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Staff safety and security issues, including refugee security: UNHCR security management plan of action and strategy for implementation

Contents

I. Introduction

1.   In 2009, five years after the last significant review of security management in UNHCR, a combination of events and processes compelled the Office to review the way in which it assures the safety and security of staff, operations and persons of concern.

2.   The review took place against a backdrop of increased threats to the United Nations and in particular humanitarian workers. Agencies, Funds and Programmes are at increased risk in countries where the United Nations is perceived as being associated with a particular political agenda - a trend confirmed by fatal attacks on the United Nations in Algiers (December 2007), Hargeisa (October 2008), and Kabul and Islamabad (October 2009). Another indicator is the number of aid workers kidnapped globally, a figure that was 350 per cent higher in the period 2006-2008 than in the period 2003-2005.[1]

3.   Following the review and a critical examination of security preparedness in UNHCR, the High Commissioner announced a number of measures to enhance security management throughout the organization. These included, as a first step, a strengthened Field Safety Section (FSS) in the newly created Division of Emergency, Security and Supply (DESS). These decisions coincided with the completion of a first-ever audit of security governance, undertaken from March to June 2009, by the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS). OIOS recommended reinforcing a number of security-related procedures and structures within the organization.

4.   This note sets out the measures that UNHCR is undertaking in terms of preparedness, improved procedures and governance as a result of these reviews, along with other actions identified through assessments of needs in the Field and at Headquarters. It covers field support, staffing, information gathering and analysis, training, and oversight and headquarters processes.

II. Field support

5.   In order to address the security risks described above, providing guidance and support to staff and managers in the Field is key. The support provided by individual field safety advisers (FSAs) includes direct assistance to operations at the point of programme delivery, security risk assessments, technical advice, inter-agency and liaison work, training, and capacity building. UNHCR's goal is to equip itself with the means to provide that assistance in a timely and effective manner, with the aim of meeting the following objectives:

• Provide reasoned, practical and up-to-date guidance on security and safety issues, both proactively and in response to reports and queries:

  • FSS will continue to manage critical safety and security incidents. In 2008 and 2009, outposted FSAs averaged 235 mission days per year. UNHCR will continue to deploy FSAs as needed and in support of country or regional needs.

  • The section will encourage the use of regional FSAs, who are able to provide informed assistance, including regional analysis and timely field support for offices that do not have an in-country FSA.

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[1] Overseas Development Institute, Humanitarian Policy Group, Policy Brief 34, *Providing aid in insecure environments: 2009 update*, April 2009.

- The Office will assign a structural engineer to assess UNHCR premises, give expert technical advice on both material and procedural issues, and provide guidance and support on all related mitigation measures.

- Additional staff at Headquarters will give the section greater ability to assess and analyse security information and trends at the global level, and will make it more responsive and better able to support operations with guidance and monitoring.

- Ensure that security-related material procured by UNHCR meets agreed norms:

  - UNHCR is developing standards for security materials used in the Field including those needed to meet the UN Minimum Operational Security Standards (MOSS). These materials include personal protective equipment, shatter-resistant film, closed-circuit television, etc. Since 1 January 2010, FSS has assumed a greater role in the procurement of armoured vehicles including screening requests from the Field, providing technical guidance, inspecting vehicles before they are deployed, and administering and maintaining a stock of vehicles to reduce delivery lead time.

- Enhance the capacity of the Office to provide physical protection to persons of concern:

  - The work of FSAs has traditionally focused on the safety and security of UNHCR staff and premises. Measures undertaken to safeguard the physical rights and well-being of persons of concern have largely been dealt with by field and protection staff, with only ad hoc support from the more proactive FSAs, except in situations when armed and dedicated policing capacities (e.g. national forces or international troops patrolling refugee camps) are involved.

  - More work is therefore needed to increase the involvement of FSAs and systematize the organization's efforts to address the security problems of beneficiaries, achieving greater synergy and integration between security advisers and protection and field staff.

  - In collaboration with the Division of International Protection, FSS is developing practical guidance, drawn from best practices, to help identify and reduce recurrent security problems experienced by refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), from sexual and gender-based violence to forced recruitment. This guidance will serve as a tool for use at the field level and will be designed to foster cooperation between FSAs and protection, field and community service staff. A first draft will be completed by the first half of 2010 and circulated for review by a reference group of protection officers and FSAs. The final text will be made available in pocket format later in the year and will form part of the briefing kit for incoming security advisers. Protection objectives will also be incorporated into the responsibilities and performance appraisal documents of all FSAs.

III. Staffing

6.   The effectiveness of UNHCR's organizational response to evolving security challenges rests to a large degree on the capacities of the FSAs, who must be able to adapt to these complex environments and adopt new approaches. Identifying and hiring qualified FSAs remains one of the most critical and labour-intensive tasks for the Section, particularly as there is strong demand at present throughout the UN system for experienced security professionals.

7.   Developing and retaining qualified and experienced FSAs demands a concerted, coherent approach. It is necessary to continuously evaluate the desired skill sets; support and reward the FSAs who have such skills, and find alternatives for those who are unable to adapt or cope with the demands. The following objective is therefore a critical component of security management within UNHCR:

• Ensure that a sufficient number of FSAs with the appropriate profile and professional skills are fielded:

> • UNHCR has redoubled its recruitment efforts and instituted a more complete vetting process to ensure successful candidates have the appropriate profile, including proven abilities in analysis, risk management, reporting and training. FSAs will now be graded on their performance as part of a more systematic method of assessing potential that will be used in the assignment process. The skills and performance of existing personnel will be reviewed on a continual basis and adjustments will be made as necessary.

IV.   Information gathering and analysis

8.   The need to better comprehend the complex environments in which staff operate and the emerging threats, and the importance of obtaining more comprehensive security-related information and making better use of it, have become clear throughout the UN system. For an organization with an extensive network of staff deployed throughout the world, security analysis should form part of the efforts undertaken to help managers better understand and operate in the environment where they work. Priority should be given to helping decision-makers judge threats, risk and vulnerabilities more accurately, allowing them to develop sound policies and operate as safely as possible.

9.   The ability to discern useful information depends first and foremost on being able to gather it. The challenge for UNHCR lies in mobilizing its sizable network and building better contacts within host and beneficiary communities; if such an approach is executed properly, it can also enhance support for UNHCR's activities. With this in mind, the Office has set the following objectives in the area of information gathering and analysis:

• Develop and maintain a security incident reporting system:

> • A web-based incident reporting database has been created and will be accessible to all staff. It has been designed to allow offices to report on security events more accurately and expeditiously, enabling FSS to better track and record developments and analyse emerging trends as a result. The geoportal system is currently being piloted but still faces a number of technical challenges. Once it has been rolled out and a database populated through systematic use, FSS will produce a regular analysis of security incidents involving staff, persons of concern and operational partners.

• Enhance the capacity of the organization to gather, analyse and interpret security-related information:

> • UNHCR is identifying and negotiating additional sources of security information from electronic security service providers to ensure that regional and country FSAs have access to the most pertinent and accessible data and analysis available. A number of FSAs will undergo training in information management, which is fundamental to using sources effectively as a complement to on-the-spot observations and reports.

- Guidance on information gathering and networking with informal and alternative sources, for use by both FSAs and managers, will be drafted. The Regional Bureaux will be encouraged to expand and systematize their analytical approach, for example by regularly consulting outside credible sources and/or convening informal brainstorming sessions with outside experts.

V. Training

10.   Most of UNHCR's large-scale actions today involve a mix of refugees, returnees, IDPs and other victims of armed conflict. The operational context is often characterized by difficulties in terms of access to persons of concern as well as non-conflict security threats, including general lawlessness. The organization must equip its staff to meet the challenges and risks involved.

11.   Knowledge, awareness and preparedness are the best guarantees for operating safely in all types of situations. Enhancing these abilities through adapted training for security specialists, managers and staff alike is one of the most important components of the efforts to update and enhance security management in UNHCR. Training must therefore be viewed as a necessity and incorporate the following objectives:

- Provide adapted training for staff in high-risk operations:

    - FSS and the Global Learning Centre (GLC) are working together to implement training adapted for international staff assigned to 10 operations/situations which currently represent a high risk to UNHCR staff and activities. The three-day High-risk Environment Security Training (HEST) sessions cover basic skills, components designed to counter threats and mitigate risks prevalent in the particular country/situation, and elements requested by the management and staff of the operation in question. Senior management supports the principle that all international staff should participate in these sessions. The content of the HEST may eventually be expanded to include elements such as programming and communicating in insecure operating environments.

- Update and multiply opportunities for staff to undergo UNHCR security training:

    - Staff will benefit from advances made by the GLC in e-learning. Modules developed for the Security Management Learning Programme (SMLP) and the Workshop on Emergency Management (WEM) will be available on the intranet; projects currently under development include security risk management, security awareness, security for women, and travel and residential security.

    - The introduction of the Learning Management System (LMS) will allow online discussion boards on security topics and a forum for FSAs to share information and best practices. The LMS will enable UNHCR to track and increase the compliance rate of staff participation in the compulsory CD-ROM security training modules on Basic and Advanced Security in the Field.

12.   The role of managers in complex and insecure situations is critical. Operating safely means being well-acquainted with the environment; building relationships with authorities and communities alike; and using informed judgement – assessing the level of risk – when weighing up whether to undertake a particular mission or project. Knowledge of inter-agency specific procedures is also essential. The following objective is designed to improve UNHCR's security management efforts:

- Enrol a greater number of Representatives and Heads of Office in the Security Management Learning Programme:

  - The goal of the SMLP, which has been in existence since 2005, is to build the security consciousness and ability of managers to balance operational imperatives with the safety of staff. The course helps senior decision-makers in the organization to assess threats, risks and vulnerabilities; manage residual risk; and better understand key aspects of the UN Security Management System. Course material is constantly updated to reflect the latest UN Security Management System policy developments, including the new security level system. The SMLP prepares Representatives and Heads of Office so that they can better advocate for their operational priorities, which are often specific to UNHCR, and more ably discharge their responsibilities as members of the country Security Management Team or as area security coordinators.

  - In 2009 the SMLP was rolled out to regional locations. In 2010, five sessions will be offered and by the end of the year, FSS will have reached 80 per cent of its targeted participants.

13.   All FSAs have relevant experience with military or police forces. However, as for other UNHCR staff, they need additional skills to operate effectively in complex humanitarian environments, ranging from assessing programme security risks to training drivers in the use of armoured vehicles. The affirmation of three areas as priority competencies for FSAs – analysis, training of staff, and information gathering/reporting – has created additional training requirements within FSS itself. Joint security training provides the opportunity to increase awareness of the particular exigencies of UNHCR's mandate externally; and internally, to establish a better understanding of the approach of the UN Department of Safety and Security (DSS) and the Office's operational partners. The following objective will enable FSAs to obtain the additional skills needed:

- Provide expert training in relevant areas for FSAs:

  - Following an October 2009 FSA workshop on Security Risk Management, the GLC and FSS will conduct a similar session this year on the analysis and processing of security information. These courses are intended to improve information gathering, analysis and management skills, as well as incident reporting. The GLC and FSS are also making available means for self-development, funding UN-certified distance-learning courses in terrorism and in protection.

  - The use of armoured vehicles has expanded significantly over the past few years, constituting a challenge for drivers accustomed to standard motor vehicles. As it has been deemed cost-effective to build an in-house training capacity, eight FSAs will undergo comprehensive instruction in the use of armoured vehicles and will then be certified to train drivers.

  - In 2009, UNHCR and DSS co-organized a Hostage Incident Management training with technical assistance from Scotland Yard, which led to the approval of a further eight UNHCR FSAs as hostage incident team members. Two additional FSAs were certified in a January 2010 session and others will participate later this year to ensure sufficient organizational capacity. The goal is to ensure that all FSAs assigned to areas where abduction is a prevalent threat, possess the necessary skills.

VI.   Oversight and headquarters processes

14.   An essential part of the effort to adapt to complex environments is a commitment by the organization to regularly review its security posture and preparedness. The volatility of many operations and the demands of inter-agency coordination make continuous re-evaluation absolutely vital, both to guard against routine oversight and to ensure that offices maintain a proactive, forward-looking approach to security management. Increasing the role of FSS in reviewing and evaluating security management efforts is one of the main recommendations of the OIOS audit and part of the measures undertaken taken by the High Commissioner in 2009. The following objectives underpin this approach:

- Conduct regular reviews of high-risk operations through the Security Steering Committee and other relevant processes:

    - The Security Steering Committee (SSC) was instituted by the High Commissioner in mid-2009 with the aim of systematically reviewing security issues in critical locations. Chaired by the High Commissioner or the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, the SSC provides the opportunity for relevant headquarters sections and field operations to evaluate current developments; the value of programmes in relation to security risks; and the steps taken to enhance the safety of operations.

    - To mirror this process in the Field, each country office has been instructed to create a local SSC, to be headed by the Representative. The aim of the local SSCs is to replicate the inclusive appraisal of security issues, paying particular attention to the concerns of national staff.

    - FSS acts as a secretariat for the headquarters SSC, setting the agenda for discussion, providing guidance as needed and tracking the implementation of decisions. The SSC ensures that senior management, both in the Field and at Headquarters, regularly take stock of changing security dynamics and how to adapt operations in response.

- Achieve full MOSS compliance:

    - While physical preparedness measures neither constitute comprehensive risk management nor replace sound procedures, the Office undertakes to ensure that all office premises and residences meet the security norms agreed upon by the UN system – i.e. MOSS compliance.

    - In 2009, UNHCR made a number of changes to the practice of tracking MOSS compliance and better situating this procedure within its security governance structures. As of 1 January 2010, MOSS compliance reports are filed on a biannual basis, rather than quarterly, saving time for offices and allowing FSS to concentrate its support to offices which report non-compliance or where standards are problematic.

    - As of 31 December 2009, all 328 UNHCR offices had reported on their MOSS status. Overall, 87 per cent were compliant, up slightly from 85 per cent in October 2009. For the 121 offices in locations at security phase 3 or above, the end-2009 compliance figure stood at 89 per cent.

- Ensure security budgeting reflects needs and practice:

    - Sophisticated threats and shrinking humanitarian space have driven up the cost of security preparedness. Countermeasures now frequently include guard services, armoured vehicles, and the retro-fitting of offices, including with blast mitigation devices. The cost and unpredictability associated with

security budgeting poses a dilemma for UNHCR's operations. Offices that incur unexpected security expenses may request resources from the FSS-administered Regional Security Administrative Budget and Obligation Document (ABOD); however, these funds are limited, and even small offices may encounter more sizeable needs if there is a tangible change in the security environment, or if MOSS measures are enhanced.

- UNHCR will continue to budget for security by encouraging operations to incorporate all foreseeable security needs in their annual budgets; meeting small, unanticipated security costs through the FSS Regional Security ABOD; and directing larger requests to the Budget Committee.

- For 2010, the Programme and Budget Section and FSS have assigned a set of codes for security-related expenditures. This will make it possible to determine more accurately how much the Office spends on security, including globally. The programming instructions draw attention to the introduction of specific codes for walls and fencing, guard services and escort vehicles, for example. FSS participates actively in the annual programme review process with the authority to review and provide advice on the resources allocated for security.

VII.   Conclusion

15.   These far-reaching efforts reaffirm UNHCR's approach to security as a means of enabling persons of concern to access protection and assistance. They require that the Office balance the importance of staff security with the need to deploy and operate in environments where residual risks are present, even after all reasonable mitigation measures have been taken.

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