Security training: where are we now?

by Koenraad Van Brabant

In recent years, concern for the security of aid personnel working in violent environments has grown rapidly.

There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, there is a perception of greater insecurity with more personnel being injured or killed. Although trends cannot be accurately assessed as most agencies do not keep proper records, it is the perceived insecurity that prompts action. An important factor in this is the perception that aid workers are now more at risk of being deliberately targeted, either for political reasons or because they are easy prey for criminals, and this drastically alters the perception of risk. Secondly, as media attention latches onto dramatic kidnappings and assassinations of aid workers, agencies are becoming more concerned about their reputation and their ability to recruit. Thirdly, some agencies have been sued by injured staff or the family members of deceased staff; not infrequently, it turns out that agencies do not have adequate insurance cover.

1. Responding to risk

Training for security is one response among others. In the last three years or so, there has been a number of awareness raising events. ICRC and ECHO for example have organised seminars on security; ECHO has developed a background paper for the European Commission; and there has been debate in the US Senate Foreign Affairs Committee. Operational agencies have also taken internal measures. These include the development of 'guidelines' or 'security manuals' for field staff and field managers[1], and reviews of security measures in a particular setting or of the larger organisational procedures and their strengths and weaknesses. Some agencies have also appointed a full-time 'security' person in-house. Worth mentioning also is practice-oriented research by Jonathan Dworken of the US Centre for Naval Analysis (on trends), this author (on a management framework for security) and the Humanitarian Security and Protection Network (on incident reporting and incident pattern analysis[2]).

There is also growing interest in security training and a gradual increase in courses on offer. UN agencies such as UNHCR and WFP are organising in-house training on security. UNSECOORD in New York fielded a team to conduct training in Central and South West Asia. Among the NGO training providers are RedR in the UK, Bioforce in France, CINFO in Switzerland and Kontakt der Kontinenten in the Netherlands. Security is integrated into ICRC's comprehensive in-house training programme.

Two important things are still missing. Firstly, we need agreed sector-wide standards that clarify the minimum requirements in terms of awareness, knowledge and skill with regard to security issues for aid workers, and similar minimum requirements for organisations sending personnel to dangerous environments. Principle 7 of People in Aid's Code of Best Practice for the Management and Support of Aid Personnel[3] is a first attempt, and the US Office for Foreign Disasters Assistance (OFDA) now contractually requires the agencies it funds to refer to the InterAction guidelines on security, but more work is needed. Secondly, there is a proliferation of disconnected initiatives on both sides of the Atlantic; what is needed is an active, international network to bring them together to avoid duplication, identify gaps, and to exchange learning on good practice.

2. Security training: need-demand-supply

Car accidents and medical conditions, including HIV, are a common cause of injury and death among aid workers. Safe driving, safe sex and practical first-aid knowledge are needed. This we will call 'safety training'. 'Security training' relates to protection against violence in the environment and the need for it is acute. There are thousands of aid workers in violent environments who have had hardly any security training. That need is not being met because there are problems with demand and with supply.

Generally the expressed demand for security training reflects an inadequate understanding of proper security management for the aid world. Typically it is for short courses, one or two days, because aid workers feel they have 'no time' to devote to security training. All one can do in 'no time', however, is raise awareness, not train people to behave in ways that improve their security. The demand is also for 'personal security' training - a mixture of safety training, stress management, and a few dos and don'ts in individual behaviour - but people are insecure in a larger operational setting. The demand is also often for agency-specific training - but security management in the field has important inter-agency dimensions. Finally the demand is for 'answer sheets': a security plan which, if followed, is believed will provide protection; there are some generic guidelines for security but, by and large, 'secure behaviour' requires thinking and judgement.

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The problem is aggravated because the supply does not match the need. Given the size of the target group, the number of courses in the aid sector remains very small. Most do not take place close to the field and there are few developed training resources. Agency guidelines and manuals are not training manuals. There are, however, good slide series on landmines, and the ICRC has some videos on security which are available to others. In late 1999, the Relief and Rehabilitation Network at the ODI in London hopes to publish a good practice review for operational security management. But more time and money could usefully be invested in developing training resources.

There is also a shortage of qualified trainers. Security training for aid agencies is mostly offered by people with a background in aid work but without specialised security training, or by people coming from the professional security sector - police and military - sometimes with and sometimes without experience of aid work and aid agencies. Training for aid agencies is also offered by a number of private security companies. there is a far greater diversity among these than aid workers typically believe, and some have been very useful. The point is not so much the background of the trainers but whether they understand the specific requirements and organisational culture of aid agencies. They need to understand that aid agencies tend to have a different approach to security than the police or the military (even though many aid agencies would be hard pressed to articulate it), and be able to relate to that, in language, style and the guidance they offer.

Funding security measures, including training, can be a problem. A number of official donors are showing more willingness to support security measures, including training. Sometimes, however, agency headquarters fail to allocate budgets for security measures and security training.

3. Curriculum development

Most courses are concerned with 'basics', and tend more to raise awareness than to develop skills in security management. There is room for basic security training for all but, like primary health care posts, there is a need for back-up support. This needs to come from training on operational security management (for those in charge at field level) and improvements in organisational security management, for which guidance could come via seminars.

a. Basic security training

Most current courses claim to offer 'basic' security training. They run for half a day to two days. Topics commonly included in the curriculum are: vehicle safety, operating a radio, passing a road-block, mine-awareness, stress management, and 'contingency planning' (in practice usually a short brief on evacuation only). Some include house-security, for offices and residences. Although these topics are relevant, the rationale behind this curriculum is unclear. Why are other security threats not included, such as car jacking, sexual assault and getting caught in the crossfire? Is managing guards not a useful topic? A number of 'people skills' are also essential components of secure behaviour: maintaining personal effectiveness, team building, personal conduct and behaviour, cultural sensitivity and negotiation styles.

Operational agencies also seem to miss the point that it may be the most junior staff who need most security training. It is often the younger and less experienced ones who are closest to the danger spot - in the refugee camp, accompanying the food convoy, working at the health post behind the front-line. They, as well as drivers and interpreters, may also have most regular contact with the warring parties and with the local population. They will be making day-to-day programme decisions that may have security implications. And they may have first-line responsibility for other staff, including for their security. They will be the ones providing front-line information on security conditions and security incidents. Should their training be limited to 'basics'? Not all of this must be addressed in generic security training courses but aid agencies would do well to follow the example of some of the better training schools for peace-keepers, and add intensive mission-specific briefing and even training to the generic training. Mission-specific briefing or training is not to be confused with orientation about the general financial and administrative procedures and requirements of the sending agency, and an overview of its programmes in a particular place. It is a briefing on the environment in which the person will be operating: politically, culturally, institutionally and security-wise.

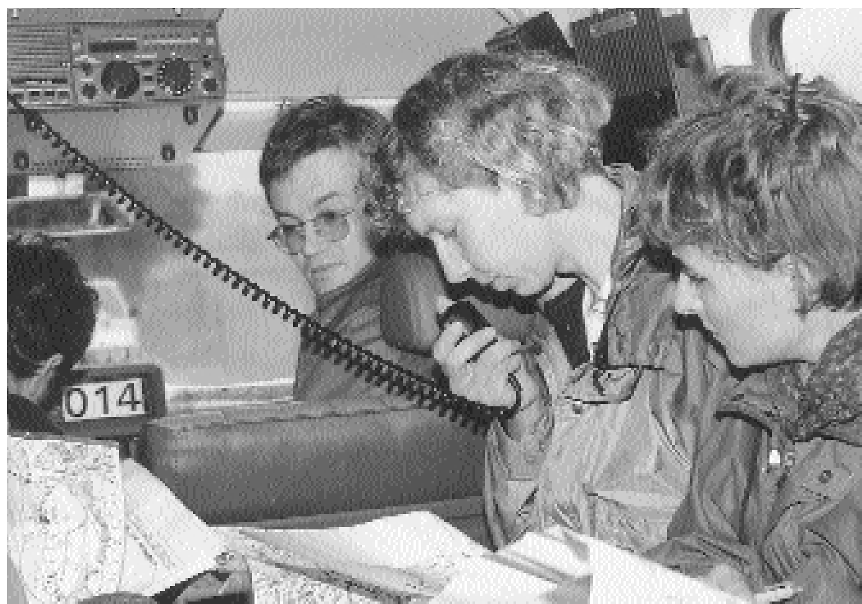
It is useful to consider for a moment the debate over 'exposure'. Many aid agencies are wary of too much realistic simulation in foundation courses or basic security training courses, especially for new recruits with no prior experience of working in dangerous environments.

They fear that it might scare and even scare off the urgently needed recruit. This is irresponsible. Recruits have the right to know what they might experience, and it is in everybody's interest that any unwillingness or inability to deal with insecurity is acknowledged prior to deployment rather than discovered in the field. Exposure here means having a gun pointed at you, hearing gunfire and explosions, walking into a dummy minefield, confrontation with aggression. Not everybody needs training in battlefield survival or hostage survival, although those who are deployed where there are those risks probably should. There is evidence that prior exposure, in a simulation, enhances the quality of the aid worker's response in the field, because the shock of total surprise is less. Finally, a security training that only scares has missed the point and failed in its primary objective: to demonstrate to trainees that security risks can be reduced through proper management and actions.

b. Operational security management training

The only course, known to this author, on operational security management in violent environments is that developed as an OFDA/InterAction project in 1998. It has been tested in two pilot courses and elements of it are finding their way in the curricula of other course providers such as Bioforce and RedR. RedR is preparing to run eight management level courses, each potentially supported by two shorter ones for field staff, in the next two years. The management course takes five days (see diagram on page 10 for concept illustration). The strengths of the course are: **Firstly**, it provides a holistic and structured concept to security management, integrating the many tangible and intangible aspects of security, and understanding security management as a dimension of all aspects of an agency's presence in a violent environment. **Secondly,** it aims not to provide the normative answer sheet but rather the 'question sheet' and guidelines towards the answers. In other words, it aims to develop the analytical, judgmental and decision-making skills of people with an operational management responsibility for security.

The emphasis on situational judgement is crucial. What is safe to do in one environment may actually increase the risk in another. In certain countries, the advice will be to stop when your vehicle runs somebody over on the road; in another setting, the advice will be certainly not to stop until the next police post. Carrying a handheld radio in one place will increase your security; in another, it will make you a target of robbers or the militia. Even something as simple as safely getting into your car in a hostile environment cannot be prescribed out of context. Everything will depend on what the threats are. You will adopt different procedures depending on whether the threat is one of sniper fire, car jacking, kidnapping or a booby-trap!



ICRC/Philippe Dreyer

ICRC security training course at Chatigny, Geneva

c. Good organisational practice

The security of staff and property is, however, a wider organisational responsibility. There is only so much the field manager can do. Aid organisations that take security seriously need to deal with it in two ways.

On the one hand, security needs to be 'mainstreamed'. It becomes part of the budgeting and the fundraising. It becomes part of general personnel management, and is a consideration in the recruitment and redeployment of individuals, in the supervision of and support to staff, and in disciplinary actions. And security risks are insured for. Security is also integrated into exploratory mission assessments, and in ongoing programme planning and review. As armed groups increasingly access global news, security considerations also become one of the checks and balances on agencies' public statements.

On the other hand, aid organisations need also to take specific measures on security. These include the articulation of organisational standards and responsibilities towards personnel who will be exposed to danger, including national staff. It also spells out what the families of kidnapped, maimed or killed aid workers can expect from the organisation. Organisations sending people into danger zones must also regularly review their security management organisation-wide, in terms of policies, procedures and practices, and follow up on identified weaknesses. Specific policies are required on incident reporting and incident analysis within the organisation, and on inter-agency collaboration on security. The organisation needs to decide how it will develop security expertise in-house. Ideally security management becomes integrated into general management. But there may be value in designating focal points for security, whose task it is to provide guidance, back-up and, perhaps, training. That requires senior management decisions to invest resources.

Preparedness for security incidents further implies that organisations have planned their crisis management: who will handle crises at headquarter level and how, and what support can headquarters mobilise for the field? Organisations may not have the in-house expertise to deal with special security incidents, such as kidnapping, but there are professionals in the security sector who can and have been called upon for assistance. Agencies therefore need to identify - in advance - such experts.

Outside expertise may also be called upon to help with victim support, such as after rape or kidnapping cases. Testimony from aid workers, however, indicates that the competence and style of the individual 'specialist' is very important; some found the encounter with the 'support specialist' another traumatic experience.

As organisations wake up to security, many have been taking initiatives, often ad hoc rather than systematic. There is scope for a review of the range of organisational approaches and experiences, to identify good practice which may then be tailored to the specific capacities and needs of different organisations.

Koenraad Van Brabant has worked with various NGOs in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Sri Lanka. Currently he is a Research Fellow at the Overseas Development Institute, London, and the coordinator of the Relief and Rehabilitation Network (RRN). Over the past two years he has been actively involved in research and training on security management. Contact: k.brabant@odi.org.uk or fax +44 (0)171 393 1699.

This paper will be developed into a joint Forced Migration Review/RRN Occasional Briefing Paper to be available in due course from the ODI.

1 MSF-Belgium, MSF-Holland, Save the Children Fund (UK), World Vision (USA), Catholic Relief Services, UNHCR and UNICEF are some examples.

2 The Humanitarian Security and Protection Network, under the umbrella of VOICE, is piloting the introduction of a simple computerised incident reporting format. This can be adopted on an individual agency basis but the purpose is to feed into a centralised incident-data base, at field level and at headquarters level. Confidentiality is guaranteed. Pilots are taking place in Sierra Leone and in Angola. The project manager is Pierre Gallien, c/o Action contre la Faim, 9 Rue Dareau, 75014 Paris. Email: pgallien@club-internet.fr

3 RRN (1997) London, Relief and Rehabilitation Network paper no 20. See 'further reading' on p47 for contact details for People in Aid.

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The Visiting Fellowships Administrator, RSP, Queen Elizabeth House, 21 St Giles, Oxford OX1 3LA, UK.
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Fax: +44 1865 270721
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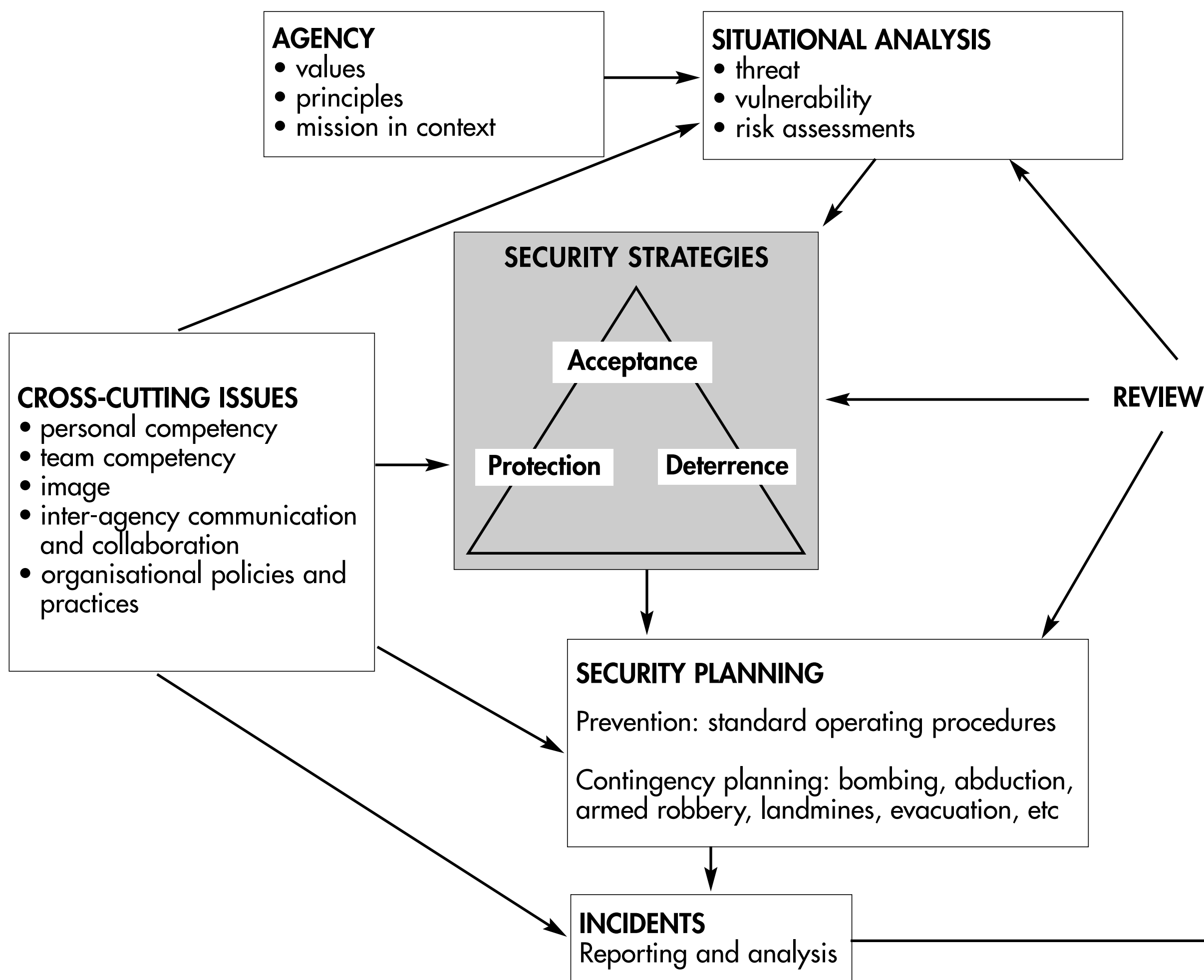

Diagram: Koenraad Van Brabant, ODI, 1999