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## **Staff safety and security**

### *Summary*

This paper provides an update on the measures UNHCR is taking from a security perspective to fulfil its duty of care to staff, especially in high-risk locations, since the 67<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee in September 2016. In particular, it focuses on risk mitigation activities conducted under the Office's "Culture of security 2017-2019: an updated plan of action". It also covers engagement with the broader United Nations Security Management System (UNSMS), which underpins UNHCR's approach to staff safety and security.

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## I. Introduction

1. UNHCR continues to operate in complex and high-risk security environments to protect and assist those who have been forced to flee their homes. Pressing humanitarian needs have compelled UNHCR to deploy personnel not just close to but often within active combat zones. Fulfilling the Office's duty of care to its personnel while they safeguard the rights of others remains a delicate but important balancing act. Although this paper focuses on UNHCR staff safety and security, the Office's humanitarian, development and other partners face similar risks in helping vulnerable populations.

2. In light of the increasing reach and sophistication of various non-State armed groups as well as other changes to the international threat environment, UNHCR regularly reviews its security procedures around the world. Despite these efforts, humanitarian workers, including UNHCR personnel, have been the direct target of violent attacks in some countries; elsewhere they have been caught up in attacks on others. The challenges remain particularly acute for UNHCR's nationally-recruited staff, many of whom play a critical role in programme delivery despite being at heightened risk in civil conflicts because of their ethnicity, religious beliefs or other affiliations. As one component of the Office's duty of care, this paper outlines the strategies, policies and procedures UNHCR is implementing to address these and other security challenges.

## II. Operating in challenging security environments

3. The Office continues to make a concerted effort to reduce security risks for its personnel, including by having appropriate risk management measures in place. Security incidents are difficult to prevent though as UNHCR often works in active combat zones and maintains its presence for longer periods of time. These factors, combined with the Office's emphasis on reporting, help explain why UNHCR personnel reported more than 270 security incidents in 2016, an increase of 21 per cent compared to 2015. Notably, the number of critical incidents reported increased by 10 per cent, from 30 incidents in 2015 to 33 incidents in 2016.

4. Reducing risks is expensive, especially in environments with multiple and complex threats. The cost to the organization is about 2.8 per cent of its total budget. However, UNHCR's continued presence in countries such as Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic would not be possible without strong mitigation measures. These include adequately reinforced premises and armoured vehicles, in addition to the robust security procedures followed by staff.

5. Investment in protective measures in Afghanistan has successfully mitigated the risks to UNHCR personnel on a number of occasions. For example, a powerful explosion near the UNHCR office in Kabul in June 2017 caused only minor damage to the building and there were no reported injuries to staff. However, the situation remains unstable and unpredictable as illustrated by another serious security incident in Afghanistan in July 2017, when a driver was seized by a non-State group in Wardak Province and held for approximately 48 hours before being released.

6. The operating environment in Somalia remains volatile, with frequent attacks occurring in close proximity to United Nations facilities. Cross-border attacks from Somalia have also occurred near the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya, with ambushes repeatedly targeting the police who help ensure the safety of humanitarian personnel. These circumstances pose a range of challenges for the governments and people of Kenya and Somalia as well as for UNHCR, which seeks to expand its presence in Somalia to support conditions for the safe return of refugees.

7. In Sudan, three UNHCR staff members were taken hostage near el-Geneina, Darfur, in November 2016 and held for 23 days before negotiations involving UNHCR and the Government of Sudan resulted in their safe release. Meanwhile, South Sudan remained one

of the most complex operations, with armed conflict posing a threat to humanitarian workers responding to the needs of over six million people. Humanitarian personnel are exposed to security risks on a daily basis and face regular restrictions in terms of movement and programme delivery.

8. Conflict in parts of the Central African Republic continues to force people to search for safety in other towns and neighbouring States. The impact on staff safety has also been significant. Recent fighting in Zemio forced UNHCR to temporarily close its office and relocate critical staff to Bangui. In addition, in July 2017, four UNHCR personnel and two staff members from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) were threatened at gunpoint when a group of men forcibly entered the Office's premises in Kaga Bandoro to steal money and personal items. Political tensions and armed conflict are ongoing in different parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In June 2017, fighting reached Beni in the north east of the country, requiring UNHCR's non-governmental organization (NGO) partners to evacuate their personnel.

9. In the Middle East, humanitarian workers were exposed to direct and indirect threats in Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. UNHCR continued to provide life-saving assistance to conflict-affected populations, including those at risk from hunger, disease and violence. In response to military action, members of non-State armed groups have sought sanctuary in different locations to reorganize, recruit and train. The possibility that these groups will attack aid workers and other unarmed targets remains a real concern.

### **III. UNHCR security strategy**

10. Confronted by the security challenges outlined above, UNHCR is constantly working to improve its risk management policies, procedures and capabilities so it can deliver critical humanitarian programmes for persons of concern. Efforts to further strengthen the security of personnel are led by the Field Security Service, which is part of the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply. The "Culture of security 2017-2019: an updated plan of action" developed by the Division outlines the Office's security strategy and objectives using five main categories: i) advice and support; ii) the security workforce; iii) governance and oversight; iv) liaison and partnership; and v) training. Community acceptance and trust-building with affected populations, including host communities, are integral components of this plan.

#### **A. Advice and support**

11. Personnel at UNHCR's headquarters entities and field duty stations must understand the environments in which they are working. In particular, advice to colleagues in the field draws from appropriate security analysis and is tailored to UNHCR's operating context, including the impact on people of concern. This is consistent with approaches taken by UNSMS. In the unfortunate event of a security incident, UNHCR strives to ensure that personnel receive appropriate medical, psychological and administrative support.

12. The Field Security Service is responsible for providing advice and support, particularly through the deployment of field safety advisers to analyse risks and propose appropriate mitigation measures. Such measures include deploying additional personnel to support emergency operations, undertaking security risk assessments, following up to ensure recommendations are implemented and providing financial and other resources to facilitate this process, where needed. In 2016, the Field Security Service provided support in over 30 countries, mostly in locations with high or very high risk levels.

13. In areas where the risk of explosions is high, a structural engineer reviews UNHCR premises to determine whether the protective measures in place are appropriate for the threat level. The Office recently developed a tool to enable non-experts to conduct "initial blast assessments" to determine whether further support from the structural engineer is required,

allowing for more efficient use of this person's expertise. In addition, UNHCR retains stockpiles of critical security equipment, which can be deployed rapidly to improve basic risk mitigation. The stockpiles include access-control and perimeter security equipment, lighting, personal protective equipment, shatter resistant film and armoured vehicles, video surveillance systems, sound barriers and personal attack alarms.

## **B. Security workforce**

14. UNHCR's security professionals cooperate closely with the UN Department of Safety and Security and other partners to ensure coordinated, system-wide approaches. However, their specialized skillset, including the ability to contribute to the security of persons of concern to the Office, is essential to ensuring the organization's ability to respond in challenging environments. In addition to high-level technical skills, UNHCR continues to recruit security professionals with strong analytic abilities, sound communication skills (often in multiple languages) and an in-depth understanding of the Office's protection mandate. UNHCR now has 75 international security positions and nearly 200 locally-recruited security staff. Most of these positions support personnel in particularly challenging operating environments. A small number of regional field security advisers also operate from regional hubs to support operations without dedicated security personnel. The Field Security Service at Headquarters manages this workforce and provides surge capacity when needed.

## **C. Governance and oversight**

15. Appropriate oversight is a critical aspect of security management. The Security Steering Committee, led by senior management at UNHCR Headquarters, remains a key mechanism in this regard. The Committee meets regularly to review the Office's activities in high-risk areas, with recent discussions on Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen resulting in enhanced risk mitigation measures and modified operational presence.

16. UNHCR remains committed to ensuring that funding is made available to meet the minimum operating security standards (MOSS) set by the United Nations for each country, as well as the enhanced security measures necessary in high-risk environments. The Field Security Service monitors these activities on behalf of the Office, providing regular reports to senior management and direct support to field operations. According to the most recent report, 415 of UNHCR's 421 offices, or almost 99 per cent, are MOSS compliant; representing one of the highest compliance rates in the United Nations. The remaining 6 offices, including offices recently established to respond to emerging situations, are working to achieve full compliance without delay.

## **D. Liaison and partnership**

17. UNHCR engages actively with the UN Department of Safety and Security and other members of the Inter-Agency Security Management Network to develop policies and procedures for UNSMS, including in relation to minimum standards, crisis management response, immediate medical support in case of security incidents and arrangements for ensuring compliance. While the Office continues to implement its own internal road safety strategy in line with the "2030 Sustainable development goals" and the "Global plan of action for road safety", UNHCR has also contributed to the development of a UN-wide strategy.

18. In addition, UNHCR remains an active member of the Saving Lives Together Oversight Committee, reflecting its commitment to including NGO partners in security training, briefings and other activities in the field. UNHCR is also a member of the Programme Criticality Steering Group and Coordination Team, which provides a structured

method for assessing which activities warrant continuation when security risks are high. In 2017, UNHCR developed internal guidelines on programme criticality to ensure field managers are engaged in this important process.

## **E. Training**

19. Preparing staff to operate safely in challenging environments is of paramount importance. In terms of security, the Office focuses on three general areas of training: i) development for managers; ii) security training for security staff; and iii) adapted security training for specific situations or groups. UNHCR's flagship programme, the "security management learning programme", continues to provide managers with the knowledge and skills necessary to manage the security aspects of their country operation. In some cases, this is reinforced by "security management exercise" training, which is tailored for specific situations or country operations. In the past 18 months, almost 220 managers and staff have undertaken the security management exercise training.

20. In accordance with agreed inter-agency standards and UNHCR's organization-specific requirements, the Office continues to prioritize the professional development of field security staff at both the national and international levels. To better support managers in their decision making, for example, UNHCR launched an online training course in 2017 to complement a process recognized within UNSMS to analyse threats.

21. In cooperation with the World Food Programme (WFP), and in recognition of the different threats that women can face compared to men, UNHCR recently developed and delivered a "training of trainers" programme for female security staff and staff welfare officers. This is just one initiative within the Office's broader efforts to address gender-based threats in security management. An implementation plan is being prepared to deliver this training to female personnel in the field in the future.

## **IV. Ongoing initiatives**

22. In 2017, UNHCR will continue updating its security management policy to reflect inter-agency developments and changes in the risk and type of threats. The Office will also work on implementing a holistic, organization-wide approach to duty of care, following recommendations from the High-level Committee on Management's task force on this issue.

23. Strengthening UNHCR's culture of security is an organization-wide effort involving a broad range of activities, including continued engagement with partners. The efforts outlined in this paper reflect the Office's commitment to providing the highest level of safety and security for staff as they in turn strive to safeguard the wellbeing of refugees and other persons of concern.

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