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High Commissioner's Programme**

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Security of the UNHCR workforce and operations

Summary

This paper highlights developments in UNHCR global security management since the last update provided to the eighty-first meeting of the Standing Committee in July 2021 (EC/72/SC/CRP.18). It addresses the actions, security policies, practices and procedures to manage security risks, particularly in the field, and provides an update on the organization's plan of action for security 2021-2023.

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I. Introduction

1. UNHCR has faced numerous security management challenges with a rapidly evolving operational landscape brought on by the situations in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Ukraine, among others. This has required the organization to continuously review its security management practices and ensure that effective procedures and measures are in place. Given the scale of humanitarian needs in these and other places, security management must be considered an enabler to support continued programme delivery within an acceptable level of risk for UNHCR personnel. Wide-ranging partnership mechanisms must be in place, including responsive relations with host governments, the United Nations Security Management System and other relevant actors, to safeguard the duty of care for personnel and the safety of persons of concern to UNHCR.

II. Security environment

2 UNHCR is present in a total of 126 countries, with nearly a quarter of the workforce operating in locations with overall threat levels assessed as substantial or high. In these areas, political violence and crime coexist, frequently overlapping to create volatile environments. The highest risk operational settings are characterized by armed conflict, in which UNHCR is called upon to assist people on the move. Many security-related casualties resulted from attacks by non-State armed actors in pursuit of political, strategic or ideological objectives.

3 In 2021, UNHCR reported over 300 security incidents, some of which were critical. The main factors leading to incidents have remained constant in recent years and included exposure to fire in conflict areas, violent demonstrations, civil unrest, crime, ambushes, kidnappings and road accidents. The Americas region accounted for the highest number of incidents overall, while Africa witnessed the most critical ones.

4 In December 2021, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a UNHCR vehicle was ambushed by an armed militia. Three staff members in the vehicle escorted by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo were seriously injured. In Nigeria, the kidnapping of a national staff member by militants lasted for six months before he was safely released. In December 2021, UNHCR lost a national staff member in Ethiopia, following an aerial bombardment in his home village while he was off duty. These incidents illustrate the volatile security situation facing staff working on the front lines.

III. Strategic security management and governance

5 UNHCR takes a systematic and strategic approach to security management. Efforts revolve around strengthening the culture of security, the integration of security in operational planning, clearly defined accountability at all levels of management, active participation in the United Nations Security Management System, sufficient resources, and a well-trained and disciplined security workforce. In 2021, UNHCR updated its plan of action: “Field Security Service 2021-2023. Culture of Security”, outlining priorities and directions for the coming years.

6 With the release of its updated policy on security management in 2020, and taking into account the new organizational structure, UNHCR developed standard operating procedures for security management processes in 2021, including on reporting, critical incident management and security oversight. The standard operating procedures have been tested in action and adapted, where required, based on lessons learned.

7 In locations where security risks are high, UNHCR holds Security Steering Committee meetings to review the security and operational modalities in place. In addition, UNHCR conducts operational meetings following the declaration of emergencies in order to ensure that security is factored in when determining the operational footprint required against the criticality of programme delivery. The programme criticality framework is based on the security risk management assessment determined for each operational area. In 2021, UNHCR

further developed a process of conducting working-level oversight reviews in high-risk countries in collaboration with the field, regional bureaux and relevant headquarters entities; six oversight reviews were completed in 2021.

8. UNHCR continues to field missions to locations deemed very high risk, in accordance with the requisite measures and in close coordination with the regional bureaux and senior management, to address any concerns.

9. In line with the plan of action on culture of security 2021-2023, UNHCR has created a number of steering groups, oversight committees and working groups to examine key issues, such as occupational health and safety, road safety and the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. This work contributes to the development of related global policies, administrative instructions and guidelines disseminated to the workforce. UNHCR has also developed standard operating procedures on how security should support a victim-centred approach.

10. Within UNHCR, there is close coordination between the Field Security Service and the Staff Health and Wellbeing Service to ensure end-to-end support when a critical incident occurs. Other relevant entities are also engaged when it comes to assessing the risks of individual victims and witnesses to ensure their personal safety and protection premised on a victim-centred approach. A security incident reporting system, which will support the workforce and be linked to other UNHCR systems, is under development and scheduled for roll-out towards the end of 2022.

11. As highlighted in the plan of action on culture of security 2021-2023, the promotion and full integration of a person-centred approach to security risk management is a priority. This entails proactive assessment of the risks of individuals and groups based on their specific profiles and implementation of a varied and considered range of measures. UNHCR maintains a Senior Field Security Officer specializing in risks to personnel because of their gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, disability and other profiles. In 2021, the Senior Field Security Officer assisted managers and security staff in the field to ensure that such risks were fully considered in the development of security risk management plans and to develop checklists for responding to incidents. UNHCR has also rolled out a dedicated workshop for locally recruited security personnel on a person-centred approach to security risk management.

12. The organization disseminated new inter-agency security policies with guidance for managers and Field Security Advisers. In addition, the business continuity plan working group developed tools to review the continuity of operations.

IV. Support to operations

13. Following the decentralization and regionalization process, UNHCR reorganized its operational support to security management. The goal was to support Field Staff Safety Advisers, who in turn support the operations, by providing technical expertise in areas, such as global analysis, security engineering, gender-based threats, and person-centred approaches.

14. In 2021, missions were deployed from Headquarters to support operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan, as well as the Sahel countries, with critical incident management responses. Technical support was also provided for several emergency situations, including in Afghanistan and Ethiopia.

15. The organization continues to ensure that personnel who apply for positions in high-risk locations are appropriately aware of the risks involved and prepared to minimize them. Webinars were conducted for 15 high-risk duty stations in this regard.

16. UNHCR maintains a stockpile of security equipment, such as shatter-resistant film for windows, heavy-duty perimeter protection against blast attacks and personal protective equipment. In Mogadishu, Somalia, a new UNHCR compound was constructed in 2021 with a special system to protect against mortar attacks. Additionally, UNHCR retains a Senior

Field Security Adviser, who is a specialist in blast mitigation, to support staff, and the staff of other United Nations entities when possible, in high-risk duty stations.

V. Security workforce

17. UNHCR currently has 87 international Field Security Advisers, located predominantly in areas with significant risks. The number of nationally and locally recruited security staff has continued to increase in response to growing needs, and over 260 are operational globally. They come with valuable understanding of the local context, bring useful contacts with governments and community interlocutors, and support efforts to strengthen local capacity.

18. Field Security Advisers play a key role in supporting UNHCR management to assess security risks, determine and implement the appropriate security risk measures, and manage critical incidents. In line with the plan of action on culture of security 2021-2023 objective of ensuring 50 per cent of newly recruited security personnel are women, five out of six external recruitments in 2021 were female.

19. UNHCR strives to ensure that its security workforce has the appropriate technical expertise, interpersonal skills and humanitarian understanding. The Global Development Learning Centre provided training and other learning opportunities for its security workforce to enhance their skills and knowledge. Topics of workshops and webinars conducted included security assessments, planning and analysis, a person-centred approach to security, and the prevention of and response to sexual misconduct. In recent years, security professionals have received specialized training in psychological first aid, aiming to make them more empathetic and effective responders when supporting a victim or survivor of a traumatic incident.

VI. Inter-agency processes

20. UNHCR remains committed to helping strengthen the United Nations Security Management System through active engagement at all levels. For instance, UNHCR participates in 15 working groups and sub-bodies of the Inter-Agency Security Management Network, where policies and processes are developed. At the UNHCR headquarters level, the Field Security Service in the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply acts as the focal point for the United Nations Department of Safety and Security and collaborates with other organizations to ensure that the system is effectively supported to enable programme delivery, while managing security risks.

21. UNHCR also contributed to strengthening security for humanitarian partners through, for instance, engagement in the Humanitarian Networks and Partnership Weeks, a platform for inter-network collaboration in areas of common concern aimed at improving humanitarian preparedness and response. UNHCR participated in the United Nations-led advisory group meetings on civil-military coordination and contributed subject expertise and the facilitation of training for civil-military cooperation developed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. UNHCR also engaged with various military actors, providing briefings on the organization's role and mandate.

VII. Learning and development

22. In 2021 and 2022, security training has continued primarily through virtual methodologies due to COVID-19 related preventive measures. The security management learning programme, presenting the tools and practices of security risk management to humanitarian field managers, was conducted three times, and 65 managers completed the training. In 2021 and 2022, over 300 UNHCR staff and partners were trained in security through eight online workshops for emergency management.

23. UNHCR also hosted and facilitated training in hostage incident management to ensure the organization has a qualified cadre of security personnel who can be deployed and support incident management in hostage situations. The training was conducted jointly with the

&United Nations Department of Safety and Security, and 20 participants were certified as hostage incident management responders, 10 of whom were from UNHCR.

VIII. Conclusion

24. Strengthening the culture of security is an ongoing effort, requiring organization-wide engagement. It requires sustained commitment, prudent assurance of procedures, resources and recognition that security remains an organizational priority. Only in this way can the organization fulfill its commitment to deliver lifesaving protection and assistance to those in need, while ensuring duty of care for all personnel.
