attacked.¹¹

UNGA Resolution 46/182

UNGA Resolution 46/182 created the Emergency Relief Coordinator and established the framework for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). It also defined humanity, neutrality, impartiality and operational independence as core principles of humanitarian action. These principles are particularly important for protecting aid workers because remaining neutral and independent can help humanitarian organisations maintain access to communities

⁹ UNSC Resolution 2730 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/152/24/pdf/n2415224.pdf>

¹⁰ "Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel (22 September 2025) - World." *ReliefWeb*, 22 Sept. 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/declaration-protection-humanitarian-personnel-22-september-2025>

¹¹ UN. Security Council (69th year : 2014. "Resolution 2175 (2014) / Adopted by the Security Council at Its 7256Th Meeting, on 29 August 2014." *United Nations Digital Library System*, UN, 29 Aug. 2014, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/778588?v=pdf>

controlled by different sides of a conflict. The resolution continues to form an important part of how the international humanitarian system coordinates responses to major crises.¹²

UNSC Resolution 1502

UNSC Resolution 1502 addresses the safety and security of humanitarian personnel and calls for attacks against humanitarian workers to be prevented and appropriately addressed under international law. It also encourages states to take action through their national legal systems when humanitarian personnel are deliberately targeted. This is relevant to protracted and frozen conflicts because aid workers can remain in danger even when they are not directly involved in the fighting. Having international rules against attacks on humanitarian personnel can help establish that these attacks are not simply an accepted risk of humanitarian work, but serious violations that should be investigated.

United Nations — UNSC Resolution 1502

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PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Saving Lives Together (SLT) Framework

The most significant previous attempt to solve the issue is the Saving Lives Together (SLT) framework, with the aim of bridging the operational divide between the UN and NGOs. It was created to share information regarding threats to aid delivery missions and coordinate evacuations in high-risk areas. However, it has failed to gain enough traction in some protracted conflict zones because of its voluntary nature. Furthermore, the framework has historically struggled to include smaller, local NGOs, who are often exposed to many of the same or greater risks as international organisations. This is a major weakness because local organisations are

¹² Sess.: 1991-1992), UN General Assembly (46th. "Strengthening of the Coordination of Humanitarian Emergency Assistance of the United Nations :: Resolution /: Adopted by the General Assembly.." Digitallibrary.Un.Org, 14 Apr. 1992, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/135197?v=pdf>

often able to continue delivering aid when international organisations cannot, meaning that their safety needs to be included in security planning.

Humanitarian Notification Systems for Deconfliction (HNSD)

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has humanitarian notification systems for deconfliction, which allow NGOs to share the location of static infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools, and temporary aid convoy routes. Military commanders are expected to avoid striking these locations once they have been notified. However, in conflicts such as Sudan or Syria, these systems can fall apart when parties to the conflict do not cooperate or when there is a lack of trust between humanitarian organisations and armed actors. Combatants may also deliberately attack civilian locations despite being aware of their humanitarian purpose. This makes deconfliction systems useful as a precaution, but they cannot fully protect aid workers if the parties involved do not respect the information provided to them.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Streamlining Bureaucratic Processes

States in protracted conflicts often use complicated bureaucratic processes as a way of delaying or outright blocking humanitarian aid, with the excuse of them being national security threats. By pre-approving visas or creating faster entry processes into the country, aid personnel can be delivered quicker and more effectively into the country. Additionally, resolutions could establish a relevant UN organ that categorises security equipment, such as body armour and satellite phones, as purely humanitarian imports in order to prevent host governments from blocking them as dual-use goods. Simplifying these processes would allow organisations to respond more quickly while still giving states the ability to carry out necessary security checks.

Reducing Counterterrorism Sanctions on Humanitarian Aid Bodies

In frozen conflicts where Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) are involved, humanitarian aid bodies are paralysed by the fear of being prosecuted by their host governments for paying tolls and taxes in regions controlled by NSAGs. Strict laws, both international and local, can make it illegal to interact with organisations labelled as terrorists. These could be relaxed only for humanitarian aid agencies, who have no other choice but to cross an area controlled by NSAGs in order to deliver vital aid. Creating specific humanitarian exemptions could allow aid organisations to negotiate safe access without providing material support to armed groups. This would help protect humanitarian workers while still maintaining broader counterterrorism measures.

Addressing Misinformation and Disinformation Campaigns

Hostile governments and combatants often accuse aid organisations of espionage and cooperating with terrorists, triggering physical violence. This can be countered by establishing local communication channels and educating the population about aid delivery. Humanitarian organisations could work with local leaders, communities and media organisations to explain their neutral role and make it clear that their purpose is to provide assistance rather than support a particular side. This could help build trust with local populations and reduce the risk of aid workers being targeted because of false information.

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