**Executive Committee of the
High Commissioner's Programme**

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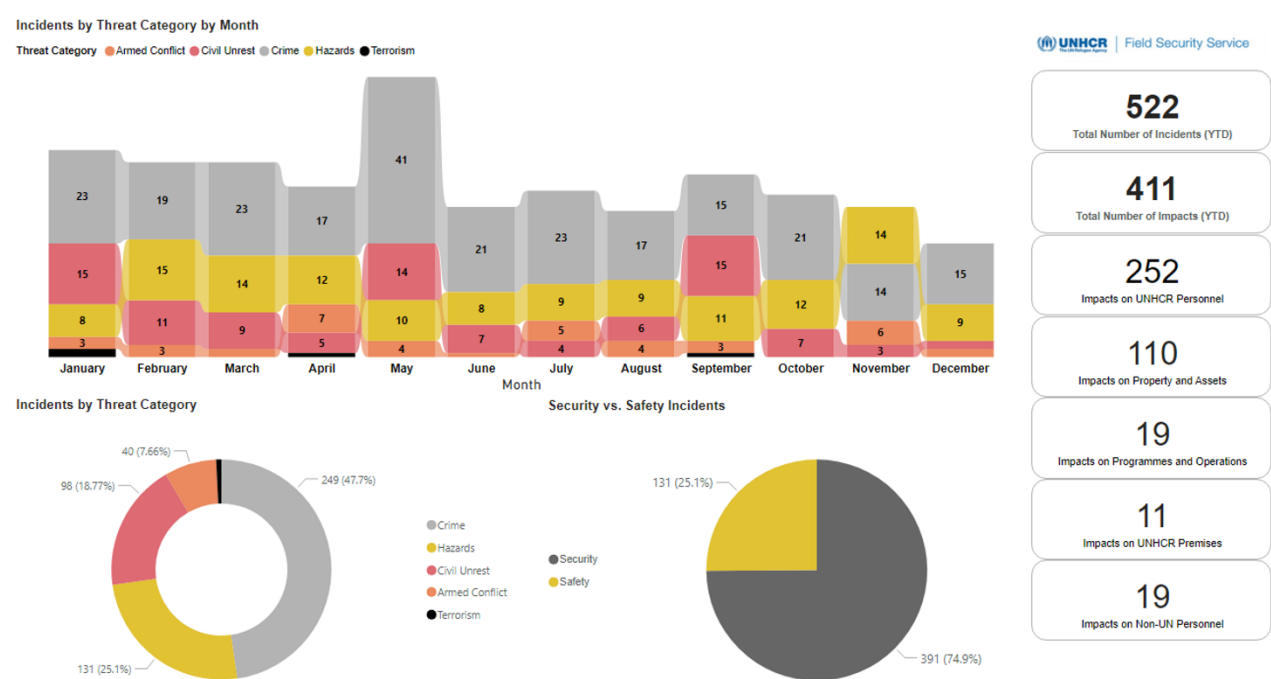# Security of the workforce and operations in UNHCR

Summary

This paper provides an update on the security of UNHCR operations and security risk management since its last report to the eighty-ninth meeting of the Standing Committee in March 2024 (EC/75/SC/CRP.5). The paper examines global security incidents and trends in 2024, identifies a number of risks affecting UNHCR worldwide, outlines recent security policy developments and operational imperatives from a security risk management perspective to reinforce workforce safety and security, consistent with the organisation's duty of care.

I.   Introduction

1.   The UNHCR security risk management strategy is critical to achieving the Office's mandate and objectives, enabling it to carry out its operations effectively, often in complex and challenging security environments. The organization promotes a culture of security and prioritizes a proactive approach, integrating security considerations from the earliest stages of planning to ensure the effective delivery of services to forcibly displaced and stateless persons, while maintaining acceptable levels of risk.

2.   UNHCR works closely with United Nations partners on security risk management. The Office remains an active member of the Inter-Agency Security Management Network and the United Nations Security Management System (UNSMS), by contributing to local and global policy development, ensuring compliance, facilitating information sharing, and offering recommendations to improve overall security management.

II.   Global security situation

3.   In 2024, new conflicts, ongoing crises and the worsening of some situations posed multiple challenges for humanitarian operations. The past year was reported as the deadliest year for humanitarians, with 339 aid workers killed. In August 2024, a UNHCR staff member and her young son were killed, while two other family members were seriously injured in a strike on their residence in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon.

4.   The number of *safety* and *security* incidents and their negative impacts reported by the organization increased compared to previous years, according to data from the UNSMS Security and Safety Incident Reporting System. In 2024, UNHCR reported a total of 522 incidents – a 12.2 per cent increase from 466 incidents reported in 2023 – resulting in 392 negative impacts on UNHCR. Of these impacts, 252 were related to personnel, 110 to assets, 19 to operations, 11 to premises, as well as 19 affecting non-United Nations personnel.[1]
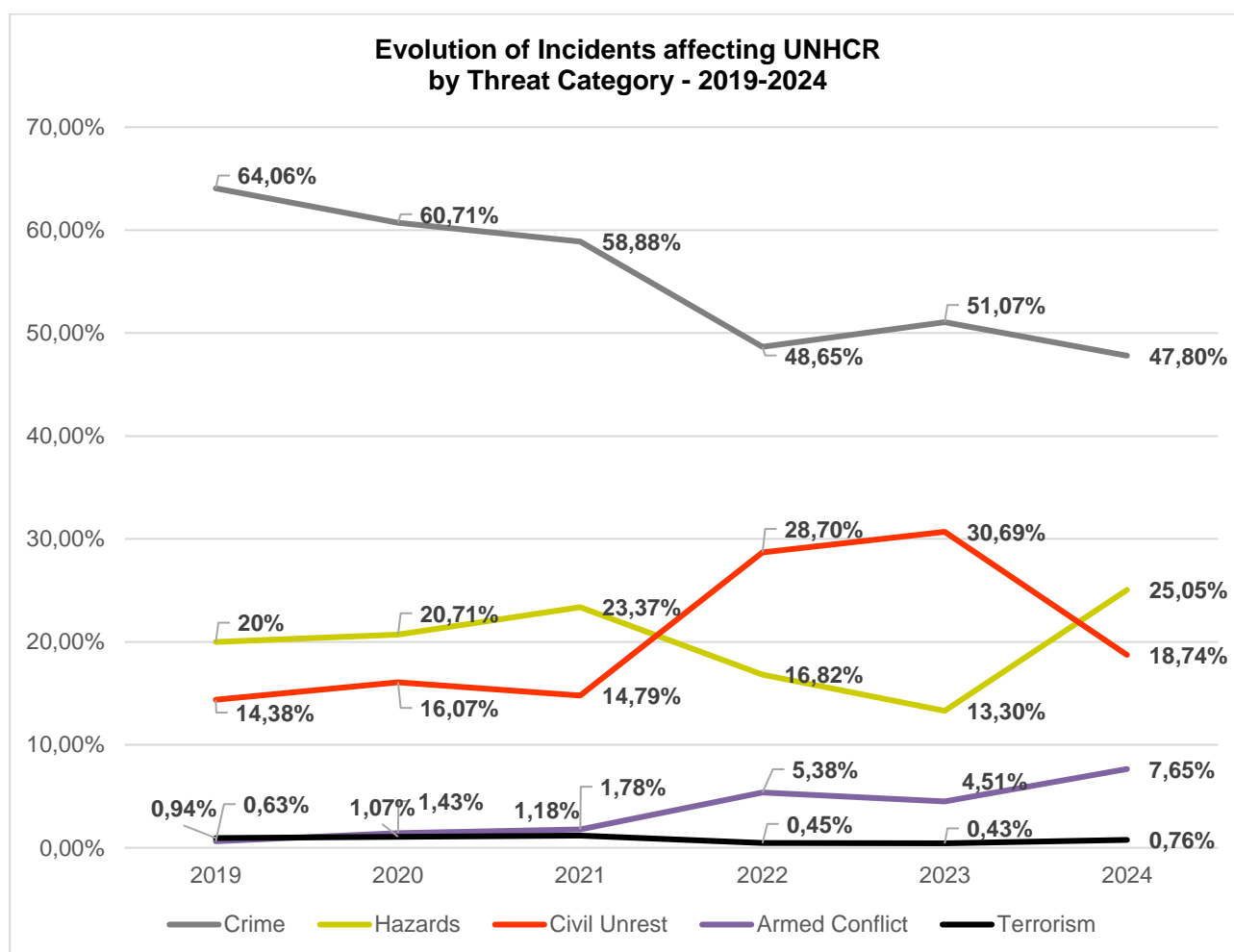

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[1] The 19 impacts on non-United Nations personnel refer to negative consequences faced by forcibly displaced and stateless persons, host community members, security guards, and police officers during the course of incidents reported by UNHCR.

5.   Overall, the number of *security* incidents (including armed conflict, civil unrest, crime, and terrorism) slightly decreased by 2.7 per cent in comparison to the previous year, from 404 incidents in 2023 to 393 incidents in 2024.

- In 2024, crime reached its lowest level since 2019, despite remaining the primary cause of incidents for the organization and its personnel, mainly affecting locally recruited staff.

- Incidents of civil unrest returned to 2021 levels after two years of increase, with most being non-violent events outside UNHCR offices involving forcibly displaced and stateless persons.

- Armed conflict incidents continued to increase in 2024. Of the total of 40 incidents reported, 30 occurred in Lebanon, Myanmar and the Syrian Arab Republic. Other affected countries included Colombia (five incidents), Ukraine (three incidents), and Yemen (two incidents).

6.   A higher number of *safety* incidents were reported in 2024 than in previous years, generating 94 impacts on the organization. This included the death of a UNHCR staff member in Türkiye due to an accidental fire. Furthermore, two UNHCR staff members in Pakistan and in the United Republic of Tanzania lost their lives in road traffic crashes, making hazards the second leading cause of incidents. Similar to crime-related incidents, locally recruited colleagues were the most affected.

Evolution of Incidents affecting UNHCR by Threat Category - 2019-2024

7.   UNHCR addressed other incidents, that were not reported or included in the UNSMS Security and Safety Incident Reporting System database due to their confidential nature. In 2024, the Field Security Service, together with the psychosocial wellbeing staff, assisted over 100 UNHCR personnel affected by security incidents that were gender-based. This support included providing psychological first aid, offering immediate security support, conducting personal security risk assessments to evaluate the situation and recommending additional mitigation measures.

III.   Oversight

8.   As part of its ongoing commitment to maintain oversight, ensure compliance, and uphold organizational accountability, the UNHCR Field Security Service within the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply implements several oversight mechanisms.

9.   Every year, UNHCR conducts a global review to assess compliance with UNSMS security risk management measures. In 2024, an improved compliance tool was developed to simplify oversight and monitoring, strengthen security risk management accountabilities, and enable real-time inputs. Additionally, UNHCR security personnel conduct targeted reviews to ensure that threats and risks in both new or protracted crises are adequately assessed and mitigated. The findings from these reviews inform the decision-making processes of the various security steering committees, where personnel from UNHCR headquarters, regional bureaux, and operations address urgent issues that require immediate attention and resources. UNHCR continuously monitors forced displacement situations and its operations, analyses trends, and provides senior management with tailored and up-to-date information.

10.   These efforts are further strengthened by maintaining close collaboration with the United Nations Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS), other UNSMS member organizations, international organizations, and security coordination groups and forums of non-governmental organizations on regional and country-specific situations to address issues of common concern. UNHCR ensures that security considerations are reflected in internal policies and guidance, incorporating any updates to UNSMS policies.

11.   To ensure effective and sustained duty of care, experts from the Field Security Service, the Psychosocial Wellbeing Section and the Medical Section work closely together to deliver comprehensive support, including providing mental health services, assisting personnel in high-risk environments, coordinating medical evacuation, and identifying suitable medical facilities. Additionally, the Field Security Service works closely with the Division of Human Resources and the Office of the Principal Advisor on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment to uphold a person- and victim-centred approach.

IV.   Technical support to operations

12.   UNHCR compiles detailed reports and analyses on field developments and further supports operations by providing blast and engineering expertise, assisting in mainstreaming a person-centred approach to security risk management, and ensuring effective incident response and management.

13.   Throughout the year, UNHCR supported lessons learned processes on security incidents and conducted personal security risk assessments to support affected persons and witnesses. A package of standard operating procedures and guidance, including on domestic violence, was developed. Additionally, UNHCR supported senior management on decision-making through eight security steering committees focused on complex and high-risk operations.

14.   UNHCR continues to research, test, and procure security equipment that is fit-for-purpose and available for immediate use. Technical specifications for equipment are frequently reviewed and updated. Additionally, UNHCR regularly assesses office and accommodation infrastructure to ensure they meet appropriate protection standards.

15.   Given the increasing instability in the Middle East, UNHCR reinforced its operations in Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic by deploying senior security professionals. The Field Security Service supported multiple operations by conducting missions to Bangladesh, Lebanon, and Ukraine. Additionally, Regional Field Security Coordinators supported regional missions to Ethiopia, Mozambique, Somalia, the Sudan, and the Syrian Arab Republic. This included providing expert advice to improve security risk mitigation. Additionally, support was offered to manage serious and critical security incidents across operations and regional bureaux.

V.   Security workforce

16.   UNHCR has endorsed a strategy to build a skilled, representative, and resilient security workforce, ensuring a broad range of expertise and perspectives to enhance operational effectiveness. As part of this commitment, the organization has implemented a new functional clearance procedure to strengthen workforce planning and career mobility, ensuring an agile and future-ready security team. With 10 per cent of the UNHCR security workforce expected to retire within the next two years, the organization is proactively assessing workforce needs and adopting a comprehensive approach to recruitment and succession planning. This ensures that UNHCR continues to attract the best-qualified candidates from a diverse talent pool, fostering a workforce that reflects the global communities it serves.

17.   As in previous years, UNHCR continued to offer regular mentoring and guidance for female security personnel through the women's security network, established in 2022. This initiative aims to foster a supportive and empowering environment that promotes retention and career development within the workforce.

VI.   Inter-agency processes

18.   In 2024, UNHCR continued its collaboration with UNSMS, contributing to policy development and providing operational support. UNHCR remains a key partner within UNSMS, actively engaging at all levels.

19.   UNHCR welcomes the upcoming UNSMS review, co-led by the Under-Secretary-General for Safety and Security and the United Nations High-Level Committee on Management and looks forward to contributing to the process. In 2024, UNHCR co-led two webinars with UNDSS for headquarters and operations personnel on locally cost-shared security budgets, which helped reinforce accountability for security budgets at the country level.

20.   UNHCR fostered cooperation and strengthened engagement within the humanitarian community, particularly during the 2024 Humanitarian Networking and Partnerships Week. It co-led the Area of Common Concern on Integrating Security Risk Management in Humanitarian Action, moderating and participating in several panels on risk management.

21,   UNHCR continues to engage with partners, member States, international organizations and both international and national armed forces through civil-military coordination mechanisms to ensure humanitarian access and achieve protection outcomes for forcibly displaced and stateless persons in protracted situations and emergencies.

VII.   Learning and development

22.   Developing and delivering adequate security trainings at all levels is essential for the organization. To this end, UNHCR needs to ensure managers in diverse environments receive tailored training to prepare for possible incidents.

23.   UNHCR personnel require security training beyond the initial and mandatory online security awareness training BSAFE to effectively prepare for different threats they may encounter. To meet this need, two security management learning programmes were delivered to 42 senior managers and security decision-makers in high-risk environments. The

programmes focused on the UNSMS framework, security risk management processes and crisis management, and critical incident management. To further strengthen the ability of managers to respond effectively to events and incidents affecting the security of the workforce and operations, UNHCR developed a training package on critical incident management, which will be rolled out in 2025.

24.   UNHCR continued to invest in the professional development of its security workforce by hosting three workshops across regions on how to apply a person-centred approach. These workshops, held in in East and Horn of Africa, West and Central Africa, and Asia and the Pacific, were attended by security personnel from UNHCR and other UNSMS member organizations from 33 operations and 66 countries. These workshops equipped security professionals with the skills, behaviors, and strategies necessary to guide managers, respond effectively to incidents, and address changing situations.

25.   Over the past year, twelve webinars were held on security-related topics, to ensure that the security workforce stayed up to date with the knowledge needed to support operations. Additionally, the Field Security Service hosted three policy webinars on security management for Representatives, aimed at engaging decision-makers at both operational and regional levels.

26.   In 2024, UNHCR provided women's security awareness trainings in eight countries, with 540 women participating. These trainings equipped participants with essential and practical knowledge, skills, and strategies to address specific threats and associated risks. Additionally, UNHCR took the lead in coordinating these trainings for UNSMS members.

27.   Last year, UNHCR also ensured that more than 100 participants from UNHCR and partner organizations were certified through the workshops on emergency management, in accordance with the latest standards of the Safe and Secure Approaches in Field Environments programme to adequately prepare them for their future deployments.

VIII.   Conclusion

28.   The security efforts undertaken by UNHCR in 2024 to safeguard its personnel, operations, and forcibly displaced and stateless persons require ongoing efforts and continued investments. A comprehensive security risk management strategy and robust processes are essential in these challenging times. Effective security management necessitates regular evaluation, organizational commitment, and adequate human and financial resources to implement security measures. This is crucial to uphold the duty of care for the UNHCR workforce, ensure the security of its operations and assets, and protect of persons under the mandate of UNHCR.

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