

Protecting Those Who Protect: A Joint NGO Statement for Humanitarian Workers' Safety

Ahead of the International Conference on the Protection of Aid Workers, co-hosted by the European Commission and the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) on 15 – 16 October, VOICE and 67 NGOs and networks call on the EU and its Member States to seize this pivotal moment to turn commitments into action.

Two years after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution [2730](#) and one year after the launch of the [Declaration](#) for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel, signed by all EU Member States, the protection of humanitarian workers remains an urgent priority. More recently, the EU's Joint [Communication](#) on humanitarian aid has placed the protection of humanitarian workers at the heart of the EU's humanitarian policy.

The scale of the challenge is stark. According to the 2026 Aid Worker Security [Report](#), in 2025, at least 1,187 humanitarian workers were victims of major security incidents, including 350 killed – the second-highest toll ever recorded. National staff bear the brunt of these attacks, representing in 2025, 96% of those affected. The Conference must serve as a catalyst for concrete steps to stop and reverse this trend.

VOICE and 67 NGOs and networks urge the EU and its Member States to:

1. Ensure accountability for violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and address the politicisation of humanitarian action by:

- Defending humanitarian principles
- Upholding IHL, fighting impunity and strengthening humanitarian diplomacy
- Countering harmful information

2. Enable a funding and partnership environment that protects humanitarian workers by:

- Addressing risk transfers and supporting humanitarian actors to improve Security Risk Management
- Investing in Duty of Care and inclusive data systems

1. Ensure accountability for violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and address the politicisation of humanitarian action

1.1 Defending the humanitarian principles

In a context where humanitarian action is increasingly politicised or instrumentalised, committing to and acting according to the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence is more essential than ever. Humanitarian principles are not abstract values but operational enablers for access, acceptance, and protection. Their erosion, through instrumentalisation, politicisation, criminalisation or militarisation, directly endangers humanitarian workers and crisis-affected communities.

We call on the EU and its Member States to:

- Ensure all decisions, from funding and policy decisions to diplomacy, are guided by humanitarian principles, shielding humanitarian action from politicisation or instrumentalisation. This includes refraining from identifying NGOs as part of States' foreign policies and security agendas and countering harmful narratives intending to delegitimise humanitarian actors.

1.2 Upholding IHL, fighting impunity, and strengthening Humanitarian Diplomacy

Violations of IHL and the persistent impunity for attacks against humanitarian and health workers remain the primary drivers of risks faced by humanitarian personnel. Weak accountability mechanisms, lack of political will, and bureaucratic impediments further exacerbate these challenges. In particular, local humanitarian staff face disproportionate risks yet often receive less political attention and protection, compounding the impact of these systemic failures.

The EU and its Member States' political and diplomatic weight can play a pivotal role in defending humanitarian space and promoting compliance with IHL. The EU has already made important commitments in this area, including in the EU's Joint Communication on Humanitarian Aid and its staff working document on humanitarian diplomacy.

Now is the time to turn these commitments into decisive, coordinated action. Therefore, we call on the EU and its Member States to:

- Publicly and consistently condemn violations of IHL, including attacks on humanitarian personnel, health workers, and civilian infrastructure, across all crises, regardless of political sensitivity. Applying double standards undermines IHL and risks reinforcing perceptions that some humanitarian actors are not principled, compounding the risks humanitarian staff face.
- Use all EU political, judicial, diplomatic, and normative tools coherently to prevent atrocities, fight impunity, hold perpetrators accountable, and promote compliance with IHL, while ensuring that these efforts do not undermine humanitarian access or principled engagement. Within EU Member States, this can include national legal proceedings in cases where humanitarian workers have sustained injuries or death, regardless of their nationality.
- Support independent mechanisms and organisations that document IHL violations and ensure this evidence informs EU and Member States' foreign policy decisions.
- Ensure the consistent use of humanitarian diplomacy as a systematic EU function, with clear roles and coordination between DG ECHO, DG INTPA, the EEAS, EU Delegations, and Member States, and implement the provisions of the Joint EU Communication on the matter.
- Integrate the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers, as well as wider respect for IHL, into all levels of EU political dialogue (global, regional, and country-specific), while safeguarding the independence, neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian assistance from political and security objectives.
- Make full use of local, national and international NGOs' expertise to inform understanding of operational contexts and ensure the meaningful and inclusive participation of diverse humanitarian NGOs in humanitarian diplomacy efforts to ensure outcomes align with needs on the ground.
- Integrate humanitarian exemptions in sanctions and counter-terrorism frameworks into EU Member States' domestic legislation, ensure their effective implementation, and champion humanitarian exemptions to like-minded countries and countries of humanitarian responses to prevent the criminalisation of principled humanitarian action. Exemptions should be included in all relevant national legislative frameworks, including criminal law, and actively communicated to the financial and private sectors.

1.3 Countering harmful information

Harmful information is increasingly used to undermine the legitimacy of humanitarian actors, restricting access, endangering affected communities and exposing humanitarian workers to reputational, legal, and physical risks.

We call on the EU and its Member States to:

- Provide dedicated spaces for regular dialogue between EU institutions, Member States, NGOs, and relevant private sector actors, where NGOs can report and raise concerns about harmful information and attacks on humanitarian actors.
- Support efforts by NGOs and the wider humanitarian sector in developing communication approaches that defend humanitarian action by providing funding, technical expertise, and political backing for their communication efforts.
- Clearly and unequivocally support humanitarian action and actors in public communications and political discussions, and challenge anti-aid rhetoric.
- Financially support local, national and international NGOs in developing tools and communication strategies to detect, analyse, and respond to harmful information (e.g., monitoring mechanisms, response protocols, training, and integration of information risk assessments into security planning).
- Treat access to accurate information as a core humanitarian deliverable, including by investing in coordination mechanisms linking humanitarian, media, and donors and by supporting local media and community radios. As a priority, develop rapid response mechanisms for situations where immediate threats to humanitarian personnel are known.

2. Enable a funding and partnership environment that protects humanitarian workers

2.1 Addressing risk transfers and supporting humanitarian actors to improve Security Risk Management

Funding constraints are weakening security capacity, staff care, and support for local and national organisations, thereby increasing the risks transferred to them. Quality funding, fair coverage of core, indirect, and security-related costs for local, national and international NGOs are essential to sustain safe and quality humanitarian action.

In addition, funding and partnership arrangements must recognise that security risks differ across intersecting factors, such as gender and disability, among others. Risk assessments and mitigation measures should therefore be participatory, gender-responsive, disability-inclusive and context-specific, rather than based on a one-size-fits-all model.

We call on the EU and its Member States to:

- Recognise and fund the full spectrum of costs required for safe, principled, and effective humanitarian action, including security risk management, prevention, and operational support; continue to strengthen donors' alignment in that regard; and ensure the mobilisation of all relevant European Commission's instruments. This should include dedicated investments in training, equipping, and protecting local first responders and community volunteer networks, whose preparedness and resilience are essential to sustaining lifesaving assistance in high-risk and access-constrained environments.
- Ensure dedicated budget lines for security costs, equally accessible to both international and local and national NGOs (L/NGOs).
- Promote collaborative risk management through quality funding that includes adequate overhead coverage and partnership agreements that do not pass disproportionate liability to L/NGOs.
- Further engage in countries impacted by funding cuts and the reduced presence of actors, including the UN, and financially support country-level planning, ensuring proper coordination and alert mechanisms are in place. Such planning should be jointly developed with local and national humanitarian actors, ensuring their meaningful participation in decisions.

2.2 Investing in Duty of Care and inclusive data systems

Duty of Care must be understood as an organisational responsibility that applies equally to international, national and local staff, volunteers, community-based responders and other humanitarian personnel. It should encompass physical safety, relocation, mental health and psychosocial support, protection from sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse, prevention of gender-based violence, safe working conditions, accessibility, and access to appropriate referral and support services. However, Duty of Care remains uneven, particularly for local staff who face disproportionate risks.

In addition, data collection, sharing, and analysis are underfunded, despite their critical role in informing risk management strategies. More comprehensive and ethically collected data is needed to understand how risks differ across intersecting factors, such as gender and disability, among others. At the same time, data collection must follow strong safeguarding, confidentiality, informed consent and do-no-harm principles.

We call on the EU and its Member States to:

- Elevate Duty of Care as a political priority, with adequate funding and public advocacy to ensure it is fully inclusive and equally applicable to local, national and international staff.
- Scale up investment in prevention, psychological and legal support, and data systems that include L/NGOs, including by supporting mutualisation of resources at program level.
- Ensure that Duty of Care approaches recognise differentiated risks among staff groups and contexts, including through gender responsive, disability-inclusive and age-sensitive measures.
- Fund dedicated budget lines for specialised, survivor-centred and trauma-informed legal services for victims and survivors of attacks, including sexual and gender-based violence, harassment and discrimination, and ensure humanitarian organisations have safe, confidential, independent and survivor-centred reporting mechanisms, with appropriate referral pathways.
- Sustain and expand initiatives like Saving Lives Together and the Protect Aid Workers mechanism, ensuring they are fully funded and accessible to all humanitarian actors.

From local volunteers to international NGOs, humanitarian actors save lives, relieve suffering, and defend human dignity every day. The cost of inaction is not abstract. It is measured in lives. The EU and its Member States must act to protect those who protect millions.

Signatories:

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 Ayuda en Acción
 CARE International
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CESVI
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COOPI - Cooperazione Internazionale
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CROSOL - Croatian Platform for International Citizen Solidarity
DanChurchAid (DCA)
Danish Refugee Council
Dóchas - The Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations
Documenta - Center for Dealing with the Past, Croatia
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GOAL Global
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Health and Educational Services Organization for Afghanistan (HESOA)
HealthNet TPO
HelpAge Deutschland e.V.
HIAS Europe
ICVA
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Portuguese Platform of Development NGOs
POWECD / Iraq Local Space
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Prosper Global
Refugee-Led Organisation Network (RELON) of Uganda
Relief International
Save the Children
Secours Islamique France (SIF)
Solidarités International

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