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Staff safety and security*Summary*

In order for UNHCR to deliver critical protection and assistance for people in need and operate in areas with security risks, the organization must have effective security risk management procedures in place. This paper provides a brief overview of the current operating environment from a security perspective and illustrates measures that have been taken in accordance with “UNHCR’s culture of security 2015–2017: An updated plan of action,” which outlines how the organization manages security for operations situated in challenging security environments. UNHCR’s security management approach builds upon the United Nations Security Management System, led by the United Nations Department of Safety and Security and the Inter-Agency Security Management Network, while ensuring cohesion between security for our personnel and for persons of concern to UNHCR.

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I. Introduction

1. UNHCR and its partners face increasingly complex security environments as they seek to remain present and deliver critical programmes to protect people in need. Pressing humanitarian needs have raised expectations for UNHCR to deploy personnel to dangerous locations, requiring staff to work and live in areas not just close to, but in zones of active conflict. Within this context, it is a delicate balancing act to keep personnel safe and respond to humanitarian imperatives.
2. As a protection-oriented organization, UNHCR's access to persons of concern is essential to fulfilling its mandate. However, working in unstable security environments, such as, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, creates acute challenges for ensuring "duty of care" for those colleagues who put their lives at risk. This is especially true for nationally-recruited staff, who may be at increased risk in civil-conflict situations because of their ethnic identity or sectarian affiliation, yet play a critical role in the organization's efforts to deliver protection and assistance.
3. This paper outlines the strategies UNHCR is using to respond to these and other security challenges.

II. Operating in challenging security environments

4. The increasing reach of groups with violent ideologies poses direct and indirect threats to United Nations and humanitarian personnel. In some countries, personnel have been targeted; elsewhere they were "collateral damage" in attacks against others. The sophistication of such groups in mobilizing recruits and coordinating attacks, including across borders, has required UNHCR to continuously review and strengthen its security procedures worldwide.
5. Reducing risk and ensuring a safe working environment can be costly, requiring the organization to invest in physical protection against direct and indirect attacks by heavy weaponry and explosives. UNHCR's continued presence in areas affected by conflict would not be possible without effective mitigation measures, such as adequate perimeter protection against explosives and the use of armoured vehicles, as well as robust procedures stringently adhered to by personnel. This was exemplified on 4 January 2016, when approximately 600 kilograms of explosives were detonated directly outside the UNHCR staff accommodations in Kabul, Afghanistan. As a result of well-implemented mitigation measures, personnel suffered only minor injuries, despite the size and proximity of the blast.
6. The environment in Somalia continues to be particularly difficult, with humanitarian space restricted by the presence of non-State armed groups and militias in and around Mogadishu as well as other parts of the country. This has led to repeated attacks against the United Nations and other humanitarian targets. As a result, UNHCR faces mounting challenges as it seeks to expand its operations within the country to support the voluntary return of refugees from Kenya. In December 2015, a national staff member was killed in an ambush in Mogadishu, while travelling from work in the vehicle of a partner organization; the driver also lost his life. In July, a car bomb in Mogadishu took the life of another national staff member, as he travelled from the office to a meeting.
7. Continued insecurity and the presence of armed groups in the Central African Republic resulted in renewed displacement, both internally and across borders. In April of this year, four staff members were injured in Bambari when attackers threw a grenade into a restaurant; in July, personnel were forced to take shelter in the nearby compound of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) due to heavy fighting nearby. In Burundi, conflict stemming from

election-related violence that began in April 2015 caused large-scale displacement into neighbouring countries. In August, a staff member was injured by gunfire in an ambush. The situation in South Sudan remained tense and subject to outbreaks of violence. In December 2015, UNHCR trucks delivering assistance were fired upon and a guard escorting the convoy was killed. Since the most recent eruption of hostilities in July this year, UNHCR and other humanitarian actors have been the target of deliberate and violent attacks.

8. Across the Middle East and North Africa region, multiple conflicts continued to cause displacement and present challenges for humanitarian actors. Notwithstanding the escalation of violence in Yemen in 2015, UNHCR maintained its presence, meaning that staff were exposed to a range of dangers, including close proximity to bombardments and having to frequently negotiate passage at checkpoints. National staff and local partners suffered damage to their homes and in some instances, their family members living in or near conflict areas were injured. In the Syrian Arab Republic, efforts to provide assistance to people in hard-to-reach locations throughout the country necessitated laborious coordination with numerous armed groups to ensure safe access. In April 2015, personnel escorting a convoy of relief items were detained for several hours by an armed group, requiring lengthy negotiations before their safe passage could be assured.

9. In several parts of the world, economic and security concerns fuelled xenophobic attitudes toward refugees. Both persons of concern and those seeking to help them often faced hostility and abuse, complicating humanitarian work even further. In extreme cases, persons seeking protection were driven to desperation by the lack of options and resorted to self-harm and even suicide. The emotional and psychological toll on personnel exposed to such situations cannot be under-estimated.

III. UNHCR's security strategy

10. In an effort to strengthen UNHCR's culture of security, the organization continues to undertake activities in five broad areas as defined in its strategy document, "Culture of security 2015-2017: An updated plan of action".

A. Advice and support

11. In order to operate in areas with security risks, managers at both Headquarters and in the field must understand their working environment and have access to appropriate security analysis and advice. This advice must be tailored to the specific operating context, taking into consideration the potential impact on both personnel and persons of concern, while being fully harmonized with approaches taken by the rest of the United Nations Security Management System. Providing security advice and support is the core function of UNHCR's Field Security Service (FSS), within the Division of Emergency, Security and Supply. This includes a contextual analysis of factors impacting UNHCR's security, concrete recommendations and coordination with other elements of the United Nations Security Management System. When critical security incidents occur, the organization strives to ensure that managers and staff members receive medical, psychological, administrative and other support as appropriate.

12. FSS continues to provide technical support to the field, particularly through the deployment of trained field safety advisers to analyse risks and propose appropriate mitigating measures. UNHCR has mandated a structural engineer to review premises located in high-risk areas in order to determine what measures are appropriate for threats in that location; the importance of this expertise was underscored by the blast next to the UNHCR compound in Kabul (see para 5 above), prior to which such an assessment had taken place.

13. The organization is expanding its stockpile of critical security equipment, which can be deployed rapidly to offices in the field to ensure adequate security in remote locations. In addition to access control equipment, perimeter security, lighting, personal protective equipment, shatter resistant film and armoured vehicles, UNHCR has now established “frame agreements” for video surveillance systems, sound barriers and personal attack alarms. The centralized procurement of key security items ensures that the equipment meets global standards and is available for rapid delivery when needed.

B. Security workforce

14. The environment of many UNHCR operations continues to demand a workforce with exceptional technical skills, sound analytic abilities, good communication skills and a deep organizational awareness. UNHCR now has 71 international security positions, while also drawing on surge capacity from experienced national security colleagues from ongoing operations to support emergencies. In addition, there are also over 180 locally-recruited security staff worldwide. Most positions are located in the field, supporting personnel to stay and deliver in challenging operating environments. A small number of regional field security advisers operate from regional hubs to provide a layer of coverage to countries without dedicated security support. Finally, Headquarters staff in FSS provide technical supervision and management of the security workforce, as well as surge capacity when needs arise.

15. Recognizing the increased responsibilities and skills demanded of senior security professionals, including the ability to analyse complex regional dimensions, UNHCR upgraded two key regional security posts, one in West Africa and one the Middle East and North Africa region. A third senior-level post was re-established in East Africa to respond to the high number of demands for support from multiple complex operations. Operational developments in Turkey, Ukraine and the Mediterranean, combined with the need to support offices in reviewing risk management measures following attacks in Brussels, Istanbul and Paris – which are main travel hubs for many UNHCR staff – resulted in an increased workload for the regional focal point in Europe.

C. Governance and oversight

16. An important aspect of security risk management is continuous oversight, including through UNHCR’s Security Steering Committee, which regularly reviews operations in high-risk areas. In 2015, the Committee reviewed operations in Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen, resulting in decisions to modify activities and adopt measures to improve security as needed.

17. In response to critical incidents in 2015, the organization issued three administrative instructions on the following themes related to risk management: i) Headquarters response and support during critical security incidents in the field; ii) accountability in decision-making on operating posture in rapidly changing security situations; and iii) procedures for missions in very high-risk areas. These instructions aim to clarify procedures, systematize processes and strengthen accountability in the management of critical incidents and risks.

18. UNHCR remains committed to ensuring that funding is made available so that the appropriate security measures can be put in place, allowing the Office to continue to operate in high-risk environments and to meet the minimum operating security standards (MOSS) designated by the United Nations in each country. FSS is responsible for monitoring the organization’s compliance with MOSS, providing direct support to field operations and ensuring regular reports to senior management. According to the most recent report, 430 of UNHCR’s 442 offices, or 97 per cent, are MOSS-compliant. UNHCR currently has one of

the highest compliance rates in the United Nations system and the remaining 12 offices, some of which are newly established, are working to achieve full compliance.

19. The United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) and UNHCR's Office of the Inspector General undertake regular reviews of security measures, particularly regarding MOSS compliance, as part of their audits and inspections. In 2016, OIOS conducted a review of recurring security management issues that had been identified in recent audits, in order to ensure that appropriate action was taken to remedy deficiencies. Recommendations included specific timelines for resolving cases of non-compliance, strengthened interaction with the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) to review requirements for mandatory security trainings, the issuance of reminders on compliance with trainings, and the inclusion of security management in the work objectives and performance management of managers.

D. Partnerships

20. UNHCR remains committed to coordination with UNDSS and other members of the Inter-Agency Security Management Network, including on the development of policies for the United Nations Security Management System. A number of new policies were developed over the past year on themes such as: unarmed private security services; the arming of security personnel; security risk management; gender considerations in security management; and residential security measures. UNHCR's engagement in these processes is essential to ensuring that policies adhere to humanitarian principles and are relevant to the realities on the ground in which its staff operate. Work continues in a number of other areas to strengthen United Nations system-wide processes, including residential security measures for locally recruited staff, crisis management response, immediate medical support/first responder for security incidents, security arrangements for United Nations personnel in Member States of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the development of locally cost-shared budgets for security activities. UNHCR is also a member of the Programme Criticality Steering Group and Coordination Team, which provides a structured framework for assessing the value of programme activities against risks. Finally, UNHCR continues to participate in the Saving Lives Together Oversight Committee, a joint effort between the United Nations Security Management System and non-governmental organization consortiums, and remains committed to ensuring security for partners through the ongoing inclusion of non-governmental organizations in security training, briefings and other activities in the field.

E. Training

21. UNHCR is acutely aware of the importance of preparing staff to work in difficult environments. The organization facilitates security training for managers and professional field security staff, and also conducts tailored security training for specific situations or groups.

22. In 2016, UNHCR launched a certification programme for Representatives, Deputy Representatives and Heads of Offices, which includes a full module on security management. UNHCR's annual security management learning programme (SMLP) continues to provide country-level managers with the knowledge and the skills necessary to effectively manage security in their operations. In some cases, this is further bolstered by the security management exercise (SMX) training. From 2015 to present, 28 staff have completed the SMLP, and 167 have completed the SMX. The security component of UNHCR's workshop for emergency management also continues to be a key preparedness tool for all staff and partners.

23. UNHCR emphasizes the importance of the professional development of its field security staff. In this regard, both the national and the international field security advisors receive training in accordance with agreed interagency standards as well as UNHCR's own organization-specific requirements. In 2016, UNHCR launched an online version of its security certification programme, which covers the core competencies required of United Nations security professionals and includes training related to themes specifically related to UNHCR's mandate such as protection and security for persons of concern. To date, 37 UNHCR security professionals have completed the training. UNHCR has shared the contents of its security certification programme with other agencies and UNDSS, which are looking at using this as a basis for their own training.

24. UNHCR staff continue to receive security training during deployments to field operations, particularly in high-risk environments. Specific training has been organized for female personnel, which has been completed by over 1,000 staff members. This will be reinforced through the development of a United Nations system-wide Women Security Awareness Training programme. UNHCR also promotes driver safety programmes, including defensive driving and courses dedicated to the driving of armoured vehicles. In 2016, UNHCR organized in coordination with the French national police force a training near Geneva for 27 personnel of UNHCR and partner agencies prior to being deployed to high-risk environments.

25. During 2015 and 2016, UNHCR hosted and co-facilitated training in programme criticality for both UNHCR and partner agency staff, designed to train facilitators who provide support and guidance to United Nations country teams in the conduct of programme criticality exercises; 35 UNHCR personnel attended. The training included a presentation on the tools which have been developed on an inter-agency basis and endorsed by the Secretary-General's Policy Committee as well as the Chief Executives Board for Coordination.

IV. Other initiatives

26. In the coming year, UNHCR will update and revise its security management policy, ensuring that it takes into account changes in the United Nations Security Management System and the broader global environment. The internal security strategy will also be updated on the basis of lessons learned from the 2016 OIOS review, current trends and recent incidents. FSS is currently undertaking a survey of managers and staff members at Headquarters and in the field to understand their requirements and expectations from security professionals. This will help the organization develop a security management strategy that meets the needs of an increasingly challenging operational environment, in a way that provides maximum value while ensuring close coordination with other parts of the UN system.
