Duty of care? Local staff and aid worker security

Where security considerations compel the withdrawal of international aid workers, humanitarian agencies rely increasingly on national staff. Agencies tend to assume that locals are at less risk but this is not necessarily the case. They have largely failed to consider the ethics of transferring security risks from expatriate to national staff.

Since 1997 the number of major acts of violence (killings, kidnappings and armed attacks resulting in serious injury) committed against aid workers has nearly doubled. A recent study by the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) and the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) compiled the most comprehensive global dataset to date of reported incidents of major violence against aid workers. Overall, there were over 500 reported acts of major violence against aid workers from 1997 to 2006 involving 1,127 victims and resulting in 511 fatalities. Violence against aid workers is most prevalent in Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Chechnya and the North Caucasus. Most aid worker victims are deliberately targeted, for political and/or economic purposes, rather than being randomly exposed to violence.

The study found that insecurity is not affecting all institutions in the same way. Historically the UN and ICRC have endured a greater number of casualties per staff member in the field than the NGOs. However over the last four years, international NGOs have become more insecure than their UN and ICRC colleagues. In addition, international NGOs have recently seen their international staff become safer, while their national staff and partners suffer increasing casualties. National staff represent 79% of all victims. For the first time, in 2005 the reported rate of incidents against national staff (seven per 10,000 workers) surpassed that of international staff (six per 10,000 workers). Too often agencies have not identified the specific risks faced by national staff. There tends to be a blanket assumption that local staff enjoy greater acceptance by the host community and therefore require fewer security measures overall. Sometimes local staff may benefit from greater community acceptance but this may not be the case for a national posted to a distant part of the country. Also local staff may be ‘too local’, assumed, rightly or wrongly, to be aligned by ethnic or religious affiliation with a party to a conflict. In some contexts they risk being attacked due to their access to cash or agency assets, such as computer equipment or vehicles. They also face a potential loss of income for themselves and their families should a programme be terminated.

Despite the fact that local staff make up over 90% of all field workers they tend not to figure highly in agencies’ security policies. The study found a significant discrepancy between local staff and internationals in their access to security-related training, briefing and equipment. The fact that local aid workers are not always considered when designing security policy has negative consequences, not only for local staff themselves but for the organisation as a whole. Local staff possess a breadth of knowledge and information about their environs that is often not fully used by international organisations as a security resource. This may be due to barriers between international and national staff because of language, a distrust of national staff for fear they may pass information onto local belligerents or an otherwise dysfunctional organisational culture. International staff often fail to realise that national colleagues may find it exceedingly difficult to decline potentially dangerous work for economic and/or altruistic reasons.

Remote management – a trend where international staff withdraw or have their movement restricted when insecurity increases while national staff continue the work – is increasingly used in places such as Somalia, Iraq and parts of Darfur in order to continue to reach beneficiary populations despite security or access constraints. In some cases, international staff continue to act as key decision-makers designing and programming the humanitarian response at a distance by delegating to national staff, local partner organisations, local government, private contractors or community-based organisations. This avoids the complete closure of programmes, allows people in need to continue to receive aid and gives agencies profile in crises where there may be high media exposure.

Remote management is currently practiced in a way that is ad hoc and unplanned. Few organisations have a specific policy on what security-related equipment would be handed over to national staff or local partners when security deteriorates and international staff have to leave. The practical challenges of remote management – less efficient service delivery, difficulties in ensuring strategic focus and accountability, and risks of corruption – have not been fully thought through. The approach is still seen as an option of last resort, to be used in rare situations of high insecurity, but unfortunately such situations are occurring with increasing frequency.

Part of the reason that local staff security and remote management are difficult to talk about is that practical responses can seem to reflect a hierarchy of values placed on different lives: those of international
Responsibility to Protect: lessons from South Kivu

by Jaya Murthy

Protection is one of the components of the new UN-led cluster approach in emergency environments.1 Can the protection cluster mobilise the international community to protect civilians in areas where states are either unwilling or unable to do so? A pilot project in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) may offer guidance.

In 2001 the International Commission for Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) published its watershed report The Responsibility to Protect.2 The Commission was responding to former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s challenge to the international community to chart a more consistent and predictable course of action when responding to humanitarian crises, particularly when humanitarian principles and notions of state sovereignty are at odds. ICISS developed a global framework for the international community to use in determining its actions against states – including military deployment – whose civilian populations are suffering grave harm.

The Commission’s single most important contribution was the reconceptualisation of the core concept of the international community’s ‘right to intervene’ on humanitarian grounds as, rather, ‘the responsibility to protect’ civilian populations at risk. This change has ultimately shifted the focus from those exercising state power to the actual victims of conflict.3 The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) notion has gained widespread international legitimacy and is becoming an acknowledged international norm. The latest UN Security Council resolutions (1738 and 1674, adopted in 2006) to protect civilians in conflict plainly note the international community’s responsibility to protect. UN Peacekeeping missions are increasingly being mandated with a Chapter 7 mandate4 to aggressively protect civilians in conflict. In statements to the Security Council the former UN Humanitarian Coordinator Jan Egeland called for more predictability in meeting international R2P obligations towards civilians in need. At the 2005 World Summit all governments clearly and unambiguously accepted the collective obligation to protect populations from crimes against humanity.

While these developments have been significant in enabling the international community to pressure states to exercise their R2P, scant attention has been paid to how the R2P can be systematically structured and employed so that the international community can carry it out at field level. In 2005 UN member states called for more predictable, efficient and effective humanitarian action and for greater accountability when responding to humanitarian crises, especially in situations of mass internal displacement. As a result, in September 2005 the Principals of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee5 established the ‘cluster approach’, assigning responsibilities to lead agencies in order to ensure a more predictable and accountable humanitarian response in emergencies, particularly those resulting in mass internal displacement. The cluster approach was developed with the intention of providing predictable action in analysing needs, addressing priorities and identifying gaps in specific sectors. Referring to the potential efficacy of the cluster approach to respond to protection issues, UNHCR’s Assistant High Commissioner for Protection Erika Feller recently noted that “the ‘cluster approach’… has been formulated as a means of operationalising the notion of the ‘responsibility to protect’”.6

The protection cluster in South Kivu

The fact that most of the population of the troubled eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are at risk of displacement led the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in DRC to ensure the protection cluster addressed the needs of the entire civilian population, not solely IDPs. The protection cluster – joint leadership of which was given to UNHCR and to the UN’s DRC peacekeeping mission