Staff safety and security issues, including refugee security

Summary

This paper discusses key elements of UNHCR’s revised security plan of action for 2013-2015 and provides an update on actions taken since the 53rd meeting of the Standing Committee in March 2012.
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I. Introduction

1. Three years ago, UNHCR developed its security management plan of action and strategy for implementation, which established security-related procedures and a plan to enhance security management structures within the organization. With the actions and initiatives of that plan largely accomplished, UNHCR has revised its plan of action for the years 2013 to 2015. The plan seeks to strengthen the culture of security within the organization based on sound risk management practices that will enable UNHCR to deliver its programmes safely and effectively, even in high-risk environments.

2. Operational demands and security challenges remained substantial throughout 2012, with the continuing crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic and the eruption of a new emergency in Mali. Significant deterioration of security situations were seen in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where UNHCR offices were looted and staff forced to temporarily relocate or evacuate. Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan and Yemen as well as parts of Kenya remain high-risk areas for humanitarian workers. The challenge of ensuring protection and assistance for people in need continues to require a holistic approach to operations and security in order to remain and deliver life-saving assistance. Regrettably, 2013 has not been without tragedy for UNHCR. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a national staff member was killed during a robbery, and in the Syrian Arab Republic, a field assistant was shot and killed while driving at night. Although the colleagues were off-duty at the time, these tragedies highlight the dangers that nationally recruited staff members sometimes face in their home environments.

3. The emphasis within the United Nations Security Management System on finding ways to remain in difficult security environments has helped UNHCR deliver on its mandate. This is achieved through constant analysis of the situations and, when necessary, temporary reductions of staff to essential levels to mitigate risk as thoroughly as possible.

4. The number of Field Safety Advisers (FSAs) at headquarters and deployed across UNHCR operations remains high, at nearly sixty. The need for security staffing has been particularly acute in Mali, the Syrian Arab Republic and countries affected by these crises. UNHCR security personnel collaborate with humanitarian partners to ensure standards of safety for staff and work closely with protection officers and others on the security issues faced by persons of concern.

II. Field support

5. In 2012, UNHCR enhanced its Field Safety Section (FSS) by designating Senior FSAs with regional responsibilities, corresponding to the Regional Bureaux, to allow for more predictable and effective support. These Senior FSAs have reinforced the Office’s information management initiatives by providing in-depth situational and security analysis for their regions and have helped build the capacities of the FSAs within their regions. Beginning in 2013, further steps have been taken to reinforce contextual analysis and develop guidelines for critical incident management response. The ultimate aim is to create a system that enables the Bureaux and FSS to proactively identify potential problems and take preventative action. Going forward, a systematic approach to critical incident management will require a review of organizational procedures and policies in order to incorporate lessons learned and the recent adaptations of the United Nations Security Management System; this is one objective of the 2013-2015 Plan of Action.

6. In 2012, FSS staff were deployed over 30 times to field locations in Afghanistan, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Yemen, among others. They provided direct support in managing critical incidents and technical advice on how to sustain operations in high-risk locations.
7. Threats targeting the United Nations and civilian populations have become more sophisticated over the years; recognizing this, mitigation measures must be adapted accordingly. UNHCR’s Senior FSA for Structural Engineering advises managers on the suitability of premises and provides guidance on mitigation measures that are compliant with standards, appropriate for the threat, and cost-effective. UNHCR has been able to rapidly deploy necessary mitigation equipment, personal protective equipment, shatter-resistant film and armoured vehicles to operations as required. FSS continues to work closely with Supply Management Service in the rollout of vehicle tracking equipment. This GPS-based technology is both a fleet management and a security tool, affording the ability to locate vehicles in real-time and signal an emergency through a duress alarm. In the next two years the Division of Emergency Security and Supply aims to outfit vehicles in the highest priority operations, with the ultimate goal of similarly equipping entire global fleet.

III. Security workforce

8. FSAs are required to meet the demands of an increasingly complex operational context. The Office has identified numerous attributes and skillsets that are essential for this role including technical expertise, analytical skills, communications skills, knowledge of humanitarian fields, and language capabilities. It also actively seeks diversity in age, gender, geographic background and professional experience.

9. The process of recruiting the most qualified candidates remains selective and labour intensive, averaging 50-70 applicants for each position filled. On average, ten candidates are successfully recruited per year; some of these replace staff who are retiring or departing for other reasons, but overall it represents a steady increase, with the number of international security positions reaching 59 by the end of 2012.

10. New FSAs require training, mentoring and feedback on their performance by both staff at headquarters and Senior FSAs in the region. FSS and the Global Learning Centre provide specialized training for security professionals, and FSAs are further encouraged to take advantage of learning opportunities both within and outside the organization.

IV. Management, policy and oversight

11. Oversight functions for security have a direct reporting line to the High Commissioner; and major decisions are generally subject to his personal review or that of the Assistant High Commissioner (Operations).

12. UNHCR’s Security Management Policy was updated in 2012 in line with changes within the United Nations Security Management System. It is necessary to continually revise and update UNHCR’s policies and administrative procedures to ensure that their content reflect both organizational needs and current inter-agency standards.

13. In 2012, a United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services audit on security resource management recommended strengthening the role of FSS and the FSAs in monitoring the use of resources for security purposes. The audit reaffirmed the necessity for appropriate security budgeting and accountability. In this respect, FSS continues to monitor resource allocation in high-risk areas, alerting operations and Bureaux of concerns, advising on risks, and when necessary, elevating concerns to senior management. A critical function in the oversight of security resource allocation is the review by FSS of country operations plans as part of the Annual Programme Review. Each plan is reviewed to ensure that the security context is adequately addressed and that the resources allocated correspond with the needs.

V. Inter-agency liaison

14. UNHCR works within the inter-agency security management framework that sets policy for United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, maintaining an active engagement at all levels to ensure that its operational concerns are adequately reflected. The inter-agency work takes place both at headquarters, where FSS engages with United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) on policy issues, and in the field,
where UNHCR contributes actively through the Security Management Team structure to ensure that policies and risk management processes are appropriately applied.

15. UNHCR remains an active proponent of the “Saving Lives Together” (SLT) approach, which encourages information sharing and communication on security between the United Nations Security Management System and non-governmental organizations, and is a member of the SLT Oversight Committee. This includes collaborating on training, facilitating interoperable communication, identifying minimum security standards based on security risk assessment adapted to the context and organization, and seeking adherence to common humanitarian principles.

VI. Training

16. As the knowledge, skills and attitudes of staff are often the best guarantee of operating safely in complex environments, UNHCR prioritizes efforts to enhance these through training for managers, security specialists and staff in general.

17. The training of managers in security risk management is a distinguishing element of UNHCR’s approach to security. UNHCR believes that managers must be adept at weighing both the imperatives and the dangers of their operation; in addition to their general management responsibilities, they must be managers of risk as specified in the Office’s Security Policy and Global Management Accountability Framework. UNHCR’s Security Management Learning Programme presents the concepts and practices of risk management in a humanitarian field environment. In 2011, the Security Management Exercise was introduced as a modified version of the Security Management Learning Programme in which managers apply the core concepts in realistic planning and response exercises. To date, over 600 managers have attended one of these trainings. New distance-learning modules are currently under development for the Security Management Learning Programme.

18. Improving the technical and professional skillsets of FSAs and national staff with field security responsibilities remains a high priority for UNHCR, as it develops well-rounded professionals for the organization and helps in the retention of FSAs by supporting their career development goals. FSS, in conjunction with the Global Learning Centre, arranges periodic training for FSAs on subjects such as mitigation measures, analysis, communication strategies and security for persons of concern. Two workshops are conducted per year, and UNHCR ensures that all FSAs undertake at least one training annually. Likewise, professional training is organized on an annual basis for national safety staff; this has the dual purpose of increasing their professional capacity and evaluating their potential for future advancement. In the inter-agency arena, UNHCR will continue to take advantage of specialized trainings organized by UNDSS such as its training on hostage incident management and analysis. In late 2013, UNHCR, together with World Food Programme, will conduct a hostage incident management training facilitated by UNDSS and external specialists, with the aim of expanding the cadre of trained personnel who can be readily deployed in case of a hostage incident impacting a United Nations staff member.

19. FSAs continue to conduct training for staff in their respective environments. The High Risk Environment training and Security Awareness training are supported by FSS and the Global Learning Centre and are developed based on the threats in a given country, often identified in the Security Management Exercise. Security training is incorporated into UNHCR’s Workshop for Emergency Management, where staff members who may be deployed for emergencies are exposed to high intensity security simulations.

20. Recognizing the need for specialized training for staff that may be at additional risk due to their occupational functions, UNHCR conducted a “train the trainers” course for instruction on the use of armoured vehicles, as the fleet of armoured vehicles has been expanding to mitigate the risk of small arms fire. Eleven FSAs have undergone this training and thus far have trained 79 drivers in high-risk operations in the use of these vehicles; the goal is to ensure that all drivers within operations with armoured vehicles receive this training. The Global Learning Centre is currently developing a training package for guards working on UNHCR premises.
VII. Security of persons of concern

21. In 2011, the Office released the *UNHCR Manual on Security of Persons of Concern*¹, which provides field staff and partners with practical guidance and best practices on how to respond to recurring security threats against persons of concern. Throughout 2012, the rollout of the Manual was accompanied by an extensive training programme for UNHCR and partners in the field. United Nations agencies and partners continue to request copies of the Manual, citing its utility in field operations. A 90 minute e-Learning course on Security for Persons of Concern is being developed to give learners an overview of the subject, present real-life scenarios and test their knowledge. A complementary mobile phone application is also under development. The next phase for this project is to issue a second edition, which will draw on feedback from field-based staff and partners.

VIII. Conclusion

22. Strengthening the Office’s culture of security is a multi-year effort involving a broad range of activities and requiring commitment throughout the organization to adhere to security management principles even when operational urgency and financial challenges are great. UNHCR remains committed to delivering in challenging security environments while ensuring that appropriate risk mitigation measures and security procedures are in place, in order to protect the well-being of staff, partners and persons of concern.

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¹ The *UNHCR Manual on Security of Persons of Concern* is available at http://www.refworld.org/pid/4f6313032.pdf