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**Security of UNHCR's workforce and operations***Summary*

This paper highlights developments in the area of field security since the last update provided to the seventy-third meeting of the Standing Committee in September 2018 (EC/69/SC/CRP.20). It reports on steps that UNHCR is taking to ensure that security policies, practices and procedures are aligned with risks in the field. Particularly, it underscores efforts to adapt approaches to the newly decentralized organizational structure, apply lessons learned from the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) situation, and ensure a diverse and inclusive security workforce that is responsive to the needs of UNHCR's operations and personnel.

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## I. Introduction

1. UNHCR operates in a continuously evolving security environment. Security arrangements are therefore constantly reviewed to ensure that effective security risk management measures are in place, and that the mandate and all related activities are delivered within a framework of acceptable risk. This update provides an overview on actions the organization is taking to ensure a holistic approach to effective security management, including a duty of care to the workforce. While in 2020 and 2021 some of these actions have been complicated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have also been innovations that are likely to remain.

## II. The security environment

2. In 2020, UNHCR reported 279 security incidents, a reduction as compared to the 320 incidents in 2019. The most common types were related to crime, followed by hazards and civil unrest. Sixteen incidents were considered critical, including eight detentions, five serious injuries, one sexual assault and two traffic fatalities.

3. While in 2020 UNHCR did not suffer fatalities in deliberate, malicious incidents, personnel were exposed to risk, and sometimes near-misses, around the globe. This included indirect fire attacks in Baghdad and Mogadishu, attacks on and near humanitarian workers in Nigeria and the Sahel region, and risks related to close proximity to armed conflict in many other places. UNHCR partners in the field, including international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), also faced significant threats, unfortunately sometimes resulting in casualties.

4. For the rest of 2021, several situations will continue to be of concern and must be closely monitored due to the following reasons:

(i) Crime, with organized criminal groups and drug cartels, taking advantage of existing unstable conditions and economic situations, may rise, threatening State authority and triggering high levels of violence associated with their illicit trade and activities.

(ii) Violence related to elections, with opposition groups being targeted and activists and/or political parties partaking in – and often dissatisfied with – electoral processes, resorting to violence. Furthermore, the growing economic crisis and the inability of some governments to mitigate or address its consequences are likely to lead to deeper dissatisfaction and polarization. Countries with upcoming elections, facing fragile transitions or already experiencing tense political situations are at even greater risk of upheaval of this type. Civil unrest, triggered by political and electoral issues, building on existing social and economic tensions, compounded by the negative impact of Covid-19, is likely to be of concern and may possibly increase throughout the year.

(iii) Armed conflict between State and non-state actors, militias and militant/rebel groups, will likely continue to have a negative impact on civilian populations, hinder operations and the safe delivery of assistance, as well as possibly triggering further displacement.

(iv) Extremist groups are expected to continue to be a threat to civilian populations, governments and operations in the areas where this risk has been present for years, as well as areas where this is a relatively new phenomenon. Extremist groups may take advantage of deteriorating situations and existing tensions to increase their outreach, operations and attract disenfranchised populations, mainly youth, to their cause. It is anticipated that the risk associated to extremist militancy will remain important for 2021 for humanitarian operations and workers.

## III. Strategic oversight

5. In response to these situations, UNHCR continues to ensure that security policies, procedures and practices are appropriate, up to date and responsive to the different risks. In

November 2020, UNHCR issued an updated internal policy on security management, which provides guidance on roles and responsibilities and incorporates important updates of inter-agency security policies. In addition, with the transition to a regionalized and decentralized organizational structure, updated standard operating procedures were developed to clarify security processes and ensure appropriate actions and alignment with the new approach. These include procedures for the reporting of security incidents and the management of critical incidents, as well as security oversight.

6. With 24 per cent of UNHCR's operations in areas with a substantial or greater threat level, a regular review of procedures and measures remains a key priority. Reviews are primarily conducted through the Security Steering Committee (SSC), chaired by the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, and attended by managers from the operations and regional bureaux concerned, as well as colleagues from the Division of Human Resources, the Field Security Service (FSS), the Staff Health and Wellbeing Service and Enterprise Risk Management. The focus is on managing risks, while ensuring that appropriate security measures are in place and duty of care is observed through the careful examination of programming activities, resource requirements and business continuity plans.

7. In 2020, fourteen SSC meetings were conducted, focusing on environments with traditionally high security risks and those with emergency threats. Special attention was given to managing risks related to COVID-19, including in high-risk environments, where the movement of personnel and logistics have been hampered due to the reduction in air travel capacity, and visa and quarantine requirements. These reviews were frequently effective in identifying gaps that required additional measures or attention. For example, a review of countries in the Sahel region led to an urgent extra-budgetary allocation to procure additional armoured vehicles and other protective equipment. The reviews will continue in 2021, supported by monitoring processes developed by FSS designed to identify areas warranting further attention through early warning and analysis.

8. Working with the regional bureaux, FSS plays an important role in monitoring compliance with required standards. In addition to the SSC, FSS oversees the biannual global review of compliance with security risk management measures and leads desktop reviews, or the Security Oversight and Review, of operations in countries with heightened risks

#### **IV. Support to operations**

9. With the transition to a decentralized approach, primary responsibility for providing security advice and support shifted to security personnel in the countries and regional bureaux. FSS provides further support, principally through the Senior Field Security Coordinators based in the regions, that adds further analysis or expertise, and ensures global consistency and adherence to policies and good practice.

10. In terms of specialized support, the service maintains an expert in security engineering, who ensures that standards for premises and equipment are suited for purpose and of the highest possible quality. FSS also employs a Global Security Analyst, who coordinates closely internally and with external partners to support the bureaux and operations with analytical products to support forecasting, the early identification of threats and decision-making. There is also an expert in gender-based security threats in the FSS team, who works to ensure that security risk management processes globally are inclusive and incorporate a person-centred approach. This approach considers risks to diverse personal profiles, including people living with disabilities and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and others (LGBTQI+) community, taking into account the intersectionality and contextual nature of those individual risk profiles.

11. FSS works with field security personnel in the regions and countries to ensure a consistent and coherent approach to security risk management worldwide. This includes effective sharing of security information with partners in accordance with the United Nations "Saving lives together" policy framework.

## V. Security workforce

12. Field Security Advisers (FSAs) support UNHCR managers in assessing security risks, determining the appropriate security risk measures to be taken and assisting in implementing them. In addition, they are instrumental in supporting the United Nations security management system through their contributions to processes, planning and critical incident management in areas that they are working in, both within the wider United Nations Security management system and for NGO partners. In this context, with the spread of COVID-19, FSAs took on additional roles in 2020, including assisting with business continuity planning, preliminary assessments of medical facilities and capacities, and medical evacuation procedures.

13. The organization strives to ensure that the workforce has the appropriate technical expertise, analytical abilities, humanitarian understanding and communication skills, as well as any languages that may be warranted. As part of the organization-wide priority to achieve gender balance, a target has been set that at least 50 per cent of the candidates recruited to security positions at the international level are women until overall parity is reached. In 2020, this benchmark was met, with five out of eight recruitments being of women; in 2021 thus far two women have been recruited. Furthermore, greater emphasis is being placed on the need to have a workforce that is diverse in race, age and professional background, as well as gender. FSS has developed a specific learning programme to support “inclusivity in security recruitment”.

14. Working together with UNHCR’s Global Development Learning Centre (GLDC), training and other learning opportunities for the security cadre continue to be developed. Regular webinars are organized to ensure that FSAs are aware of new developments in the United Nations security management system. In 2020, the annual FSA workshop was conducted virtually, while for 2021 this has changed into a series of webinars/ interactive sessions that are made available for all FSAs. These sessions cover: i) analysis and incident reporting; ii) mentoring; iii) development of plans and procedures; iv) career planning and development; and v) ensuring a person-centred approach to security risk management. Meanwhile, efforts will continue to ensure the professional development of the security workforce, not just in security, but also in related areas such as management, occupational safety, management and mental health first aid.

15. A more structured approach to coaching and mentoring of the security workforce has been rolled out in 2021, with a series of webinars for security personnel attached to the regional bureaux and large country operations to assist them in enhancing and developing the skills of the security workforce under their technical supervision.

## VI. Inter-agency processes

16. UNHCR remains committed to strengthening the wider United Nations security management system through active engagement at all levels. On a global level, FSS acts as a focal point for the United Nations Department of Safety and Security and other organizations, contributing to policy and guidance development. It contributed to the identification of new technologies and practices that can support security management, while ensuring that appropriate standards are in place for learning and training. Security was a main theme for the 2021 Humanitarian Network and Partnership week, organized by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in May 2021. UNHCR contributed to the security sessions and took the lead on the session on “A person-centred approach to security risk management in humanitarian response”, identifying what organizations were doing to support individuals and groups who may be targeted because of their profile.

17. The programme criticality framework is a common United Nations system policy for decision-making that puts in place the guiding principles and a systematic structured approach to using programme criticality in the United Nations security risk management process to ensure that activities involving United Nations personnel can be balanced against security risks. It helps decision-making on acceptable risk and is currently a mandatory

process in 26 operational areas. In 2020, given the challenges of the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic, 40 countries undertook an assessment on where security situations were likely to change and, moreover, where supply chains and movements of staff would be affected. These assessments were facilitated remotely by trained facilitators from the United Nations, including six personnel from UNHCR.

18. UNHCR actively engages with the military at a global level and on the ground to ensure that security is provided to persons of concern to UNHCR. This engagement includes participating in forums to strengthen civil-military coordination, participating in exercises with organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to ensure they are aware and understand the mandate of the Office and how it operates in complex environments. UNHCR also contributes to OCHA's new digitally connected learning programme on civil-military coordination, which is designed for humanitarian and military stakeholders.

## **VII. Learning and development**

19. To ensure effective security management, the organization has made learning and development a key priority for managers and UNHCR personnel. While in-person training was generally not possible in 2020, FSS together with GLDC rolled out a fully virtual version of the security management learning programme, which is mandatory for managers in high-risk environments. This training will be conducted again in 2021 and will be further modified into a blended learning programme, combining online and face-to-face training when conditions allow.

20. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 mitigation measures, only four sessions of the women's security awareness training programme were conducted. While some sessions on women's safety were made available online, challenges remain to ensuring a safe space for discussing the security concerns that women face in different environments and to address these. There have, however, been some opportunities to deliver the security management exercise, and other tailored training courses in the field, using regional capacity supported by FSS and GLDC.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

21. UNHCR will continue to work in challenging and sometimes hostile environments to protect, assist and support persons of concern. Therefore, the organization must ensure robust security risk management practices from early warning and analysis to pre-positioning of equipment and technologies, from planning security measures to preparing and training the workforce. UNHCR relies on and is grateful for the host governments that afford it the requisite security support to allow the Office to continue its humanitarian work, despite challenges circumstances. Furthermore, the organization will continue to work effectively within the United Nations security management system and to address collectively the security needs of operational partners.

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