

**Ground Realities:
Voices of Humanitarian Aid
Workers from the Frontlines**



Ground Realities: Voices of Humanitarian Aid Workers from the Frontlines

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Acknowledgment

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We would also like to take this opportunity to thank all the organizations and individuals who invested their time and shared their experiences. We applaud your commitment and support.

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Disclaimer

This document covers humanitarian aid activities implemented with the financial assistance of the European Union. The views expressed herein should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the European Union, and the European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information that it contains.

Message from DanChurchAid

People - both inside the humanitarian aid world and outside of it - take security for granted. We all just want to see results; effective, efficient, and speedy aid for people affected by conflicts and natural disasters. We often forget that in order for that to happen, a tremendous amount of work and preparation has to be in place in order to ensure that aid agencies' staff have everything they need to get the job done. One of the most important, and often neglected areas of investment, is security management. Aid work will never be risk free. However, aid workers and agencies need to have the tools to confidently navigate dangerous environments in order to fulfil people's rights to life with dignity, to assistance, and to protection and security. DCA was proud to be part of this EU-sponsored project, one that we hope played a small but significant role in empowering agencies and aid workers to respond with enhanced capacity.

Erik Johnson

Head of DCA Humanitarian Response

Message from the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department

Disaster-affected populations are often located in insecure environments. In order to engage in humanitarian action, organizations must manage their security in a way that minimizes the risks to staff, and, therefore, to the implementation of humanitarian programs. Security risk management is, therefore, a fundamental component to the successful provision of assistance and the undertaking of protection activities. The European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO) recognizes that dedicated resources are needed to allow organizations to better understand the contexts in which they operate and put in place appropriate risk-mitigation measures. By supporting specialized training and engaging actively with partners to ensure that operations are adapted to the known risks, ECHO aims to facilitate that aid reaches the most vulnerable people affected by disaster.

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Foreword

Humanitarian aid delivery is becoming an increasingly difficult endeavor. With countries across the globe facing increasing poverty, disasters, and civil conflicts, aid workers are exposed to new dangers and threats as they strive to provide assistance to marginalized communities.

Church World Service-Asia Pacific (CWS-A/P), an international non-governmental organization, which implements development activities across the region and responds to small and large-scale emergencies, is fully cognizant of the risks associated with humanitarian action. It has been conducting security trainings and workshops in the region since 1999, but given the growing levels of insecurity facing aid workers in recent times, it felt that a stronger intervention was needed.

In recognition of the severity of the crisis, CWS-A/P partnered with DanChurchAid (DCA), a Danish humanitarian non-governmental organization, to launch a 15-month regional project. Its over-arching objective was to ensure uninterrupted, secure, and coordinated humanitarian aid delivery to disaster and conflict-affected communities in East Asia, Africa and the Middle East by highlighting the need for integrating security and risk management strategies in organizational structures.

Key components of the project included six regional trainings on risk management in Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya, Thailand, Turkey, and Nepal for over 150 security focal persons and a global conference on “The Role of Security Risk Management in Effective Humanitarian Aid” in Kenya during October 2013, which was attended by donors, policy makers, government representatives, and humanitarian aid and development workers. The project also provided technical assistance and mentoring to humanitarian organizations on developing security plans and mainstreaming security risk management within the organization.

One of the project's activities was a research study on security and risk management with a focus on humanitarian aid workers' stories from the frontlines; hence, the idea of this book came into being. As a compendium of personal testimonies from aid workers exposed to disaster, tragedy, and even death, it presents a wealth of information that captures best practices and lessons learnt on mitigating security risks, both from an individual as well as an organizational perspective.

CWS-A/P is grateful to DCA for facilitating the project to ensure maximum cross-regional coverage as well as providing technical assistance and training on risk management. DCA has been engaged in partnership with CWS-A/P since the Kashmir earthquake of 2005 and the two organizations have worked together on a number of cross-cutting issues such as gender, participation, and accountability.

It also wishes to acknowledge the funding support of the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO), without which the project would not have been possible. ECHO funds relief operations for victims of natural disasters and conflicts outside the European Union. Aid is channeled impartially to the most vulnerable people, regardless of their race, ethnic group, religion, gender, age, nationality, or political affiliation.

CWS-A/P salutes the courage and commitment of the fearless individuals in this book who put their lives at risk every day in the pursuit of their duties. It is hoped that their experiences will highlight the significance of security and risk management within organizations and the need to prioritize the safety of aid workers for humanitarian efforts across the globe to be successful.

Introduction

In 2013, a humanitarian aid worker was injured, kidnapped, or killed every 26 hours. This staggering information, drawn from figures verified by the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSDB),¹ is a painful reminder of the continued onslaught of atrocities in the areas where humanitarianism is in action.

In recent years, policies have been restructured and various initiatives have been implemented to mitigate the level of insecurity confronting humanitarian actors. Unfortunately, despite the heightened security policies, violence aimed directly or indirectly against aid workers remains pervasive.

This only reaffirms the fact that humanitarian action is carried out in the most challenging of circumstances. Providing humanitarian assistance amid conflict has always been a dangerous and difficult endeavor; however, over the last decade aid worker casualties have tripled.² Left unresolved, this escalating level of insecurity has a clearly damaging impact on the amount and quality of aid delivery to affected communities.

Conceived as part of the CWS-A/P project on regional security and risk management, this book presents a collection of testimonies from aid workers in some of the most insecure and volatile environments in the world. The participants recount a broad array of security incidents, such as kidnappings, suicide bombings, mob violence, road ambushes, and point-blank range shootings. Their narrative provides valuable information on how organizations can manage security risks and streamline safety policies.

1 Humanitarian Outcomes 2013, *Aid Worker Security Database*, <https://aidworkersecurity.org/incidents>

2 Jan Egeland, Adele Harmer, Abby Stoddard, *To Stay and Deliver: Good Practice for Humanitarians in Complex Security Environments* (2011), 1.

It is important to emphasize that due to the nature of the participants' work, where security takes precedence over all other considerations, protecting their identity is of paramount importance. Names have been changed in a number of stories, and where actual names are used, care has been taken to limit them to only the first names in order to keep the identities private. Organizational affiliations are either mentioned within broad categories or are not mentioned at all.

Though this book aims to present a clear perspective on security and risk management it is not, however, intended to serve as a database and a statistical reference. The writers recognize the availability of database resources such as the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSDB) and Security in Numbers Database (SiND),³ which offer comprehensive global data and analyses. Instead, the writers have chosen to focus on the human element of the testimonies, to present aid workers not as mere statistics but as courageous members of the humanitarian community who do not waver from their commitment despite the dangers involved in their work.

³ AWSDB database is available for public access in an online format (<https://aidworkersecurity.org/incidents>); details about SiND are also available online (www.insecurityinsight.org/projectshumanitarian.html).



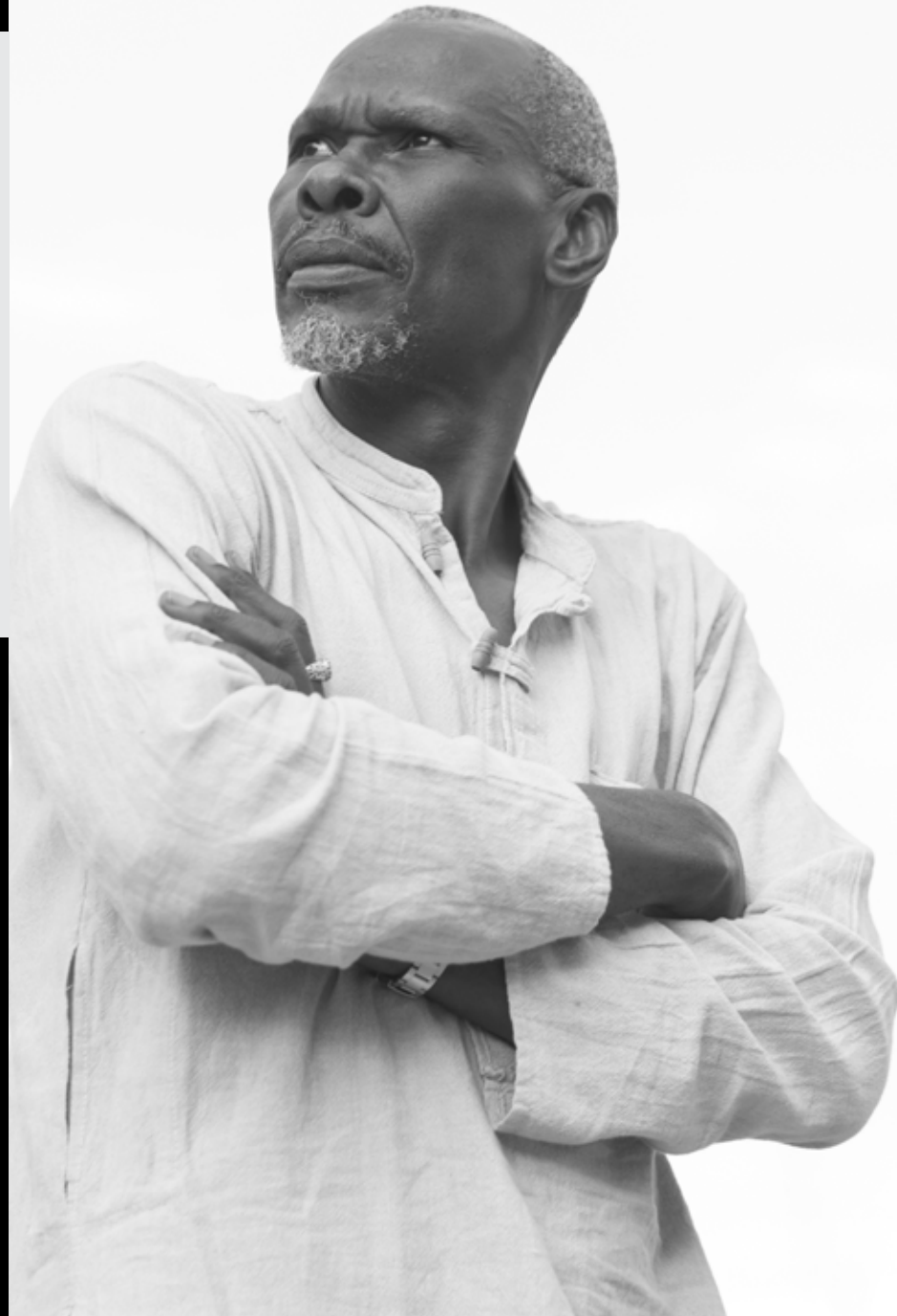


VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINES

“ THE GENERAL SECURITY
SITUATION AT THAT PARTICULAR
TIME WAS BESIEGED WITH
UNCERTAINTIES. ARMED GROUPS OF
VARIOUS POLITICAL PARTIES WERE
PATROLLING THE COUNTRY IN
SEARCH OF POTENTIAL VOTERS.

”

PATRICK
L i b e r i a



Patrick, a seasoned aid worker who has travelled to some of the world's most dangerous places, is rarely shaken. But as he recalls a deadly encounter with Liberia's notorious child soldiers¹ in 2010, he cannot keep the tremor out of his voice. "Seeing someone I know get shot right in front of my eyes brought home the fragility of our lives as aid workers. The sound of that gunshot still haunts me."

As a security expert for an international relief organization, Patrick was on assignment in the Liberian capital of Monrovia in 2010. The country, haunted by the ghost of a bloody civil war that had left thousands dead, was gearing up for national elections the following year and Patrick was assisting the NGO develop a contingency plan. "The general security situation at that particular time," he recalls, "was besieged with uncertainties. Armed groups of various political parties were patrolling the country in search of potential voters."

¹ A child soldier is any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities (*Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, 2007).

Patrick and his team were required to make a cross-country road trip from Monrovia to Zwedru to conduct meetings with local partners. Mindful of the dangers posed by the 310 mile journey which ran through isolated forests, the team underwent intense preparation, which included monitoring and cross-validating ground information as well as risk management counseling.

The seven-member team left early morning, hoping to get to their destination before dusk. About halfway to Zwedru, a group of six armed child soldiers ambushed the vehicle. Brandishing rifles, they proceeded to strip the group of all their supplies, including mobile phones. Fortunately, Patrick was able to hide a satellite phone under his seat.

Paying heed to their pre-mission training, the aid workers remained as non-confrontational as possible. However, the stress proved to be too much for one female, who panicked and completely lost control. Mary² burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter and would not stop.

² Mary (not her real name) was an international staff of Caucasian origin.



The consequences of that, as Patrick recalls, were deadly. “We could not calm her down and the child soldiers thought she was mocking them.” They shot her in the head and fled into the forest. The group was paralyzed with fear and grief until Patrick retrieved the backup satellite phone and called for rescue. A few hours later, they were safely airlifted back to Monrovia.

The brutality of the encounter had a deep psychological impact on the surviving aid workers. Three of them resigned immediately and left the country that very night. The remaining two underwent counseling, but unable to handle the trauma, also resigned.



Lessons Learned

Following the incident, the organization conducted a debriefing session for the staff, giving everyone an opportunity to voice their concerns. All employees were required to attend war-scenario training and stress-management seminars in order to prepare them for the risks of working on the frontlines in insecure environments.

Most importantly, the organization was forced to re-think its recruitment process to ensure the selection of applicants whose experience matched the context of the work environment. The re-structured hiring policy emphasized psychological preparedness and emotional adaptability as key factors to look for in new employees.



M A L I K
P a k i s t a n

“

I HAD WORKED WITH THEM FOR YEARS; IN FACT, I SAW THEM IN THE OFFICE THAT MORNING. LITTLE DID I KNOW THAT IN A FEW HOURS THEIR BODIES WOULD BE BURNED BEYOND RECOGNITION, IT WAS LIKE LOSING FAMILY.

”

As a resident of Swat, Malik is no stranger to violence. In 2007, militants seized control of this once idyllic valley in the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and though military intervention drove them out in 2009, Swat still bears the scars of bloodshed. Malik considered himself lucky that in his 10 years of humanitarian service, tragedy had sidestepped him. But in early 2010, as a suicide bomb exploded near a military check-post, he felt he had finally run out of luck. The attack left fifty-two people critically injured and claimed ten lives; three of them¹ colleagues of Malik.

“I had worked with them for years; in fact, I saw them in the office that morning. Little did I know that in a few hours their bodies would be burned beyond recognition,” says Malik as he recalls that gruesome day. “It was like losing family.”

Malik works as a program manager for a local humanitarian organization. Based in the district of Swat, the organization is well aware of the security challenges it faces and since its inception in the late

¹ The names of the fatalities have been withheld in accordance with their families’ wishes.

90s, it has adopted adequate security measures that have allowed it to carry out its activities unhindered, even in times of grave political unrest.

The horrific death of its employees, however, exposed the gaps in the security plan. The target of the bombing was the military check-post – the staff members just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. As the rickshaw carrying the bomb detonated, a staff van with a driver and two field officers was passing by. “The employees had been warned by our security officer about that particular area being a no-go zone, yet they still took that route,” Malik remembers ruefully.

Lessons Learned

In the aftermath of the tragedy, the NGO took the following steps to strengthen and streamline its security risk management:

A comprehensive security plan was developed and implemented. No-go areas were clearly identified and communicated to all employees, including drivers. Routes and timings for field visits were changed frequently to avoid regular patterns. Staff members were told to avoid political and religious gatherings as well as government installations and convoys of law enforcement agencies.

Regular coordination was maintained with law enforcement agencies and other humanitarian organizations. Security updates via SMS alerts/text messages were frequently sent out to the employees and to key humanitarian partners.

Field offices were set up at safer locations to avoid visits to the main city areas.

Trainings on safety and security for its employees were arranged.

Trained security guards were hired and fully briefed on the organization's security protocols. Security equipment such as close-circuit TV cameras, fire extinguishers, metal detectors/scanners, first aid boxes, and contingency food boxes were placed in offices. Official vehicles were equipped with first aid boxes and fire extinguishers.

A detailed life and health insurance policy was formulated for all employees and made part of the compensation policy.

For Malik, the incident brought home the realities of working in a conflict area. He surmises, "For a humanitarian organization, especially one that operates in a high-risk environment, a context-specific security strategy is essential; otherwise, working in the field is suicidal. The day of the bomb blast, the driver must have made a wrong turn and ended up in the no-go zone. A little more preparedness could have avoided this devastating blow to the humanitarian world."



“

THE TERROR THAT GRIPPED ME,
WHICH REMAINS TO THIS DAY, IS
INDESCRIBABLE, KNOWING THAT
THESE MEN HAD THE POWER OF
LIFE AND DEATH OVER ME WAS
SHEER AGONY.

”

MERLIE
Philippines

Bound and gagged, with a knife poised above her head to strike a deadly blow, Merlie knelt before her captors in what she thought would be the final moments of her life. But instead of hatred or fear, she felt a sense of despair at the cycle of oppression that had forced her abductors, some barely 18 years old, to resort to such brutality. "I looked into the face of the young boy standing above me and I thought, "oh my God, what have we done to him?"

Kidnapped by a militant organization operating in Southern Philippines, Merlie spent the 61 days of her captivity in isolation, trapped in a tiny cell and often beaten. Yet five years later, her commitment to humanitarian work remains unflinching and she is an example of the courage and resilience aid workers display every day in the course of their jobs.

Soft-spoken Merlie has dedicated her career to promoting peace in the restive region of Southern Philippines, where fighting between separatists and government forces has created a humanitarian crisis. In 2008, as part of a team that was delivering aid to displaced communities, she travelled to Basilan, a region with a violent history of kidnappings and massacres. Wary of the volatile environment in which

they were operating, the team had asked its local partners to carry out a detailed security assessment and was given the green signal. Yet terror struck as the convoy was heading back after distributing its supplies – Merlie's vehicle was ambushed and, thus, began her nightmare.

Her abductors were well-trained in psychological as well as physical torture, and Merlie was made to suffer mock executions, confinement in a tiny cell where she could only sit or lie, beatings, and forced marches. "The terror that gripped me, which remains to this day, is indescribable," she recalls. "Knowing that these men had the power of life and death over me was sheer agony."

Merlie was finally released after low-key negotiations between a local government-led crisis management committee and the terrorists.

Lessons Learned

Following her ordeal, Merlie realized the importance of establishing a strong network within the local communities where humanitarian organizations operate. "It is the people on the ground, the local residents, who have the most information. Trust them, learn from them."

She also stresses the need to cross-validate ground information by being in constant contact with government and security agencies as well as other humanitarian organizations working in the area.

Most importantly, Merlie believes that an aid worker should never lose faith in the peace process. "Peacebuilding is an art. It is the art of human appreciation. When a community has been victimized and mistreated for centuries, we cannot come in as outsiders and presume to know better. We need to understand why we made such monsters out of them and their children."

“ THE MAGNITUDE
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IN DESPERATE
CONDITIONS.

”



DR. SINGH
I n d i a

As the flag-draped coffin of Dr. Patil was lowered into the ground, his father flashed back to the days of his son as a schoolboy. Despite being born into a humble rural family, young Patil had big dreams of making a difference in the world.

His dream had come true, for this extraordinary young doctor had given up a lucrative career in one of India's top hospitals to provide free medical assistance to underprivileged communities. He saved countless lives, and on the day he lost his own he had been working tirelessly to administer life-saving aid to flood victims.

Dr. Patil worked for a local humanitarian organization dedicated to providing medical care to vulnerable communities. In September 2008, a group of volunteers from the organization was working in Bihar in the aftermath of catastrophic flooding.¹ "The magnitude of the disaster was overwhelming, putting the relief workers as well as the survivors in danger due to

continued flooding, thunderstorms and landslides, but we decided to pursue our relief work as the victims were in desperate conditions," recounts Dr. Singh, the organization's founder.

Dr. Patil's team was among the first responders to arrive in the flood-ravaged region, and as Dr. Singh puts it, he "worked like a man possessed" to organize a relief camp and treat as many survivors as he could. As the team was wrapping up for the day, a heavy thunderstorm gripped the area. Before he could take shelter, Dr. Patil was struck by a bolt of lightning and died on the spot.

The accident dealt a devastating blow to the organization, which not only lost one of its best doctors but became embroiled in an ugly legal battle with Dr. Patil's native state over unfounded rumors surrounding his death. The matter was eventually resolved and Dr. Patil received a state funeral in recognition of his humanitarian work.

¹ The 2008 flooding was one of the most disastrous floods in the history of Bihar, an impoverished and densely populated state in India. A breach in the Kosi embankment near the Indo-Nepal border occurred on August 18, 2008 affecting over 2.3 million people; "2008 Bihar Flood" - accessed October 28, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008_Bihar_flood.

Lessons Learned

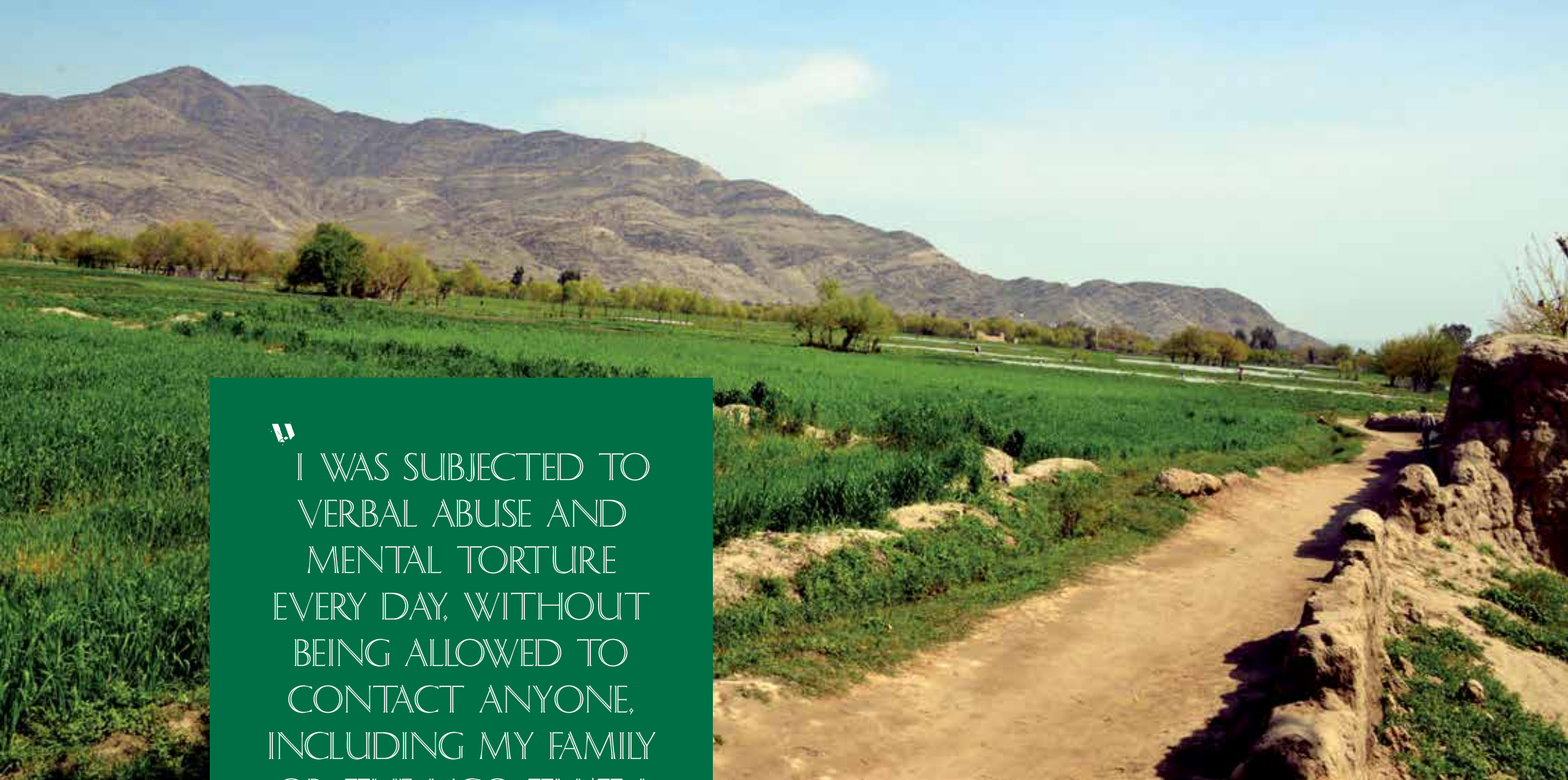
In the aftermath of a major natural disaster, relief workers are just as vulnerable as the survivors when it comes to security risks. Hence, accidents are a possibility. Logistical preparedness at various levels in the delivery of relief service is an important prerequisite to mitigating the risks. "We have in place a documented set of security guidelines," Dr. Singh clarifies, "that all volunteers are required to read and abide by prior to and while conducting any field work."

The accident, however, forced the organization to reexamine its safety protocols. "It reaffirmed the importance of briefing our volunteers on the perils of working in the field and not taking security guidelines

seriously," says Dr. Singh. "It also highlighted the urgent need for us to have a more stringent set of security procedures in place."

In addition, the incident reinforced the significance of legal paperwork that clearly absolves the organization of responsibility for an accident which may occur beyond its control. The NGO also formed a crisis management team (CMT) to address the challenges presented by future security incidents.

Five years later, the incident is still fresh in Dr. Singh's memory, not only for the immeasurable loss he suffered but for the gain in perspective he and his organization gained as a result of it. "Dr. Patil's legacy as a humanitarian worker lives on in our work, and it is to him that we dedicate our achievements."



“ I WAS SUBJECTED TO
VERBAL ABUSE AND
MENTAL TORTURE
EVERY DAY, WITHOUT
BEING ALLOWED TO
CONTACT ANYONE,
INCLUDING MY FAMILY
OR THE NGO THAT I
WAS WORKING FOR. ”

DR. FAREED
A f g h a n i s t a n

One cannot blame Dr. Fareed for requesting strict confidentiality before agreeing to share his story. Falsely accused of being a supporter of a militant group and held in a detention cell with no outside contact for over a month, he has suffered too much trauma to allow him the luxury of speaking freely.

Dr. Fareed has been working for a local NGO for over a decade. In late 2013, what began as an ordinary visit to a friend's place transpired into a series of events that would change the course of his life. A group of security personnel raided the house and arrested Dr. Fareed along with three other friends who also worked as humanitarians.

The men were handcuffed, blindfolded, and taken to an undisclosed location without an explanation for their arrest. It was only later that Dr. Fareed discovered why he was under suspicion: unbeknown to him, some of the patients he treated were members of a militant organization.

Dr. Fareed's predicament is not uncommon among humanitarian actors, especially in a complex political landscape such as Afghanistan's. Maintaining an impartial position between government forces and the opposition is an exhausting balancing act, where

even the slightest tipping of the scale to one side could easily compromise security. "As a humanitarian doctor, I work on the principle of neutrality and provide medical service to anyone who needs it, regardless of political association," Dr. Fareed rationalizes. In addition, he says, if at all he provided treatment to a militant, it did not, by default, make him a supporter of that particular ideology.

Despite showing documents to identify himself as a legitimate humanitarian worker, Dr. Fareed was not released. In fact, he was handed over to a different faction of the security forces and was detained for 38 days in terrible conditions. "I was subjected to verbal abuse and mental torture every day," he recalls uncomfortably, "without being allowed to contact anyone, including my family or the NGO that I was working for."

Dr. Fareed was eventually released due to a lack of evidence. Disillusioned by his organization, which failed to provide support during and after his ordeal, he took a leave of absence. Although he has now returned to work, fear and uncertainty stalk him at all times. "I know that I am being monitored so I am thinking of going back to private practice," he declares.



Lessons Learned

Based on his experience, Dr. Fareed suggests that humanitarian organizations which are engaged in medical relief programs, especially in conflict areas, should be very clear about their primary objective of delivering medical care to all, irrespective of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, social status or, as in his case, political affiliation.

“This message should be conveyed at the outset to all stakeholders, i.e. beneficiaries, government entities, military forces and opposition parties. Regular meetings with them should be conducted where the importance of the principle of impartiality is reiterated. If such transparency is maintained, the stakeholders will realize that it is the job of relief workers to deliver uninterrupted service to all vulnerable parties, including those who may be perceived as opposition,” says Dr. Fareed.

“

I WAS IN A MILITARY JAIL WHERE NO CIVILIAN IS ALLOWED TO ENTER AND WAS BEING INTERROGATED AT ALL HOURS ABOUT THE NATURE OF MY JOB AND THE PURPOSE OF MY TRIP. I HAD NO WAY OF CONTACTING ANYONE.

”

ANTHONY

South Sudan

As the youngest country in the world,¹ South Sudan is grappling with the challenges that come with an independence gained after years of brutal conflict. Inter-communal violence, the rise of armed militias, corruption, and a flailing economy mean that the country faces a humanitarian crisis that is fast spiraling out of control.

Anthony, a native of South Sudan who barely remembers a period of his life when the region was not at war, grew up with a desire to see his country prosper. For the past eight years, he has worked as a humanitarian with international aid organizations, reaching out to some of the most vulnerable communities in the country, often at the cost of his own safety.

A chilling encounter with security forces in 2010 served as a stark reminder of the dangers associated with working on the frontlines in a conflict zone. Anthony and a colleague were travelling to a village near Juba² to oversee an aid project. As a program officer for an international NGO, Anthony often undertook field visits to remote villages and strictly followed the

1 South Sudan seceded from Sudan on July 9, 2011.

2 Juba is the capital and largest city of the Republic of South Sudan. It also serves as the capital of Central Equatoria, one of the ten states of South Sudan.

organization's safety guidelines. On the way back, their vehicle was stopped at a military check-post. "We thought nothing of it for it was normal procedure in those areas to be stopped and questioned at security checkpoints," says Anthony. Alarm bells started to ring when the soldiers removed all communication tools, including mobile and satellite phones, from the vehicle and proceeded to shift the aid workers to a military detention center in Juba.

The next eight days were the most terrifying of Anthony's life. "I was in a military jail where no civilian is allowed to enter and was being interrogated at all hours about the nature of my job and the purpose of my trip. I had no way of contacting anyone. The soldiers used emotional torture to intimidate and harass me," Anthony recalls.

Anthony and his colleague were never charged and provided with no explanation for the arrest. Luckily, their organization was able to track their whereabouts and with the intervention of the United Nations and senior government officials, was able to secure their release.

Lessons Learned

The incident marked a turning point in Anthony's life as an aid worker. "I had always been aware of the security risks present," he says, "but imprisonment in a military jail really made me see the precarious nature of my work in a region where there is little regard for the rule of law."

In the aftermath, the organization promptly upgraded its communication facilities and organized a series of trainings on security risk management for its employees. It also sought to clearly define its objective of providing humanitarian assistance and broadcast it within its project areas to ensure that its employees' activities were not viewed with suspicion.

“ TENSIONS AT THE
SCENE WERE VERY HIGH;
THE DRIVER AND
ACCOMPANYING STAFF
MEMBERS WERE DETAINED
FOR QUESTIONING. ”

SARFARAZ
& OIHID
P a k i s t a n



Sarfaraz and Oihid are familiar faces around Charles Colony, a slum located in the center of a thriving metropolis. As employees of an international humanitarian organization that supports disadvantaged communities worldwide, the two have been involved in development projects targeting slum dwellers that live in abject poverty, with limited access to basic amenities such as clean water and sanitation.

Navigating the country's slums is no small feat. Divided along ethnic and religious lines, with a population that is mainly illiterate and wary of outside interference, they pose a challenge to humanitarian actors seeking to improve their living conditions. Sarfaraz stresses the importance of respecting local traditions and gaining the trust of community heads if NGOs hope to make headway in these areas.

His organization's good standing is a result of years of concerted effort that involve an approach of inclusion and understanding – including the residents in the decision-making process and respecting their

sensibilities. Yet, all the hard work seemed to be in danger of going to waste the day a company vehicle fatally hit a 5-year-old boy in one of the slums where the organization carried out its work.

The boy sustained critical injuries and died hours later at a hospital. Even though the driver of the vehicle was not at fault, the organization braced itself for backlash from the boy's family, community, and possibly even the local government. "Expectedly, tensions at the scene were very high; the driver and accompanying staff members were detained for questioning," Sarfaraz recounts. With the possibility of the revocation of its license, the organization's future in the country was at stake.

Fortunately, there were several locals who witnessed the incident and testified in favor of the organization. The driver was not speeding and tested negative for alcohol. The witnesses unanimously ruled out foul play and stated that the child suddenly dashed across the road, giving the driver no chance to avert hitting him.



Lessons Learned

Oihid, the NGO's logistic coordinator, says, "It was very critical for the organization to act promptly. Getting medical attention for the injured was the priority." He stresses the need to get in touch with local law enforcement agencies immediately in the aftermath of a crisis, so that the organization cannot be held liable for obstructing justice. In this case, the police assisted them in evacuating the employees from the scene of the accident, where the victim's family was on the verge of violence. The fact that the driver was well-prepared to handle emergency situations also worked in the organization's favor, thus highlighting the importance of training staff in standard operating procedures to deal with crises.

The matter was eventually resolved with a financial settlement for the family and the NGO was able to carry on with its development work. "In a case like this, time is a key element," Oihid adds. "The sooner the situation is brought under control and the aggrieved party satisfied, the easier it is for the organization to move forward."



AHMED

Y e m e n

“ I COULD SEE THE CHANCES OF THE ENCOUNTER ENDING IN VIOLENCE. THE ARMED MEN WERE ARROGANT SO IT WAS ESSENTIAL TO CALM THE TENSION BY BEING NON-CONFRONTATIONAL.

”

Yemen, the poorest nation in the Arab Peninsula, suffers from an acute humanitarian crisis. Add to that an extremely volatile political climate, armed clashes and economic instability, and you have a set of challenges that put humanitarian workers at a high risk. In 2012 alone, eleven aid workers were victims of insecurity in Yemen, which involved one fatality and 10 kidnappings.¹

Faced with the danger of becoming one such statistic was Ahmed, a Yemeni working for an international NGO. It was only due to his training as a security officer that Ahmed was able to extricate himself and his colleagues from a potentially fatal situation in 2013.

Ahmed was compiling a report on the security hazards faced by the organization's employees in course of their daily activities when he was disrupted by the sounds of a quarrel. Ironically, he was to find himself in the middle of a serious security breach at the office. A trusted company vendor had entered the office along with two unidentified tribal men. Once inside, the men wielded firearms and announced that they had come to collect payment for an unsettled account.

¹ Humanitarian Outcomes 2012, Aid Worker Security Database, <https://aidworker-security.org/incidents/search?start=2012&end=2012&detail=1&country=YE>

Indiscriminately pointing their guns at everyone, they refused to leave until the money was paid. Tension escalated when the organization's procurement officer challenged the vendor's demand, causing his accomplices to become alarmingly aggressive.

Realizing the seriousness of the situation, Ahmed managed to alert the nearest police station. In the meantime, he and the office guards intervened and tried to diffuse the situation by adopting a conciliatory position. "I could see the chances of the encounter ending in violence," Ahmed explains. "The armed men were arrogant so it was essential to calm the tension by being non-confrontational."

Eventually, the men were persuaded to leave. Soon after their departure, the police arrived at the scene and the uneasiness around the office dissipated. The organization's senior management called an emergency staff meeting to immediately pacify and address the concerns of the employees.

Lessons Learned

Following a thorough debriefing on the incident, the following security recommendations were implemented:

The vendor was blacklisted. The international NGO community was warned about him and advised not to avail his services.

Guidelines on how to lodge a complaint against the organization were displayed prominently on the main gate, along with contact information of senior management.

CCTV equipment was upgraded. Security guards manning the gate were briefed on screening procedures for any person entering the office.

The procurement officer was briefed on handling sensitive situations as his emotional outburst aggravated the incident. The same briefing, focusing on conflict resolution strategies, was shared with the entire staff.

The procedure of payment collection by vendors was reviewed, with payment schedules and processing guidelines during the bid process and contract award clearly laid out.

According to Ahmed, the most important outcome of the incident was the establishment of a crisis management team (CMT). "The single most effective way of dealing with a security risk or a crisis," say Ahmed, "is through a CMT, which is made up of persons fully trained in planning for and responding to an emergency."

ZARNAAB

P a k i s t a n

“ THERE WERE
PEOPLE WITH BLOOD
RUNNING DOWN
THEIR FACES, SOME
LIMPING, OTHERS WHO
WERE NOT WEARING
ANY SHOES. IT WAS
COMPLETELY SURREAL.

”

On a sweltering day in the summer of 2008, Zarnaab got up from her desk at the office of the international development organization where she worked as a media coordinator and began to gather her things to head out for lunch. As she was about to leave the office, her eyes fell on a pile of documents that needed her attention. Thinking she would go over them quickly before joining her colleagues outside, she began to turn the pages. That is the last coherent memory Zarnaab has of the day before it turned into a nightmare beyond her wildest imagination.

A few seconds later, a powerful bomb ripped through the building and Zarnaab saw the room around her collapse into a heap of rubble. "The chair I had vacated just a few minutes earlier was buried under a big cupboard that fell over it. I would have died if I had still been sitting there," she recalls.

The car bomb, which was meant to target a foreign embassy located opposite her office, resulted in 6 casualties and several injuries. Zarnaab was miraculously unhurt but some of her colleagues were not so lucky. "When I came out of the office into the backyard where everyone was gathering, I felt like I had stepped onto a movie set. There were people

with blood running down their faces, some limping, others who were not wearing any shoes. It was completely surreal," she says.

The damage caused by the bomb blast was devastating. The front portion of the building was completely destroyed, as were most of the cars in the parking lot. One employee was killed as the impact of the blast flung him off his feet. Another suffered a heart attack but, luckily, survived due to timely first aid administered by his colleagues. The emotional trauma wrought upon the survivors was even worse. Zarnaab was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. "For weeks, I couldn't sleep and I kept hearing the sound of the blast in my ears. I sat awake at night and just cried. I couldn't get the image of the office boy who died out of my head," she says.





Lessons Learned

The office was located in the heart of a residential district that housed various embassies and offices of international NGOs. It had a security policy in place and the staff regularly attended safety trainings. In retrospect, Zarnaab feels that the safety measures were rudimentary in view of Pakistan's worsening political and security climate.

It took the organization 4 months to set up an office at a new location, this time with stringent safety measures in place. One of the most valuable lessons learned from the tragedy was the importance of

training staff in first aid and CPR, which is what had saved the life of one of the employees. According to Zarnaab, there is another very important component of a security strategy that most organizations fail to consider. "Usually there is a different set of rules for the expatriate and the local staff. I feel there should be uniformity in the security policy and one set of rules to guide all, for it is usually the locals who are most at risk."

Despite the trauma and pain it caused, Zarnaab has learned to put the horrific incident behind her. "I feel it has changed me in a positive way. I have learned to appreciate the little things in life, things that most of us take for granted."



MARVIN

P a k i s t a n

“ THEY SHOVED ME
TO THE BACK AND
ONE OF THE MEN
HIT ME SEVERAL
TIMES IN THE RIBS. ”

Marvin is an experienced humanitarian worker whose career has spanned over two decades. From dodging bullets during Afghanistan's civil war in the 90s to surviving the insides of a Pakistani jail, there is very little that he hasn't seen. Shaped by his experiences into a man who leaves little to chance and never takes his safety for granted, Marvin thought nothing could faze him until the day he found himself staring into the barrel of a gun, held to his face by his kidnapper.

As the head of an international NGO, Marvin's job requires him to travel frequently around the region. In 2012 he was in Karachi¹ to oversee a development project. Although a sprawling urban metropolis, Karachi has a violent history spawned by years of ethnic conflict, gang warfare, and the growing influx of militants who seek refuge in the city's dark underbelly.

Having wrapped up work for the day, Marvin decided to head out for a quick shopping trip. "I am not the easiest person to con," says Marvin. "Given the life I have led, I am always well aware of my surroundings and keep an eye out for suspicious activity." Maybe

1 Karachi is the largest and most populous metropolitan city of Pakistan and its main seaport and financial center, as well as the capital of Sindh province – accessed January 30, 2014; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karachi>

it was the fact that the shops were located in an area considered safe due to its proximity to a number of foreign consulates and police check-posts, but Marvin's guard was down that day. As he looked for a parking spot, two men approached the car, threatened him with guns and forced him to let them in. "They shoved me to the back and one of the men hit me several times in the ribs," recalls Marvin.

Having confiscated his wallet and phone, they began driving and eventually a third man joined them. "I knew I had to keep my wits about me so I engaged the men in conversation, asking them to let me go. They promised they would do me no harm, and that they were forced to commit this crime due to poverty." While Marvin did not doubt that the primary motivation for the kidnapping was monetary, his instincts told him that it was unlikely he would be freed and could possibly end up in the hands of Karachi's notorious kidnapping gangs. Kidnapping-for-ransom is a thriving business in the city with the criminals having a far stronger network than the law enforcement agencies.²

2 "Kidnapping for ransom big business in Karachi" – accessed January 30, 2014; <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-2-199133-Kidnapping-for-ransom-big-business-in-Karachi>



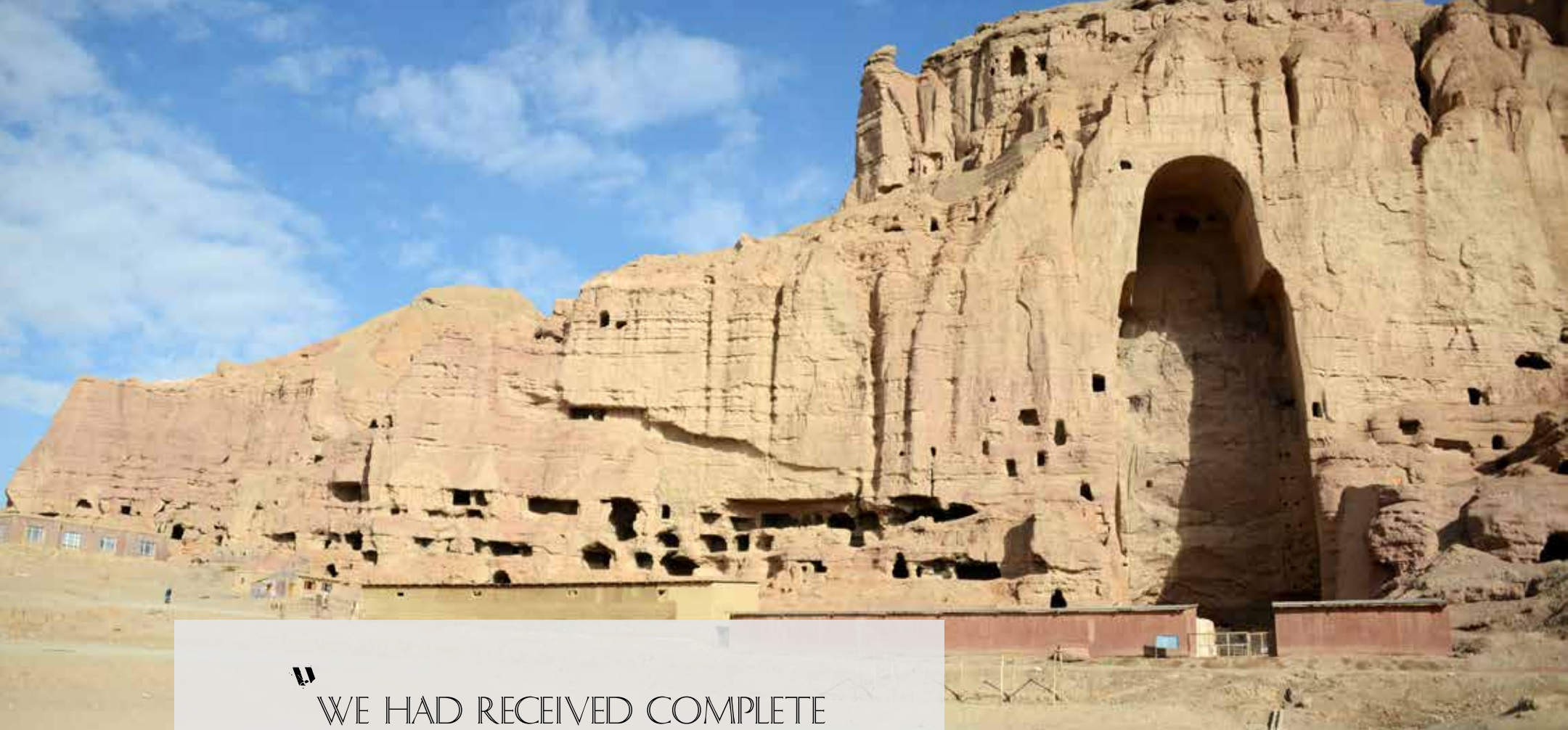
Marvin credits his return home that night to the timely and efficient response of his local team. Friends and colleagues had been waiting for him at a dinner. When he did not arrive and his cellphone couldn't be reached, they realized that something must have gone terribly wrong. Fortunately, Marvin's car was fitted with a tracking device and once the tracking company was informed, it switched off the engine and sent in a recovery team.



Lessons Learned

The kidnappers abandoned the car as soon as its engine shut down and the recovery team from the vehicle tracking company found Marvin in a small town on the outskirts of the city. “The local office had reported the incident to the police, but they hadn’t arrived even after an hour of our waiting in that unsafe part of town,” he recalls. Their tardiness only served to reiterate a fact Marvin already knew – the organization could not rely on local law enforcement agencies and the head office for its protection and must strengthen its own local security policy to ensure the safety of its employees. Following the incident, it put several anti-kidnapping measures in place, including the upgradation of vehicle tracking systems and the creation of a virtual fence the breach of which by a company car would set off an alarm.

On a personal level, what helped Marvin deal with the trauma was being surrounded by friends who encouraged him to talk about what he had suffered. “If you go through an ordeal, don’t keep it bottled up,” he advises. “Talk about it, voice your fears. In getting your story out there, you not only fight your inner demons but give others a chance to learn from your experience.”



“ WE HAD RECEIVED COMPLETE SECURITY CLEARANCE THAT DAY. THERE WAS ABSOLUTELY NO INDICATION THAT SOMETHING SO DREADFUL WAS GOING TO HAPPEN.

”

HALIM
Afghanistan

With violence against aid workers increasing each year, Afghanistan is considered a dangerous country for relief work. The Aid Worker Security Database records a 43% increase in the number of security incidents targeting aid workers since 2012, with 2013 witnessing a total of 80 attacks.¹ Despite these alarming statistics, the highest for any country in the world, humanitarian agencies continue to assist the Afghan people, ravaged by years of brutal conflict, political and economic instability, and human rights violations. One such dedicated organization is a local NGO serving the underprivileged and marginalized since 1989.

The staff at the NGO brave insecurity and violence every day in an effort to help those most severely affected by the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Sadly, this commitment proved to be fatal for two

of its most skilled engineers in 2011. They had been working in a village on the outskirts of Kabul when unidentified men ambushed their vehicle and abducted them. That was the last time the two were seen alive.

Halim, the NGO's humanitarian coordinator and disaster risk reduction manager, keeps going over the events of the day in his mind, trying to understand what went wrong. As part of the team that had conducted the security assessment before sending the two men out in the field, Halim cannot help but feel responsible for their deaths. Yet the organization followed strict security protocols and regularly coordinated with a number of security agencies. "We had received complete security clearance that day," says Halim. "There was absolutely no indication that something so dreadful was going to happen.

¹ Humanitarian Outcomes 2013, Aid Worker Security Database, <https://aidworker-security.org/>



Lessons Learned

According to Halim, the unpredictability of attacks directed at humanitarian actors in Afghanistan is too complicated to mitigate. With armed conflict dominating the day-to-day headlines, reaching out to remote villages around the country is a daunting task that involves putting the lives of aid workers in constant danger. This plight is further exacerbated by the fact that aid workers in Afghanistan often work with limited resources. Moreover, with the economy in tatters and unemployment at an incalculable rate, humanitarian organizations become soft targets for economically motivated crimes.

Fully aware of these challenges, the organization still reviewed its security strategy following the

abductions. Recognizing that the political and safety dynamics within the country varied vastly from region to region, it highlighted the importance of validating area-specific security information before any field visit. Counseling sessions were arranged for the staff to help them deal with the loss of their colleagues and trainings on capacity building and security risk management were organized.

The deaths of the two engineers remain unsolved to date. “The fact that they were killed while serving their fellow Afghans is a testament not only to their dedication, but to that of the hundreds of aid workers who risk their lives every day to improve the lives of others,” says Halim.



CHRIS
Kenya

“ WE REACH OUT TO PEOPLE
IN DESPERATE CONDITIONS;
IF WE OURSELVES ARE NOT
SAFEGUARDED, HOW CAN WE
BE EXPECTED TO FULFILL OUR
OBJECTIVE OF HELPING OTHERS?
”

When Chris decided to embark on a career as an aid worker, he knew he would be risking a great deal, maybe even his life. For the last ten years, he has dedicated himself to serving disadvantaged communities around Marsabit,¹ a small town in north Kenya where poverty and malnutrition are widespread. The risks of working in this remote region are plenty – whether it is navigating the rocky terrain, dealing with poor communication in the field, or braving tribal conflict and militancy. For Chris, the results have been worth the danger – countless lives have been positively affected as a direct outcome of aid projects he has helped deliver.

All the more reason why, according to Chris, aid workers' safety should be the top priority for all humanitarian organizations. "We reach out to people in desperate conditions; if we ourselves are not safeguarded, how can we be expected to fulfill our objective of helping others?" he questions.

Chris has been a vocal proponent of modernizing his organization's approach to security risk management ever since an accident he suffered last year exposed

¹ Marsabit is a town in northern Kenya. It is located in the Eastern Province and serves as the capital of Marsabit District.

glaring loopholes in it. In early 2013, Chris was visiting a project area along with a colleague about two and a half hours away from Marsabit. The terrain was rocky and despite a four-wheel drive vehicle and an experienced driver at the helm, the car lost control and rolled off the road.

Luckily, Chris did not sustain any serious injuries, but his fellow passengers were not so lucky. The driver was hit in the chest while his colleague hurt her arm. Dragging them to safety by the side of the road, Chris tried desperately to call for help but the area was so remote that there was no cellphone coverage. In his shaken state, he had to walk for almost an hour until he picked up a weak signal to place a call. "The incident was an eye-opener; it made me realize that well-placed safety procedures could very well mean the difference between life and death in a critical situation," says Chris.

Although the team was safely brought to Marsabit a few hours later, the town's poorly equipped hospital could do little more than provide them with basic first aid. It took another four days for them to be evacuated to Nairobi and receive proper medical attention.

Lessons learned

As Chris stood shaken and battered by the side of the road after the accident, he realized that he had no idea who to call for help. "The organization does not have a security focal person, someone who is trained to deal with emergencies." As station coordinator, Chris is working on strengthening security management at the organizational level, with the following essential elements to be incorporated:

- Appointing a security focal person
- Updating communication equipment
- Equipping company vehicles with emergency supplies and first-aid kits
- Organizing trainings on safety procedures for the staff

According to Chris, the success of development projects is directly proportional to the extensiveness of an organization's security strategy. He says, "Every day aid workers put their lives at risk to ensure that those in need have clean water to drink, food to eat and medicines to fight deadly diseases. Humanitarian organizations need to have effective policies at all levels to ensure that their staff, their most important asset, is protected and prepared."

A D A M

Pakistan

“ WHEN I LOOK
AT VICTIMS OF
BOMB BLASTS
ON TELEVISION, I
CANNOT HELP BUT
THINK THAT THIS
COULD HAVE BEEN
ME TWO YEARS
AGO.

”

Whether it was due to pure luck or divine intervention, Adam couldn't be any more grateful that when a bomb ripped through his office in Quetta,¹ no one was killed. The attack on the learning center set up by his organization shocked a city that has become accustomed to bomb blasts and targeted killings as part of its daily routine.

For years, the provincial capital Quetta has been plagued by violence and insecurity caused by various separatist and militant organizations. Victims of the violence include security personnel as well as civilians. Still, Adam could not have imagined that terrorists would deem a center for computer literacy a likely target.

Adam's career in the humanitarian sector began twenty years ago when he volunteered to assist relief efforts in the aftermath of a major flood. That simple act of humanitarianism paved the way for what would become a lifelong commitment to serving the marginalized and underprivileged. Despite the

¹ Quetta is the provincial capital of Baluchistan province of Pakistan and is the largest city in the province. Located in northern Baluchistan near the Durand Line border with Afghanistan and close to Kandahar province, Quetta is a trade and communication center between the two countries as well as an important military location which occupies a strategic position for the Pakistani Armed Forces – accessed December 11,2013, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quetta>.

demands of working in an environment where security risks are an ever-present reality, Adam finds comfort in the fact that at the end of the day, he knows he is making a difference in someone's life.

One of the development projects that Adam is most passionate about is the empowerment of youth through education. His organization established a learning center in Quetta with the aim of teaching computer literacy to those who could not afford it. The project drew a lot of support and attention from the locals and by the end the first year, the number of students far exceeded the capacity of the center.


"The success of the project was a big boost for the organization. It was inspiring for everyone," Adam declares. So when the bomb tore through the building and turned the learning center into rubble one day in 2012, the organization was taken completely by surprise. The silver lining on an otherwise very dark cloud was that no one was hurt as the blast occurred at night. Collateral damage was limited to the destruction of computers and the building.

Lessons Learned

“Due to the overwhelming support and acceptance of the project within the community, there was a tendency for our security personnel to take potential security risks for granted,” Adam now recognizes. Post-bombing analysis was conducted with the help of law enforcement experts and it was concluded that the attack was not random. However, no one claimed responsibility, and to this day the case remains unsolved.

When the center was rebuilt, the organization implemented a more stringent security policy. Security cameras were installed, guards were posted 24/7 and anyone entering the building had to undergo a security check.

Adam lives every day with the realization that had the blast occurred during the day, the consequence would have been ghastly. “When I look at victims of bomb blasts on television, I cannot help but think that this could have been me two years ago,” he says. “Yet such acts of senseless violence should not force us to stop living our lives. This brush with death, in fact, has strengthened my resolve to live for what I believe in.”



“ THE SECURITY
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FIERCE FIGHTING WAS
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AGENCIES WERE
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DR. KUMAR
I n d i a

Just a year into his job as a humanitarian worker and Dr. Kumar has already witnessed some of the worst tragedies, both natural and man-made, to befall his country in recent times. As a program manager for a local NGO focusing on medical relief, Dr. Kumar has provided aid to those affected by catastrophic flooding in the Indian state of Uttarakhand¹ and tended to the victims of violence in restive Assam.²

Dr. Kumar's organization specializes in disaster relief, and has a well-documented security policy that protects its employees from the unavoidable dangers of working in crisis zones. Recalling a frightening incident when he was caught in the crossfire of Assam's rival communities, Dr. Kumar credits the organization's stringent adherence to rules as the reason why he and his team members did not panic even as the threat of violence loomed. "Knowing what to do and being prepared for an emergency – those are the key elements to working in conflict areas," he says.

1 In June 2013, a multi-day cloudburst centered on the North Indian state of Uttarakhand caused devastating floods and landslides in the country's worst natural disaster since the 2004 tsunami.

2 In July 2012 violence in the Indian state of Assam broke out with riots between indigenous Bodos and Muslims. The first incident was reported to have taken place on 20 July 2012. As of 8 August 2012, 77 people had died and over 400,000 people were taking shelter in 270 relief camps, after being displaced from almost 400 villages; "2012 Assam violence" – accessed January 29, 2014; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Assam_violence

The year 2012 saw an escalation in the communal conflict in Assam, with hundreds killed and many thousands displaced from their homes. At the heart of Assam's troubles is a debate over so-called "infiltration" by outsiders, which has led to ethnic tension between the state's indigenous population and the migrants.³

The NGO had set up medical relief camps in the area and Dr. Kumar was leading a team of doctors on field visits. "The security situation in the province was precarious at best," he recalls. "Fierce fighting was still going on and only relief teams and government agencies were allowed to be out."

As they made their way towards their destination, a migrant-dominated area, they passed a mob of local tribespeople standing outside their burnt houses. Armed and violent, the mob was headed towards the same village, bent on seeking revenge for the destruction wreaked on their properties during the riots.

Dr. Kumar's vehicle was surrounded by the unruly mob which, carried away on a surge of fury and adrenaline, was in no condition to listen to reason. Luckily, the driver was trained to deal with a potentially violent situation and he sped away to safety.

3 "What lies behind Assam violence?" – accessed January 29, 2014; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-18993905>



Lessons Learned

Despite the urgent need for relief in the violence-ridden region, the NGO thought it prudent to temporarily shut down its operations in Assam. Aid worker security was given top priority; the organization was quick to realize that any relief effort would be futile if its staff was at risk.

Moreover, once its operations restarted, a control room was set up to ensure that field personnel were connected to the headquarters at all times and in case of an emergency, help could be provided instantly. The control room kept track of local news through radio, television, newspapers, the internet and local sources for any security-related information (road blocks, protests, abductions etc.), thereby ensuring the safety of its staff going out into the field.



ABDUL Pakistan

“ THE PASHTUN CULTURE PLACES GREAT EMPHASIS ON ADHERING TO RELIGIOUS NORMS AND CULTURAL VALUES; IN CASE OF A BREACH OF THESE CUSTOMS, THE MALES CAN BECOME AGGRESSIVE AND RESORT TO VIOLENCE.

”

As war, conflicts and natural disasters rage across the globe, aid workers travel to some of the world's most remote places to carry out their work. In many cases, the communities they encounter have had very little interaction with the outside world and live by a traditional code of conduct. In such a situation, the safety and efficacy of humanitarian actors rests largely on their being culturally aware and sensitive to the unique social and religious norms of the society in which they are operating.

Abdul's story illustrates this need perfectly. In the aftermath of the devastating earthquake that struck Pakistan's northern areas in 2005,¹ the presence of international aid workers in the region magnified. The province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a highly conservative area, was badly hit and in severe need of aid. Abdul was involved in the rehabilitation program carried out by an international humanitarian organization in a remote part of the province.

¹ The 2005 Kashmir earthquake was a major earthquake centered in Pakistan-administered Kashmir near the city of Muzaffarabad, also affecting the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. It occurred at 08:52:37 Pakistan Standard Time (03:52:37 GMT) on 8 October 2005 and registered a moment magnitude of 7.6. As of 8 November, the government of Pakistan's official death toll was 75,000; "2005 Kashmir Earthquake" – accessed January 24, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005_Kashmir_earthquake

"Although the people of the valley had initially welcomed the foreign workers, their continued presence in the region was becoming a point of contention with some of the more conservative members of the community," recalls Abdul. Development projects focusing on females were particularly under threat, for local Pashtun culture places strict restrictions on the role of women.

Events reached a critical stage the day a team of female health workers conducted a training session on hygiene at the village. Some of the male members of the community were given the impression that that the women were discussing reproductive health, a taboo in this conservative society.

Enraged at this perceived threat to their culture and moral code, a group of ten men from the area stormed the office of the organization and demanded an immediate closure of all its activities. Abdul, as the station manager, had to act quickly to control the situation. "The Pashtun culture places great emphasis on adhering to religious norms and cultural values; in case of a breach of these customs, the males can become aggressive and resort to violence," he says.



It took a great deal of tact on Abdul's part to pacify the men and assure them that the female staff had not breached their cultural norms. The training material from the session was presented before the men to assure them that its contents had been designed in line with local tradition and religion. Eventually they were satisfied and departed amicably.



Lessons Learned

The incident was an eye-opener for the organization, which conducted immediate re-training sessions for its staff on cultural sensitivity. Female staff was temporarily suspended from visiting the village till the negative sentiment died down completely.

Abdul sums it up succinctly when he says, "Sometimes, we forget that what is considered normal for us may be a completely alien and unacceptable concept for others. The key to the success of international humanitarian action is showing a desire to understand and respect the indigenous cultures and traditions of communities, no matter how odd they may seem to us."



FARHAN

P a k i s t a n

!!
MOB MENTALITY HAD
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REASON FROM THE MINDS
OF THE VILLAGERS AND THE
WORKERS WERE IN COMPLETE
PANIC.

!!

Farhan is proud to have served in the Pakistan army for ten years. The rigors of military training proved highly beneficial when, in the early 2000s, he embarked on a career as a security officer in the humanitarian sector. This was the time when local NGOs, reacting to the escalating violence in the region, were following in the footsteps of their international counterparts and creating stand-alone security departments. When Farhan took on the role of security focal person at an international NGO based in Islamabad, he used his experience in the military as the basis for preparing the organization's security policy.

Working for a large organization running multiple projects all over the country came with its share of demands and challenges. "The larger the organization, the bigger the scope of its operation, which translates into more movement and more exposure to risks," says Farhan. The year 2011 was an exceptionally trying time, when two security incidents, both involving angry mobs, tested Farhan's preparedness.

The first incident occurred at a village where the organization was implementing a development project. Two employees were headed back from the area in a company vehicle when they accidentally ran down an old man, injuring his leg. Witnessing the incident, a mob of angry villagers surrounded the car and threatened to burn it down with the workers trapped inside.

In the midst of the commotion, one of the terrified employees phoned Farhan. "At that critical point, when mob mentality had removed any shred of reason from the minds of the villagers and the workers were in complete panic, it was important for me to remind my colleague to stay calm and assure him that help was on the way," Farhan recalls.

The police were immediately informed. Farhan arrived on the scene and took on the role of the mediator. The old man was rushed to the hospital and Farhan assured the village elders that the organization would cover medical expenses and provide compensation. Eventually, the villagers calmed down and the



employees were allowed to leave unharmed. The NGO monitored the progress of the victim until he recovered and was discharged from the hospital.

The second incident occurred during the month of Muharram¹ in 2011. A group of employees was traveling to a city in southern Punjab when the car took a wrong turn and ended up in the middle of a religious procession, causing undue interruption to the religious activity. Feeling offended and disrespected, the people angrily confronted and threatened the group. Once again, Farhan acted as the arbitrator and diffused the tension by assuring the procession that the driver had made a mistake and meant no disrespect.

¹ Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar, when Muslims commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad (pbuh).



Lessons Learned

The two incidents were important lessons for the organization as well as for Farhan. They brought home the importance of being aware of the cultural and religious sensitivities of the local people as well as the need for security assessment of all project areas.

“In a situation where emotions are running high and an angry mob is involved, it is crucial that the mediator act swiftly in coordinating with the key players involved in the crisis,” Farhan explains. The main goal must be to pacify the sentiments of the aggrieved party and clarify that the organization will take full responsibility for any losses. Most importantly, stresses Farhan, a bearing of calm and diplomacy should be maintained during the whole process; grace under pressure, so to speak.

SAIF & AMIR Afghanistan

“ HE KNEW HE FACED DEATH
GOING OUT THERE, YET
THERE WAS A SMILE ON HIS
FACE AS ALWAYS.

”



A loud blast, a shower of dirt and rubble and then a deafening silence – that is how eyewitnesses describe the final moments of Morad’s¹ life. He was killed instantly, by the very landmine he had been seeking to destroy so that people living in the nearby village could be safe from the threat of death and disfigurement.

Morad worked for a local NGO focused on eradicating landmines. An expert surveyor, he was committed to the project due to the alarming statistics involving landmine accidents in his country. Each month, between 30 and 60 Afghans have an encounter with landmines. They are either killed or badly injured. Despite the ban on landmines in Afghanistan, the country still has the highest number of hidden mines worldwide.²

That day in 2012, recalls Saif, a colleague and friend, Morad was leading a group of surveyors to comb a site for landmines. “He knew he faced death going out there, yet there was a smile on his face as always. I’ve rarely met a person so passionate about his line of work, despite the dangers involved.”

1 The victim’s name has been changed to protect his identity.

2 “*Hidden enemies: Afghanistan combats landmines*” – accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.dw.de/hidden-enemies-afghanistan-combats-landmines/a-16716914>

Lessons Learned

What made Morad’s death particularly galling was the realization within his organization that the tragedy could have been avoided had their continuous demands for better equipment been met. Unfortunately, the lack of attention given to prioritizing the safety and security of aid workers in Afghanistan compromises humanitarian action and its delivery at every step. According to Amir, the administrative manager at the NGO in question, since relief and development programs in the country are underfunded, donors and organizations fail to allocate an adequate budget to implement effective security policies at the program level.

Morad’s death struck a hard blow to the morale and confidence of his colleagues who felt that if the organization had taken the time to conduct staff safety assessments, it would have realized that its field workers tasked to eradicate landmines lacked the necessary technology and equipment.

The incident serves as a grave reminder to the humanitarian world that unless organizations and their donors address the threats to their staff and take measures to mitigate the risks, effective humanitarian action will be impossible. A successful organization is one that strikes the right balance between keeping its workers safe and meeting its objectives.



MARY

Kenya

“ IF I MENTION THE NAME
OF ONE TRIBE IN FRONT OF
ANOTHER, THEY WOULD
KILL ME. ”

As a program manager for an international humanitarian organization that provides aid to impoverished communities in Africa, Mary has become accustomed to dealing with security risks. Ethnic clashes, banditry and kidnappings – these are only some of the threats that humanitarian workers like her are exposed to in the course of their jobs.

“My years as an aid worker have taught me never to take my personal safety for granted,” asserts Mary. “While security rules and protocols may seem like a nuisance to follow, it is worth your time to make that effort. Above all, trust your instinct.” Mary’s instinct has served her well as she divides her time between warring communities in North Kenya. “If I mention the name of one tribe in front of another, they would kill me,” she says, explaining the gravity of maintaining a tactful balance and respecting cultural sensibilities.

In recent years, tribal conflict, especially between the Turkana and the Pokot in northern Kenya, has intensified as these pastoral communities fight over diminishing water and land resources. The major causes of conflict include intensified cattle rustling, proliferation of illicit arms, inadequate policing and state security arrangements, competition over control

and access to natural resources such as pasture and water and increasing levels of poverty.¹

Caught in one such clash in 2011, Mary says had it not been for her sound training and good judgment, she would have been a victim of the ensuing violence. She was conducting an assessment for a water project in a village dominated by the Turkana tribe when she sensed unease among the people. Men from the village had attacked a rival community recently and made away with their livestock. Now the villagers were bracing for a retaliatory attack. Mary’s instinct told her to abandon the project and leave the area. Sure enough, an hour after she had departed, a violent attack was carried out. The fighting eventually got so out of control that the army had to be called in.

1 “*Conflict in Northern Kenya*” – <http://practicalaction.org/conflict-in-northern-kenya>



Lessons Learned

Humanitarian workers operating in areas where government machinery rarely functions and the rule of law is sketchy at best must learn to rely on non-traditional methods of securing their safety. “My organization goes the extra mile when staff is travelling to high-risk areas,” says Mary. “The rule is to travel in a convoy rather than alone and always have security escorts.” She also stresses the importance of cultivating a good relationship with tribal elders and other locals, who can provide valuable information and assistance in times of an emergency. “Most importantly, all human beings have an innate need for self-preservation; we can sense danger. Learn to trust that instinct,” she says.



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”

AKMAL & ARSHAD
P a k i s t a n

For Akmal, an aid worker based in Islamabad, every day that he returns home safe from his job is a small victory. As the project manager for an international NGO, Akmal oversees the organization's projects in the slums around the city.

Existing on the fringes of society, and with poverty running rampant, slums have a tendency to become breeding grounds for criminal activity. Islamabad's katchi abadis¹ are no different. The organization recognizes the dangers of operating in such an insecure setting, where rivalries between sects and ethnicities combined with economic depravity create a unique set of challenges. "Tribal sensitivity is something that every humanitarian worker should pay attention to when working in such an environment," says Akmal.

Disadvantaged communities migrate to Islamabad due to political unrest, ethnic clashes or abject poverty and settle in these illegal katchi abadis. The resulting population is a mix of various religions, ethnicities and tribes. A good percentage of the inhabitants are refugees from Afghanistan. It is not uncommon for clashes to erupt if one group perceives itself to

be unfairly treated in the dispensation of aid. "To counter this, the organization takes measures to ensure that relief services are distributed equitably among the groups," says Arshad, a social organizer at the NGO. Beneficiary selection is conducted with the help of community leaders and representatives.

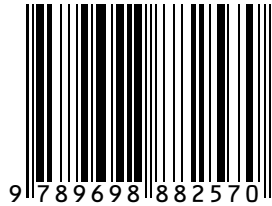
¹ Katchi abadis: informal settlements established through squatting or informal subdivisions of state or private land common in Pakistan.

Lessons Learned

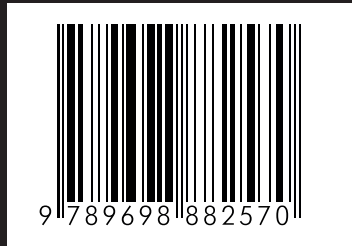
Despite the continued risks, the organization has been running successful projects in the areas since 2010. It credits its steady progress to a stringent security strategy, whereby its workers keep a low profile and carry out their work without causing undue interruption in the daily routines of the locals. It also has a policy of community involvement, whereby the locals can have a say in the planning and decision-making phases before a program is implemented. With this approach, local leaders are kept in the loop, thus fostering a healthy relationship with the rest of the community.

“We also maintain a certain balance between local and non-local staff,” Akmal reports. The locally hired staff members, who live and work in the slum areas, are a good source of security information and provide valuable feedback that helps the organization plan its field visits.

“All things considered, it is very encouraging that our organization is able to carry out its relief programs in areas where security risks are ever-present and could compromise our humanitarian efforts at any given day. I’ve proven it to myself time and again that community-based acceptance is the main factor why our relief program is successful,” Arshad concludes.



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