

## **67th Meeting of the Standing Committee**

**21-22 September 2016**

### **Agenda Item: 2. (ii) Staff Safety and Security (EC/67/SC/CRP.24)**

Mr. Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, I last spoke to you on the subject of the security of UNHCR's workforce in 2014. Since then, not only have we seen flagrant violations of international humanitarian law and of the rights of the people we are here to serve and protect, but increasingly we are witness to outrageous attacks on humanitarian workers as we make every effort to comply with the commitment to stay and deliver in high risk operating environments such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan. As these incidents become all too frequent, we must constantly review our approach and attitude to ensure that they never become considered the norm. We must fight for full respect for our colleagues around the world and for those who suffer most when loved ones are injured or lost; our teams on the ground, the families left behind, the children who will grow up never knowing their parents, the loss of sons and daughters, brothers and sisters.

In today's world, our colleagues on the ground need to continually hear strong protests of outrage and indignation from the international community regardless of where these incidents happen. Stay and deliver requires strong, unfailing advocacy on access for humanitarian workers, respect for humanitarian action and that those responsible for attacks on humanitarian workers be held accountable.

Since we last met, we have faced many challenging security situations and lost colleagues in shocking circumstances. The impact of such events on staff morale, particularly in the field, and on the longer term mental wellbeing of our colleagues, challenges and questions our systems and tests our faith in what we do. Remarkably, our teams around the world remain steadfast in their commitment to deliver protection and assistance, precisely because we are humanitarians. Allow me to share with you some recent incidents.

In Somalia, on 11 December, 2015 Amina Noor Mohammed, our Senior Community Services Assistant in Mogadishu, was returning home from a

meeting in a vehicle driven by a colleague from a partner organization when they were both shot and killed in an ambush by unknown gunmen.

On 26 July 2016, Ahmed Mohamed Hassan, our UNHCR Protection Associate in Mogadishu, was killed when moving between offices during an attack in which a truck loaded with explosives detonated nearby. Five other UN personnel were injured and 11 private security guards were also killed.

Amina was a humanitarian worker and a young mother; her 2 year old child and 3 month old baby will grow up without knowing their courageous mother. Ahmed left behind a wife, two sons aged 4 and 2, and a 3 month old baby daughter. Indiscriminate violence also led to the death of another team member and the injuring of her sister. Understandably, the morale of the UNHCR team in Somalia has been very hard hit, as they struggle to address the inevitable fears that arise while also reaching out to and supporting the families of their deceased colleagues and friends.

In January 2016, a truck containing six hundred kilos of explosives detonated outside the wall of the UNHCR guest house in Kabul, Afghanistan. The investments made in hardening the outer wall, which withstood the attack, really did save the lives of our staff. Sadly, our neighbours suffered high casualties and deaths. Following this we arranged to move to new premises. Last month, an INGO partner in the same street also came under serious attack. The premises where our international staff are currently temporarily housed have been the subject of three previous attacks. Daily we ask where is it secure for staff in Kabul? With numerous significant attacks in Kabul, it is hard to imagine the longer term impact on the wellbeing of our team.

In July 2016, aid workers were targeted and raped in South Sudan, yet little was said at the time. Four weeks ago, my colleague on mission was held at gunpoint for half an hour. Last week a UNHCR and partner team was attacked by gunman on the way to visit an IDP camp. One partner staff member was wounded in the leg. There are daily reports of harassment and assaults on humanitarian workers as they move around the country.

On Monday, aid workers, as you are well aware, came under direct attack while unloading humanitarian assistance in Syria. The Syrian Red Cross, lost a

dedicated humanitarian worker and twenty civilians were killed including drivers hired by our logistics partner.

**Mr. Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates**, sadly these are not the only serious incidents that UNHCR and humanitarian personnel face around the world, but they are a stark reminder of the security risks that humanitarian workers face. UNHCR currently has 33 offices in countries graded at high and extreme risk with more than 900 staff.

UNHCR personnel and partners are living and operating in environments where shelling and active combat activities are ongoing. Some colleagues have suffered serious injuries that affect them and their operational mobility for many years. National colleagues face added risks because their families are living the daily nightmare of conflict from which there is no escape. Many leave for work in the morning not knowing if they will find the family intact when they return in the evening. Some national staff do not tell their families that they work for the UN for fear this may bring reprisals and additional risks. Some do not tell their families when they are going on high risk missions, as they do not wish to worry them.

National staff can also become caught up in localized conflicts which may be compounded by perceptions of tribal/ethnic affiliations. Some have seen their homes damaged in shelling or they may face threats from different actors while trying to make the journey to the office or be confronted in their homes. Others have become displaced themselves. Offering additional security, even transportation may expose them further and in many cases, colleagues prefer to maintain a 'low profile'. National staff face arrests and detention, with limited information provided as to the reasons. It is incumbent upon us to ensure we have done all that is possible to keep national staff safe including enabling swift evacuation or support so that they can leave through their own means.

Institutionally leaving is rarely an option today so our capacity to '**deliver outside what are increasingly seen as international bunkers**' must be effective in terms of access to people of concern and actual programme delivery. Communities need to be able to perceive and value the concrete outcomes of our work. Meeting their protection needs is our main objective, but it is also critical to reducing our security risks. This requires sufficient funding for the

security needs of our partners and ourselves as well as for meaningful operational delivery through sustained and collective engagement. Governments **must guarantee safe access** to persons of concern for humanitarian activities and respect for national staff as well as internationals.

The global perception of terrorism and fear of human mobility have added to our protection challenges as they erode protection space. Staff observe how smugglers and traffickers abuse and exploit refugees and migrants shamelessly, women and children in particular. Reports are shared with authorities, yet it is demoralising when there is no follow up action. Too often we are seeing transnational criminal groups operate with impunity and little action by governments, in Europe for example. To keep staff, partners and persons of concern safe, we need stronger action against smuggling and trafficking.

**Perceptions and xenophobia towards refugees** can lead to security incidents. Staff safety and security goes hand in hand with protection for persons of concern and our security advisors work closely with protection colleagues to analyse threats to persons of concern.

For UNHCR **a strong security culture is paramount** in ensuring effective security risk management processes, thorough analysis of the environment, determining risks to us, our partners and persons of concern; through continuous review of our measures, plans and procedures, investments in security equipment; training our staff and managers on all security aspects; and having business continuity plans in place as well as being prepared to modify our operations where we cannot effectively operate. Strengthening security analysis in our emergency preparedness work is expected to enable more effective planning and response.

Our staff are our greatest asset and we can only remain relevant if we are present on the ground. Protection is about presence. We invest significant amounts in security training, awareness of the security environment that we expect them to deploy too, actions that they can take, measures that make them feel safe while on and off duty. If colleagues are subject to incidents we have support mechanisms in place. In 2017, there will be an increased effort to offer training to **UNHCR partners** as well as training related to **gender and diversity considerations in security**; this includes increasing specific security training for women.

Of critical concern is ensuring adequate **medical and casualty evacuations**. Many locations do not have proper facilities for mass casualties and even where there are UN Integrated missions, the medical facility afforded by the mission may be completely insufficient and have limited medical supplies much less trauma surgery capabilities and blood supplies. In some cases flight clearances for medical evacuations are not provided by parties to the conflict or air ambulances are restricted by other air protocols.

On a daily basis our managers in the field face difficult security decisions, balancing the imperative to stay and deliver humanitarian assistance while minimizing risks to staff. While we have UN security and operational tools such as programme criticality to assist in this, they are no substitute for the proactive support of Governments in creating and maintaining the conditions to operate safely. Increasing our presence in emergencies is only effective if it is accompanied by the means to operate, for example through swift customs clearance for items such as vehicles, including armoured vehicles and adequate, well protected accommodation facilities, effective evacuation procedures and above all respect for humanitarian work and workers.

#### **M. Chair, Distinguished Delegates,**

Responsibility for the protection of humanitarian workers is a paramount **responsibility of member states**. There is a need to collectively ensure that we are afforded the space to deliver free from political interference and with respect for humanitarian principles.

In conclusion, allow me to reiterate that to stay and deliver, we count on your continued and very active support in advocating for:

- Safe access to people of concern to enable the delivery of protection and assistance
- Promotion of respect for humanitarian workers, particularly national staff
- Holding those responsible for violating the rights of humanitarian workers accountable
- Funding for security measures, including provision of adequate medical needs, and operational programme delivery
- Ensuring in-country conditions and support for all necessary security measures including emergency evacuations of international and national

staff by air, and facilitation of customs processes to enable effective operational delivery.

Thank you

Check against delivery