

THE URGENT NECESSITY TO PROTECT HUMANITARIAN AND HEALTH WORKERS – INCREASING PREVENTION, PROTECTION AND RESPONSE TO ATTACKS

THE ISSUE

UPHOLDING HUMANITY - THE ROLE AND FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW



Evariste Kajibwami Ndjouy, SMSP programme manager, Agnès Ndokoi psychosocial worker during an SMPS workshop in the Metché camp health centre. Chad. © Christophe Da Silva for Action Against Hunger France

In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Sudan and other conflicts, this year, attacks against aid workers have reached unprecedented levels. 2023 was the deadliest year on record for aid workers, and 2024 is set to follow the same tragic trend. By now, in 2024, at least 276 staff were killed; 157 injured, 94 kidnapped and 107 arrested.¹ These attacks disproportionately affect national staff, who make up 90% of the humanitarian workforce in conflict zones.² This alarming trend underscores the urgent need for a stronger global response to safeguard those who operate in conflict areas. As humanitarian crises become more complex and the humanitarian space is dangerously shrinking against politicisation of aid and unlawful denial of access by conflict parties, the need for an enhanced international effort – including from the European Union (EU) and its Member States – to protect civilians alongside aid workers is dire.

ROOT CAUSES: WHY HUMANITARIAN WORKERS ARE TARGETED

The scale and intensity of violence against aid workers have risen dramatically over the past 20 years.³ In 2006, 17 of our ACF colleagues in Muttur, Sri Lanka, were shot dead in our office while providing support to people

“The scale and intensity of violence against aid workers have risen dramatically over the past 20 years.”

impacted by the Tsunami. High-profile incidents as in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Sudan and other locations today, affecting humanitarian and health organizations underline how dangerous the environment has become for aid personnel. It also illustrates the heightened risks for civilians in conflict contexts where disregard of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), the shrinking of humanitarian space and in final, access to population in need is blatantly ignored.

Additionally, several other factors have also contributed to this worrying trend, among them the instrumentalisation of humanitarian assistance to serve geopolitical and military objectives, the collapse of multilateralism and the campaigns of disinformation or misinformation against some humanitarian actors. Overall, they are leading to a suspicious perception of humanitarian actors, and consequently restricting principled access to populations and putting at risk staff’s security and safety.

1. Protect Aid Workers, Data from 2024 Aid Worker KICA – Insecurity Insight. Available at : <https://protectaidworkers.org/>
2. International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO). Available at: <https://ngosafety.org/our-network/>, (accessed 17 July 2023)
3. Aid Worker Security Report, Figures at a glance 2023, [Humanitarian Outcomes ho_aws-preview_july_23_final.pdf](https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/en/our-work/aid-worker-security-report-figures-at-a-glance-2023)

In addition, the impact of sanctions regimes and counter-terrorism measures creates a high level of complexity and risk for humanitarian actors. This can hamper the impartial delivery of aid, ability to negotiate access and acceptance with communities, expose to the risk of attacks and criminalization. This legal complexity puts aid workers at risk of both violence and prosecution, forcing them into a perilous position where they must navigate a highly complex and risky operational environment.



Distribution of drinking water to refugees. Noël Djodinan Djimadoum, Wash programme manager, Zaki Ismail Mahamat, water point guard
Author: © Christophe Da Silva for Action Against Hunger France

STRENGTHENING PROTECTION FOR HUMANITARIAN AND HEALTH WORKERS

In light of the increasing dangers, it is urgent to make swift and concrete operational progress to best protect humanitarian workers, in particular national actors. This requires reinforced prevention, protection and support in the aftermath of attacks, enhanced capacities in humanitarian organizations and stronger diplomatic efforts to ensure aid workers can operate safely. Many of the [recommendations](#) below have been captured in the report on advancing the protection of humanitarian and health workers jointly published by Handicap International/ Humanity and Inclusion, Doctors of the World and Action Against Hunger in 2023.

First, states and donors must provide sustained financial and operational support to ensure the safety of humanitarian workers. Security Risk Management (SRM) systems within aid organizations are essential for preparing workers for high-risk environments, offering necessary security training, providing essential equipment, and establishing support to adapt to volatile environment. Donors should work alongside the humanitarian community to make sure that funds are equally available for both international and local/ national non-governmental organizations and to align



Two ACF staff, Esdrass BYARUHANGA KABAGAMBE (R) and Nathanael MWARABU KILICHO (L), WASH technicians, walk through the Rhoos site where almost 70,000 people are displaced after fleeing attacks by armed groups in recent months. Democratic Republic of Congo
Author: © Alexis Huguet for Action Against Hunger France

their policies to include dedicated budget line to fully cover security costs and avoid detrimental cuts to staff's security and safety as notably by the Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF).

Secondly reinforcing compliance with IHL and accountability framework is a paramount. While the Geneva Conventions and its related protocols, as well as specific UN Security Council Resolutions provide a comprehensive legal and policy framework to protect aid workers and ensure unimpeded humanitarian access to population, parties to the conflict act in persistent impunity, frequently disregarding these laws. The recent resolution 2730 offers an important avenue for the security council and members states to act as well as for UN to step-in further in conflict response. While systematic condemnation of attacks are essential to signal perpetrators that these crimes are not tolerated, this is not sufficient. Long run diplomatic pressure and high-level political engagement are key to monitor and follow up cases, but also ensure parties are accountable for violations of IHL. Accountability and fight against impunity should guide engagements to avoid crimes becoming a norm.

Moreover, there is an urgent need to mitigate the impact of sanctions and counterterrorism measures (SCTMs) to ensure that humanitarian work is not criminalized and that it does not impede the delivery of humanitarian action. These legal frameworks must include standing humanitarian exemptions that protect aid workers from prosecution, criminalization, and other attacks due to unintended impact of SCTMs. A concerted international effort is needed to protect humanitarian action and ensure that aid organizations are not penalized for working in high-risk areas. States must take the lead in ensuring humanitarian access and working capacities are not hindered by overly restrictive legal frameworks and measures and should transpose in national laws and support the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 2761 (2024), providing a standing humanitarian exemption for all UN sanction regime.

Finally, there must be concrete support mechanisms for victims and their families (physical protection, legal advocacy, and psychological assistance). Programs such as “Protect Aid Workers” could serve as innovative models, offering immediate support to those affected by violence in the field. States must implement effective accountability mechanisms at global and national levels to ensure perpetrators are held accountable for attacks on aid workers and unlawful denial of humanitarian access through judicial mechanisms.

“As the 10-year anniversary of the World Humanitarian Summit approaches in 2026, the international community has a unique opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to people and the protection of humanitarian and health workers.”



➤ PROTECT AID WORKERS – A LIFELINE FOR HUMANITARIAN STAFF

Protect Aid Workers is a newly established mechanism that provides critical support to aid workers who face life-threatening incidents, arrests, or legal challenges due to their work. Funded by DG ECHO and developed with two partners – GISF and Legal Action Worldwide - it fills a critical gap in the protection of humanitarian workers by offering grants to organizations to respond to incidents. By soliciting applications on its [website](#) through trusted organizations, rather than individuals, Protect Aid Workers ensures that all cases can be validated rapidly. This allows aid workers and their families to receive assistance as soon as possible.

The funding for applicants varies based on the severity of each case, up to a maximum of €10,000. Eligible cases include violence, causing injury or death; kidnapping or abduction; arrests, detention or legal action; and more. Funds are often used to pay for medical bills, legal fees, or to support the family in the event of an aid worker's death. The mechanism can also offer legal advice, ensuring swift, tailored responses for aid workers in regions of high risk. So far, the initiative has received over 80 cases in just a few months, primarily from high-conflict areas like the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The goal is to provide rapid assistance while raising awareness about the urgent need for better protection of humanitarian workers. Although currently focused on specific regions, there are plans to expand its scope.

ADDRESSING GAPS AND FUTURE STEPS

The international community, with the EU and its Member States as central actors, must take immediate and coordinated action to address the growing threats facing humanitarian workers. The EU's ability to leverage its political and diplomatic influence makes it uniquely positioned to lead global initiatives aimed at strengthening the protection of humanitarian workers.

In addition to legal reforms and sanctions, humanitarian diplomacy must be prioritized. As the lines between humanitarian and political agenda continue to blur, there is an urgent need to work together in putting the protection of civilians at the core of the diplomacy. While the EU and its Member States have been actively committed to this critical issue, the new EU leadership coming in place provides the opportunity to build the momentum. It should set up a dedicated European humanitarian diplomacy strategy to commit all EU institutions alongside with EU Member States in promoting compliance to IHL, ensuring unimpeded access, and enhancing the protection of civilians and critical civilian infrastructure.

As the 10-year anniversary of the World Humanitarian Summit approaches in 2026, the international community has a unique opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to people and the protection of humanitarian and health workers. By strengthening compliance with legal frameworks, enhancing diplomatic engagement, investing in SRM measures, international community can create safer conditions for those working on the front lines of crises. These efforts are essential not only to safeguard aid workers but also to ensure that vulnerable populations continue to receive the life-saving assistance they need.

Protecting humanitarian workers must be seen as a moral and strategic imperative. As conflicts become more complex and the dangers more acute, a comprehensive, multilateral approach is needed to safeguard those who deliver aid to the world's most vulnerable people. This will require a renewed commitment to upholding international law, strengthening diplomatic efforts, and reforming legal frameworks that hinder humanitarian operations. Only through such a coordinated and sustained effort we can hope to address the root causes of violence against aid workers and ensure the continued delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Chibuzo Okonta,
CEO
Action Against Hunger – France