NGO field security

by Randolph Martin

In an environment of increased exposure, deterioration in the rules of war and loss of perceived neutrality, the community of NGOs operating in complex emergencies is facing significantly increased risks to staff safety and security.

Humanitarian crises are increasing in number, duration and their impact on civil society. In the first half of the 1990s, 70 states were involved in 93 wars. More than half of these conflicts lasted over five years, forty per cent lasted over 10 years, and wholly one quarter have lasted over 20 years[1]. At the same time, civilians are increasingly the targets of conflict rather than simply hapless victims: civilian casualties of war have increased from 10 per cent at the turn of the century, to 50 per cent in the second world war to over 75 per cent in contemporary conflicts. Since 1980, the number of refugees has increased from 2.4 million to 14.4 million[2], while IDPs have increased from 22 million to 38 million[3]. The magnitude and duration of crises have left beneficiary groups reliant on international assistance for extended periods of time. It has also been suggested that the shift from wars between national armies to wars between militia and guerrilla groups has contributed to the loss of the rules of conduct of war. Finally, as civilians are increasingly the targets of war, those who come to their assistance - the NGOs - are less likely to be perceived as impartial and neutral.

While few statistics are available, there is an abundance of anecdotal evidence clearly indicating that aid workers are increasingly victims of hostage taking, assassination, mine explosions and robbery in addition to the ongoing exposure to vehicular and health threats.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) faces its share of this groundswell in security challenges and has scrambled to develop policies and protocols which will maximise the security of its staff assigned to insecure environments. We have been fortunate to be able to draw upon the excellent reflective and practical work of a number of our colleagues in the NGO community. Our land-mine security protocols draw heavily on the excellent work of CARE in this area; the information exchanged by the NGO participants in InterAction's Security Task Force and subsequent training programme have been a major source of ideas and inspiration; and the 'Security Triangle' concept which is the foundation piece of IRC's security protocols - and this paper - was conceived by Koenraad Van Brabant at the Overseas Development Institute, and developed further by the InterAction Security Task Force. As such, this paper does not seek to provide original thought, but rather to add flesh to the important work that has already been done.

Why are humanitarian aid workers at risk?

Although there is very little by way of study or documentation, it is clear that there has been an increase in the number and degree of threats to humanitarian aid workers in recent years. There are any number of reasons for this.

- Increase in the number and duration of conflicts
- Absence of rules of conduct : Conflicts are increasingly fought by smaller and less disciplined forces, often struggling over the control of resources, rather than ideology or legitimacy. Conflicts are increasingly intrastate rather than international, meaning that the combatants and the outside world are less likely to view the conflict as subject to external scrutiny.
- Impunity: Aid agencies are perceived as 'soft' targets which can be attacked with impunity due to their lack of communal or diplomatic links with the combatants.
- Erosion of neutrality: As civilian population displacement has become increasingly the purpose rather than a by-product of war, so too have the aid agencies that come to their assistance lost their aura of neutrality.
- NGO competition and culture: Competition between aid agencies can increase pressure to 'get there first' and work the closest to the lines of confrontation. Moreover, the culture of NGO workers is too often ill-disposed to the discipline necessary for proper security protocols. This both reflects and perpetuates the lack of development of professional standards and 'best practices' in the field of security.

Safety versus security

For our purposes here, the term 'safety' relates to protection from illness and accidents, whereas 'security' relates to protection from acts of violence and crime. While the security of NGO staff, assets and programmes necessarily requires the investment of considerable time and resources, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the greatest risks to the well-being of NGO staff arise not from security threats, but from safety issues. *Safety threats such as vehicle accidents, malaria, water-borne disease, HIV and other health threats continue to be by far the largest causes of casualties among relief workers.*

The impact of mandate and mission on security

An NGO's exposure to security threats is directly related to its mandate and mission, *mandate* being the overall purpose of the organisation and *mission* its reason for operating in a particular situation. For example, an organisation whose *mandate* involves evangelism will obviously be at higher risk in some environments than a secular organisation. Similarly, human rights and 'solidarity' organisations may be at higher risk than service-providing organisations. An organisation whose *mission* in a given country is life-saving medical services must be prepared to withstand higher levels of risk than an organisation involved in economic development. It is important for NGO leadership to weigh their mandate and local

mission as it relates to the local environment. IRC's mandate is refugee assistance. In countries where refugees are perceived as threatening or are a persecuted group within the host country, IRC may be seen as aiding and abetting an enemy. Where IRC's mission is life saving, we must be prepared to withstand a higher level of threat than in countries where our mission is, for example, self-reliance or reconstruction projects.

The Security Triangle: Acceptance-Protection-Deterrence

Unfortunately, security is often conceptualised in terms of military or police models which appear (albeit superficially) to emphasise equipment and tactics. While there is much that we can learn from these models, NGO security is far more complex. Fancy communications gear, logistics capabilities and compound security have their place, but are only a small part of what constitutes security for aid workers.

At IRC, each field office must adapt a local security protocol which includes each of the three elements of the security triangle: acceptance, protection and deterrence. An effective local security protocol must balance all three elements. A strong acceptance strategy with supportive protection and deterrence elements is ideal. However, where local conditions limit the effectiveness of the acceptance strategies, it is necessary to build stronger protection and deterrence capabilities.

1. Acceptance - softening the threat

This is when the community in which an NGO is working accepts and supports the NGO's presence, and out of that acceptance grows security.[4] Lest 'acceptance' appear too utopian, note that acceptance strategies include the security which may be provided by local law enforcement authorities. Some of the elements of acceptance are:
- The belligerent parties/combatants or the official or *de facto* authorities in the NGO's area of work give their consent to the NGO's activities.
- The community has a stake in the programme and participates actively.
- The community has been involved in the assessment and design of the programme.
- The community is involved in the evaluation of the programme.
- The NGO's mission is transparent and broadly communicated.

- The NGO's activities are perceived as *impartial*.
- The NGO's staff and presence are culturally and politically sensitive.
- The NGO's programme reflects local priorities.
- The NGO has developed good working relationships with local governmental authorities, including the police and military where appropriate.
- The NGO's programmes reflect basic development concepts and a willingness to invest the time and effort to involve the community in every facet of project assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation.
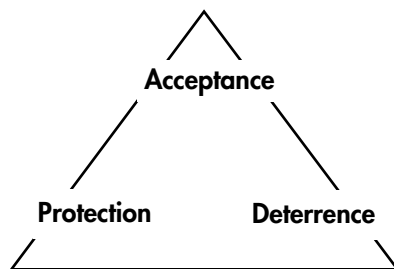
Acceptance is the cornerstone of security for NGOs with a development mandate, but is often challenged under the timeframes and political circumstances in which NGO relief efforts take place. In war-time relief operations, acceptance by the beneficiary community may seem to be grossly overshadowed by the hostility of one or more of the combatants. For example, Bosnian acceptance of NGO operations in Sarajevo was overshadowed by Serb hostility, making it necessary for NGOs to build strong *protection* and *deterrence* strategies.

In emergency operations, the pressure to get programmes moving may limit the ability of staff to thoroughly involve the local community. However, it is imperative that NGOs do not let a limited vision of *mission* obscure this critical element in the security triangle and core element in quality programming: the community's involvement.

2. Protection - hardening the target

This is the element that many people most readily associate with security, though it is by no means the most important element in the triangle. Elements of 'protection' are presented under three main headings:

Protection devices: the materials and equipment needed to provide adequate security, such as:

- Communications equipment
- Reliable vehicles and maintenance facility
- Perimeter security devices including walls, barbed wire and alarm systems
- Flak jackets and helmets
- Use (or non-use) of the NGO emblem (or other symbols)

Operational policies & procedures: the institutional mechanisms which enhance security, such as:
- Clear and equitable national staff personnel policies - including grievance procedures - which are communicated to staff and implemented consistently. *Incidents involving disgruntled staff are one of the largest causes of security infractions for NGOs.*
- Clear financial policies and procedures including division of responsibility in accounting, and prudent cash transfer procedures
- Clear vehicle operations policies and strict discipline regarding vehicle operations
- Curfews and no-go zones where appropriate
- Development of and/or participation in a 'warden system' or communications pyramid for conveying emergency messages
- Communications protocol, training and disciplined radio usage
- Security orientation for incoming staff and routine security briefings for staff including personal security training
- Convoy operations protocol
- Visitor screening protocol
- Clear and consistent discipline for infractions of security policy, including the inclusion of security compliance in routine performance reviews

Coordinated operations: the activities which NGOs are able to carry out together, thereby creating a 'strength in numbers' strategy, such as:
- Active membership in NGO coordinating bodies
- Active relationship and coordination with the United Nations
- Collaborative convoy operations
- Integrated communications
- Collaborative monitoring, community policing, etc

Some elements of protection are important in all situations, even in stable settings where *acceptance* is the primary strategy. Good communications, sound policy structures and inter-agency coordination are always the mark of quality operations. *Protection* strategies need to be enhanced if conditions deteriorate and

acceptance strategies become less effective, but should never be viewed as an alternative to strong community support.

3. Deterrence - posing a counter threat

Most NGOs are not large enough, nor an appropriately suited actor, to pose a credible counter threat on their own. The focus of deterrence strategies is the relationships which we are able to build with larger regional or international institutions:

Diplomatic deterrence: This is the product of an NGO's relationship to larger international actors who can exert diplomatic pressure on our behalf, influencing local authorities and actors who either pose security threats themselves or who are well placed to promote the security interests of the NGOs, but are not adequately doing so. This is a very important element in the security strategy in any country of operations. Elements include:
- The quality of our relationship with key diplomatic missions
- The quality of our relationship with the United Nations
- The quality of our participation in NGO coordinating bodies which are capable of presenting a unified front

Guards: The use of guards is a common deterrent strategy at NGO facilities around the world. Oddly, there are very few instances where NGOs have developed strong professional guidelines for this very common deterrent force. Uniforms, basic training, incident debriefing and provision of basic equipment (ranging from a night stick and flashlight to VHF radios) are among the cornerstones. Coordinated inter-agency monitoring greatly strengthens the effect of guards.

Military deterrence: This is the least common form of deterrent strategy, usually appearing in conjunction with peace-keeping missions when NGOs formally coordinate activities with *external international* military forces. We have witnessed this in northern Iraq, in Somalia and in Bosnia. In each case, NGOs have worked closely with international military coalitions who have provided a military security umbrella under which NGOs have been able to implement humanitarian assistance programmes. Needless-to-say, military deterrent strategies are less than ideal and should only be pursued when the other elements of the security triangle are clearly insufficient.

Threat assessment and response

Threat assessment should accompany any initial programme assessment, and be carried on continually during programme operations. Like programme assessments, security threat assessments should include a wide variety of inputs from the United Nations, the embassies and national government, through to other NGOs, local government and community leaders and finally individuals in the community. In the simplest terms, it is a matter of identifying what security threats are of the highest probability and greatest consequence to an NGO's operations and prioritising resources to these threats accordingly.

The security triangle in practice

There is an appropriate place for each point of the security triangle under any type of security threat, from land-mines to burglary, even though the emphasis may shift between acceptance, protection and deterrence.

Liberia, Somalia and Afghanistan are among those countries where car theft has meant not only a loss of property but a security risk to staff. Learning that one of the enticements to theft of NGO property in these settings has been the knowledge that NGOs will not retaliate through vendetta, IRC has limited the risk by renting vehicles from the local community instead of purchasing new vehicles. An indirect benefit of this approach is that more funds go into the local economy, assuaging an issue which often embitters local communities. This acceptance strategy focusing on a local community may be of limited use when travelling between distant locations. In these situations, protection strategies such as sound vehicle protocols governing routes taken, times of travel, communications *en route*, use of convoys, etc, become much more important. Deterrence strategies also play a role; in Afghanistan, IRC coordinated with several other NGOs to suspend assistance to a particular district until the community returned several stolen vehicles.

Official harassment is typical in situations where an NGO is assisting a group persecuted by the host government, or where NGOs are operating across lines of confrontation. Bribery is not a good strategy here, as it only exacerbates the problem for all concerned over time. Acceptance strategies can work under these circumstances. During the war in Bosnia, IRC faced great difficulties bringing assistance into Serb-surrounded Sarajevo. Opening primary health care programmes and a winter heating programme in Republika Srpska greatly enhanced IRC's ability to negotiate passage, while not compromising our mandate in the region. Similarly, singling out refugee or returnee groups from a larger community which might also be in desperate need can also undermine security. IRC health programmes in northern Sudan have sought to provide assistance in a balanced way to Northerners as well as Southerners. Similarly, our ongoing programmes for Serb refugees in Yugoslavia may provide a degree of acceptance for IRC in post-conflict Kosovo or for current operations in Montenegro. Protection strategies can also mitigate against official harassment. Training of staff in methods of conflict diffusion is helpful. Staff need to be well oriented in the agency's mandate and mission and be able to represent the NGO in a mature and non-threatening way. Finally, the deterrence strategies

ICRC/Till Mayer

Kabul, Afghanistan
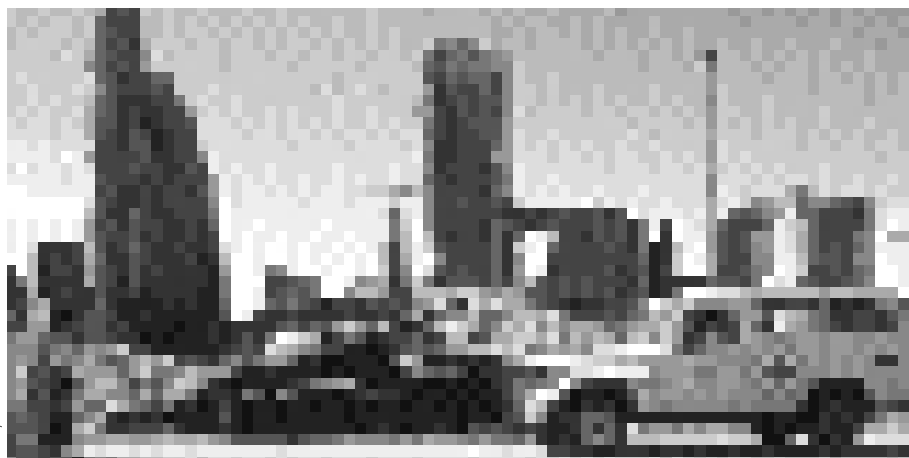
centre on the relationship between the NGO and the larger political actors who may be able to cajole a hostile government when all else fails.

Conclusion

These brief examples suggest rounded strategies for each threat. There are clearly advantages and disadvantages to any strategy, which must be weighed within the context of each local environment. In Liberia, for example, the poor quality of rented cars and their drivers eventually posed a greater risk than car theft, and the policy was abandoned. Thus, flexibility and local control over security policies are an imperative. When developing security policies, field managers should first identify the key risks in the local environment based upon probability and consequence. Risks of high probability and/or high consequence should be the primary focus of agency attention and resources. Secondly, for each of these key risks, the field manager needs to carefully and creatively consider *each* of the three strategies - acceptance, protection and deterrence - in devising an appropriate local response.

Security for humanitarian staff operations is too often viewed in terms of military models or, worse yet, overlooked as an inevitable and inalterable aspect of working in humanitarian crises. In fact, there is a lot that can be done to enhance security in humanitarian operations. However, security in humanitarian operations calls for a new paradigm that weighs not only the familiar equipment and technology of security but also the dynamics of community support, inter-agency coordination and diplomatic influence.

Randolph Martin is Senior Director for Operations at the International Rescue Committee, New York.

1 Dan Smith with the International Peace Research Institute, *The State of War and Peace Atlas*, Myriad Editions Limited, 1997, p13.

2 UNHCR, *State of the World's Refugees 1995*, Oxford University Press, p26.

3 Smith, *op cit* p26.

4 Van Brabant K 'Cool ground for aid workers. Towards better security management in aid agencies', *Disasters* 22 (2), pp109-125, 1998.