



# Operating in Insecurity

Shifting patterns of violence against humanitarian aid providers and their staff (1996-2010)

Christina Wille and Larissa Fast



Insecurity Insight Report 13-1

## About Insecurity Insight

Insecurity Insight is an association under Swiss law. It generates data on the impact of insecurity on people's lives and wellbeing and helps organizations to set up data gathering systems to document topics of concern. Insecurity Insight runs the Security in Numbers Database (SiND) in partnership with ten humanitarian agencies.

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## Findings at a glance

This report identifies the following trends over the last 15 years:

- The proportion of national staff affected by all types of security events has increased among all types of humanitarian aid providers (UN, Red Cross, and INGOs), an effect that is particularly strong during periods of active fighting. This suggests that the exposure to the most dangerous environments has been increasingly transferred to national staff members. The trend is slightly less apparent among INGOs than for UN and Red Cross agencies.
- The proportion of international female staff members who experience severe security events has decreased, even though absolute numbers have risen. The reason for this remains unclear.
- In contrast to INGOs, the proportion of security events affecting the UN and the Red Cross over time has fallen in some contexts and risen in others. The proportion of events affecting the UN has decreased in rural areas and during road travel. However, in urban areas and during periods of active fighting, UN agencies continue to experience security events in above average proportions. We interpret this trend as indicating that the UN's security policies have succeeded in limiting staff exposure in areas of well-known risk (in rural areas and on the road) through a variety of measures. Nonetheless, these figures highlight continued exposure to insecurity in specific areas, particularly in cities and during periods of active fighting between conflict parties.
- The proportion of security events affecting Red Cross agencies in rural areas has fallen, but their proportion of security events occurring during travel on the road remains high. The Red Cross also experiences a high proportion of severe security events during periods of active fighting and in urban contexts. We suggest that this reflects the ICRC's and National Societies' presence during periods of active fighting, as well as their continued travel to hot spots to access people in need.
- Across all contexts, INGOs continue to bear the greatest share of security events. This is particularly true in rural areas and during road travel, and slightly less so in urban areas and during active fighting. We interpret this as reflecting an increased INGO presence in areas of sustained assistance, in particular in rural areas, but cannot judge to what extent security measures and intentional targeting by perpetrators influences this trend.
- Overall we believe that the pattern of security events suggests an overall increase in humanitarian presence in highly insecure places. This, in turn, affects their exposure and vulnerability to violence and insecurity, and might influence perpetrator intention as well.

## Rising burdens of insecurity for aid workers

The number of aid workers killed, injured or kidnapped has risen to unprecedented levels in recent years. The Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD) indicates that in 2011 – the deadliest year on record for aid worker fatalities and kidnappings so far – approximately three aid workers lost their lives or were kidnapped every week. By comparison, in 2001, AWSD statistics indicate some five deaths or kidnappings in an average month. The majority of these fatalities and kidnapping victims are nationals of the country in crisis. Moreover, at the time they are kidnapped or sustain fatal injuries, an increasing proportion of victims are employed by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) rather than UN agencies or the Red Cross Movement. At first glance, this also suggests that exposure to violence has shifted from expatriates to national staff members, and from UN agencies and Red Cross to NGOs. This report, based on the data from the Security in Numbers Database (SiND, see box 1), discusses the shifts in reported security events among humanitarian agencies in relation to the broader changes in the global environment of humanitarian aid delivery.

### Box 1: The Security in Numbers Database (SiND)

The SiND is a collaborative project between Insecurity Insight and ten humanitarian agencies that provide information on security incidents. As a result of its extensive inclusion criteria, the SiND tracks threats and incidents of violence affecting aid workers (kidnapping, death, and injuries) and impediments to aid delivery and access (e.g., damage to infrastructure or supplies and the impact of insecurity on access for humanitarian agencies) going back to the 1990s. As of 30 September 2012, the database contained 3,177 events dating back to the mid-1990s. Forty percent of these are security incident reports submitted by the ten participating agencies. The remaining 60 percent have been gathered from media reports and other sources.

The SiND dataset is not a complete or representative collection of all security events affecting aid agencies, since the experiences of the contributing agencies and the nature of events that the media tends to report affect the patterns emerging from the data. Our analysis therefore focuses on **comparing the proportions of events affecting groups of agencies over time**. This approach allows us to reduce the impact of the possible bias within the data as our findings centre on characteristics that we assume to be less affected by the potential bias of received reports. (See the methodology discussions in the boxes throughout the text for more detail).

#### The data used in this report

For this particular analysis, we use only the 747 'severe events,' defined as events in which a staff member was killed, injured or kidnapped between 1996 and 2010. These 747 events affected 2,084 staff members and resulted in 565 deaths, 529 injuries, and 896 kidnappings. Seventy-three percent of these events were reported by the media and 27% were submitted by contributing agencies. To analyse changes over time, we have grouped all events into three time periods of five years: 1996-2000, 2001-2005 and 2006-2010.

**Table 1 Number of severe events and number of staff members killed and kidnapped used in the analysis**

	Number of events	Number of staff killed	Number of staff kidnapped
1996-2000	34	37	29
2001-2005	93	71	111
2006-2010	620	4557	756

For each time period, we cross-tabulate information on who was affected (i.e., national or international staff, UN agency, Red Cross agency, or INGOs) with information on the location (i.e., rural / urban) or the context in which the event occurred (i.e., active fighting or generalised insecurity).

We use two approaches to address the possibility of sampling bias in our data ('Method A' and 'Method B' - see boxes 6 and 7).

## Shifting burdens of insecurity

The overall rise in numbers of security incidents and the shifting burden of insecurity has been much discussed in the humanitarian literature. Other reports have also highlighted the reduction in events affecting UN and international agencies and expatriate staff, and suggested that this reflects a practice of 'risk transfer' away from these groups to national staff and local partners. The 2006 report *Providing Aid in Insecure Environments* concluded that, 'the level of risk in highly insecure environments has been effectively (albeit unintentionally) transferred from UN agencies and international organisations to international NGOs, and from international NGOs to their national staff and local partners' (Stoddard, Harmer and Haver, p. 20). The image of 'risk transfer' is compelling, in part because of the ethical concerns it implies. However, there has been little evidence-based discussion of the nature of the shifting exposure to insecurity and the ways it relates to broader aid policies, particularly using more recent data. This report provides additional evidence by looking at patterns of security events from 1996 to 2010 that affected different types of humanitarian workers, categorised by origin (international or national), provider organisation (UN agencies, the Red Cross Movement and INGOs), and gender.

## Box 2: Definitions

**Active fighting:** events occurring during military engagement between two or more conflict parties, or as a result of shelling or bombardment during a period of intensified violence.

**National staff:** an employee of an international aid agency (UN, Red Cross or INGO) who is locally employed or a citizen of the host country.

**International staff:** an employee or consultant to an international aid agency (UN, Red Cross or INGO) working in a country in crisis who is not a citizen of the host country.

**Severe event:** an event in which at least one staff member of a humanitarian aid agency was kidnapped, injured or killed.

**Generalised insecurity:** a climate of heightened perceived or actual insecurity, whether due to rumours or concrete information about the activities or presence of armed or otherwise hostile actors. This can include, but is not limited to banditry, large-scale political demonstrations, or the movement of armed groups.

**Urban:** a human settlement with more than 100,000 inhabitants.

**Nonurban /rural:** all areas not classified as urban.

**Events affecting the delivery of aid:** any threat or reported act of violence, or the adoption of policies or actions that result in one or more of the following outcomes: harm to an agency's staff, programmes, or reputation; negative effects on the agency's infrastructure (e.g., buildings or equipment); or actions that prevent aid agencies from gaining access or delivering programmes as intended.

**Provider agency:** Agencies are categorized in four groups:

- the Red Cross, including the ICRC, the IFRC, and national societies
- UN agencies, including OCHA, UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP and other UN agencies
- International NGOs, such as CARE, Oxfam, Save the Children, World Vision, and others
- Other humanitarian agencies, including government agencies, missionary organisations, military forces, local or national NGOs, local health care providers, private foundations, and unspecified actors providing humanitarian assistance or medical services. (These providers appear only in figures 6 and 7, to help explain the averages for international and national staff fatalities).



### Box 3: What is 'risk transfer'?

Originally, the term 'risk transfer' was used within the finance industry to describe the transfer of an insurable risk to another party. Today, different communities have adopted the term but with different meanings, which can affect the coherence of policy responses to manage risk in volatile contexts. Within the humanitarian community, it has been used to describe shifting physical security risk between international agencies and from international actors to national actors. In contrast, donors working in 'fragile' and 'transitional' contexts use 'risk transfer' or 'risk sharing' to describe a pooled funding mechanism, allowing for the shared fiduciary risk that derives from corruption (OECD nd). As the OECD notes, 'systemic behaviour with regard to risk must be considered as a function of mutual attitudes and expectations within the international aid system' (p. 2). The risk management agendas of aid providers and aid donors are related yet these debates occur in isolation. Both sets of actors are highly dependent on each other for implementing and funding frontline programmes in volatile context. The use of cash transfers in emergency situations is an example of colliding agendas of 'risk transfers.' Agencies may opt for direct cash transfers to beneficiary populations as a mechanism to reduce risk to frontline staff because such transfers can be done electronically and remotely (e.g. using mobile phones), thereby limiting staff exposure in violent situations. From a donor perspective, however, this practice raises questions related to the accountability for aid money. Each perspective captures a different type of risk. Without a comprehensive or systemic approach to risk management these perspectives are more likely to compete rather than complement each other (see also Merkelbach and Daudin 2011 on risk management).



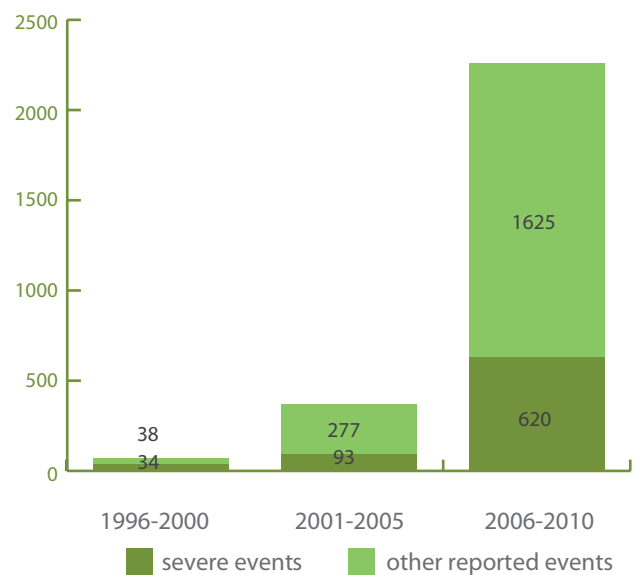
Yemen The injured are evacuated © COSMOS/ Catalina Martin-Chico 2011



## A continuous increase in security events affecting the delivery of aid

The number of recorded severe events (defined as involving death, injuries or kidnapping) started to rise noticeably after 2000 and increased sharply after 2005 (see figure 1). The increase in absolute numbers of severe events is a consequence of the increasingly complex security situation in which agencies deliver assistance and the increasing number of people engaged in providing aid (Stoddard, Harmer and Haver 2006; Stoddard, Harmer, and DiDomenico 2009). In addition, the reporting of security events and sharing of information has become more widespread. More agencies today have security information management systems in place and take part in data sharing initiatives, including the SiND. Advances in new media and communication technologies have made it easier to report and share security events. For example, national media outlets publish information on local events on the internet, thereby increasing the share of events that are picked up through internet-based media searches. All of these factors have contributed to the rise in absolute numbers of reported events. However, these factors are unlikely to explain all of the increase in reported severe events. Without doubt there has been an increase in the number of aid workers killed, kidnapped, and injured.

Figure 1 **Absolute number of reported severe events** (of death, injury or kidnapping) and other reported events affecting the delivery of aid, 1996-2010



Because the reporting of security events has improved over time and events are more likely to be captured in the database, it is not advisable to analyse trends in terms of absolute numbers. In addition, reporting biases mean that certain categories of events may be over- or underrepresented in the dataset. These possible biases may have shifted between each of the time periods, making comparisons across time unreliable without ways to reduce the effect of these potential biases in the analysis. All of these factors impose important limitations on the interpretation of the data. Recognizing these limitations, we have applied methods that are less affected by these sources of bias and allow for more reliable findings (see Box 4).

## Box 4: Interpreting the data

### What does a security event tell us about the way humanitarian aid providers operate?

Any security incident is the consequence of the interplay of an organisation's **presence** (and therefore its exposure to insecurity in the field) and **vulnerability** (influenced by security measures, including acceptance strategies, and individual behaviours) as well as the perpetrator's **capability** (referring to the ability of the perpetrator to take action against an aid agency) and **intention** (which may be indiscriminate or deliberately targeted and driven by various motives). Trends in observed security events ought to be interpreted against these four elements.

In practice this is very difficult. The necessary data relating to these factors are usually missing. There is no global source on the extent or nature of provider presence expressed in deployment data (disaggregated by type of humanitarian aid provider), type of programme, as well as gender and nationality of employees for all events. No systematic information exists about the security management practices by different provider type that would give us data on vulnerability. In only a few cases do we know anything certain about the perpetrator's intent or motives because the group(s) issues a statement before or after the event. Instead, we can only infer intent and motive from the characteristics of security events, including the number of perpetrators and the weapons used. In the absence of this information, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify with certainty the reasons behind changes in who experiences security incidents. It is easy to assume that an increase in security events affecting a particular category of humanitarian provider is evidence of greater presence in a particular area. However, it could also be a sign of a provider's greater vulnerability to incidents, or more selective targeting by a certain type of perpetrator.

In sum, interpreting these data is complicated and can be controversial. Since the information in the SiND comes from different sources, the proportion of different categories of incidents is not likely representative. In the absence of complete data relevant to assessing general trends affecting aid work, proper interpretation of humanitarian security incidents data requires a degree of qualitative assessment. We do so in this report (see boxes 6 and 7 on Methods A and B).

In addition, we avoid reporting absolute numbers, but instead compare ratios of different event types where a strong argument can be made that the biases in the dataset do not affect the comparisons in ways that would likely influence the overall conclusions. For example, selection biases in media data likely affect the ratio of international to local staff members hurt by reported security incidents, because events affecting expatriates tend to be more newsworthy to the international media. Thus international staff are probably someone overrepresented among all staff fatalities. However, the extent of this bias has probably not changed significantly over the three time periods. Hence, observed changes in the ratio between international and national staff probably reflect a real trend without necessarily being representative of the precise proportion to which national and international staff members are affected.

## Increasing victimisation of national staff

The proportion of national staff among all aid worker fatalities and kidnappings has risen noticeably over the years. National staff members made up 20 percent of reported fatalities during the 1990s, but accounted for 70 percent between 2006-2010 (see figure 2). For kidnappings, the proportion of national staff among all kidnapped aid workers has risen from one percent to nearly fifty percent. In comparison, the reported proportion of international staff either killed or kidnapped has fluctuated between 19 and 32 percent between the different five-year periods (see figure 3). Notwithstanding uncertainty regarding changing reporting on cases affecting national and international fatalities and kidnappings over the years, the extent of the change observed suggests that there has been an important shift in the burden of security incidents. Today national staff make up an increasing proportion of fatalities and kidnapping victims among affected aid workers around the world.

**Figure 2**  
**Absolute numbers of reported deaths among international and national staff, 1996-2010**



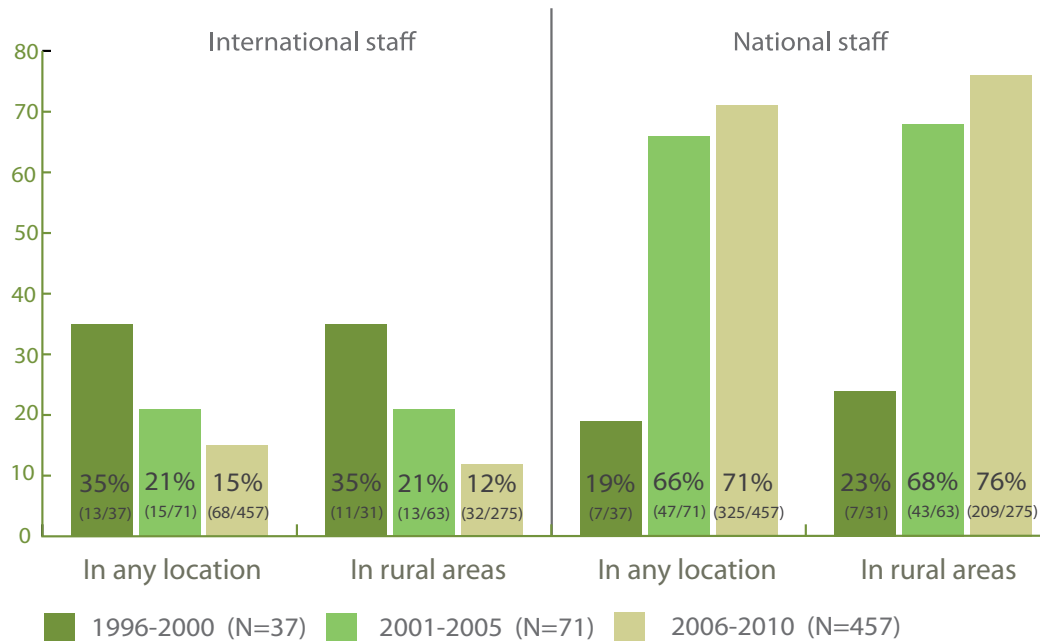
**Figure 3**  
**Absolute numbers of reported kidnappings among international and national staff, 1996-2010**



**Palestinian Territories** Ramallah Evacuation of the injured by the Palestinian Red Crescent ©CICR Ursula Meissner 2000

**Figure 4 Fatalities**

Proportion of international and national staff fatalities among all deaths in any location and among deaths in rural areas, 1996-2010



The total number of affected staff includes staff members for whom no information on nationality was provided.

**Figure 5 Kidnappings**

Proportion of international and national staff kidnapped among kidnappings in any location and among kidnappings in rural areas, 1996-2010



The total number of affected staff includes staff members for whom no information on nationality was provided

The increasing proportion of national staff member victims is visible in all contexts that we examined. Figures 4 and 5 show the proportion of events affecting national staff has increased in all locations and in rural areas. National staff are also disproportionately affected during periods of active fighting, when national staff made up 93 percent of all fatalities during the last five-year period (compared to average of 71% for all other contexts).

## Box 5: Potential biases regarding events that occur in rural areas and other locations

In analysing the location of security events and comparing rural and other locations based on the proportion of these security incidents in our samples for each time period, we considered likely biases from our access to information that could have influenced this finding. We assume that any bias in access to information would be stronger for events that occurred in rural areas because they occur further away from headquarter offices in the country, which we assume will reduce the likelihood of events being reported within an organizational system or in the media. If this were true, we would expect a smaller sample of rural events in our database. However, there are considerably more events in rural areas, which reduced our concern regarding this potential bias. Moreover, we expected that the inclusion of rural events would increase, rather than decrease over time due to improvements in communications. However, the number of reports from rural areas has consistently fallen over the years (see section on shifting burdens of risk and figure 9 below for details). Notwithstanding the fact that we do not claim that the proportion of severe events in urban and rural events as presented in figure 11 below precisely reflects the actual relative proportion of these events across time periods, we do believe that our data reflect a changing trend in the location of security events towards urban areas that is not due to any particular bias in our dataset.

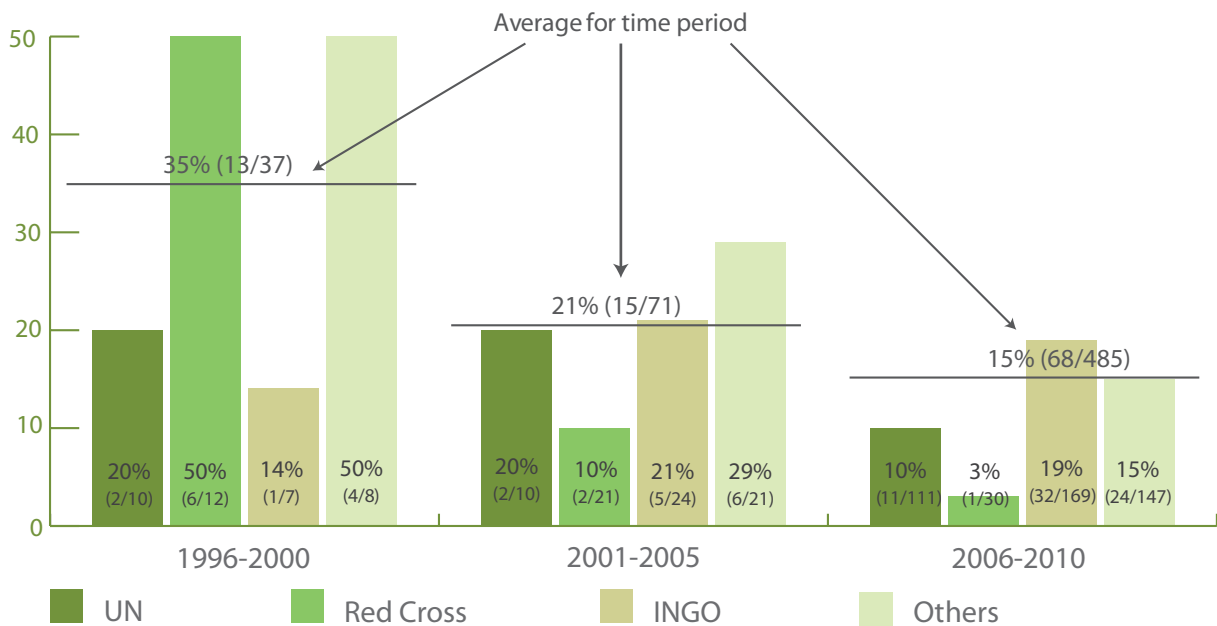
Among all humanitarian aid providers, Red Cross organisations have reduced their share of international staff fatalities most noticeably. Between 1996 and 2000, half of all Red Cross reported fatalities were international staff members. Since then this proportion has fallen to three percent (see figure 6).

Conversely, the proportion of fatalities affecting national employees has risen over time. For UN agencies this proportion was 30% during 1996-2000, but had risen to 83% by 2006-2010. Among INGOs, the number of national staff fatalities among its employees has also risen over the years, although to a lesser extent than UN agencies and the Red Cross Movement (see figure 7).

The proportion of international INGO employees who lost their lives has not changed noticeably over the last 15 years (from 14% to 21% to 19% in the three time periods). This suggests that, notwithstanding the general increase in national staff fatalities and kidnapping victims, the rate of international employee victimisation among INGO staff has remained roughly the same, even in the most insecure environments. This calls into question the assumption of a cascading effect of a risk transfer from UN to INGOs and from INGO international staff to national staff and local partners.

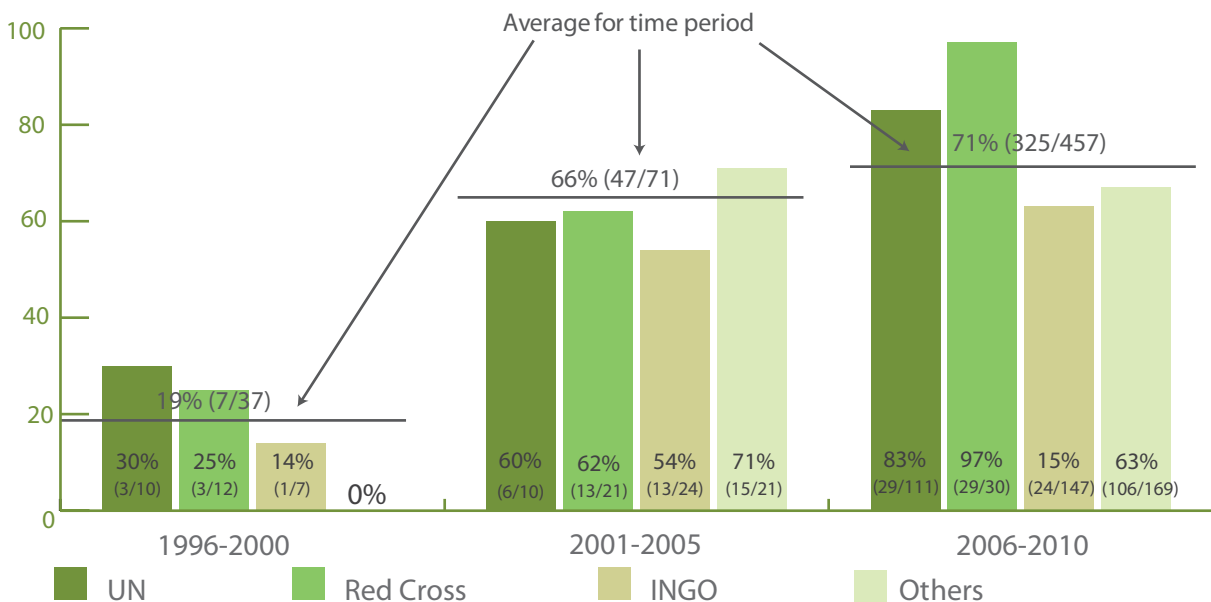
**Figure 6 International staff fatalities**

Proportion of international staff fatalities among all reported staff deaths (UN agencies, Red Cross, INGOs, and other providers, 1996-2010), compared to the average proportion of fatalities for all international staff among all providers during that period



**Figure 7 National staff fatalities**

Proportion of national staff fatalities among all reported staff deaths (UN agencies, Red Cross, INGOs, and other providers, 1996-2010), compared to the average proportion of fatalities for all national staff among all providers during that period





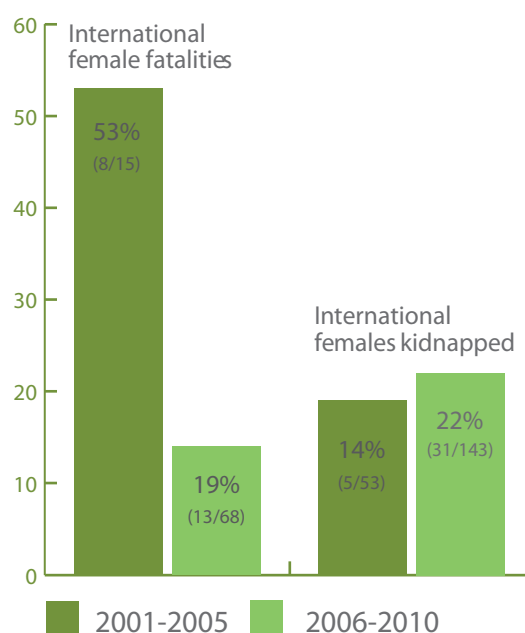
In as far as security events reflect the exposure to risk, these figures could indicate that international staff members are providing less direct aid delivery and have shifted out of frontline roles into office based management and training tasks. The figures may also indicate increased protection of international staff following changes in security training and security policies or remote management strategies that decrease or eliminate the placement of international staff in the most dangerous contexts. However, we question the notion that risk has been transferred from international to national staff. The trends we observe are likely to be explained more by increased hiring of local staff for frontline work rather than the replacement of one category of workers with another. This also could reflect pragmatic considerations about the cost and effectiveness of employing national staff who receive lower salaries and are assumed to have greater local acceptance.

## Reduced exposure of international women to security risks?

The proportion of female fatalities has fallen among international staff (though it increased in absolute numbers) in relation to men and unreported victim sex. In contrast, the proportion of women who are kidnapped remained relatively stable or increased slightly, even though the absolute numbers have also increased. The reasons for these trends are unclear.<sup>3</sup> The proportional decline in fatalities of women could reflect a reduction in the employment of female international staff overall. Likewise, it could signal an aversion among humanitarian aid providers to deploy international female staff in highly dangerous contexts or the implementation of different security measures for women (e.g., more restrictive or hardened security that reduces their vulnerability). It could also be indicative of perpetrators' hesitancy to kill women, or a deliberate strategy of targeting men.

**Figure 8**  
**International female staff victims**

Proportion of international female fatalities and international women kidnapped among all international staff who died or were kidnapped, 2001-2010



The period 1996-2000 had to be excluded from the analysis as the sample size was too small (N Killed=13 and N Kidnapped = 22) in particular as the proportion of unreported sex was high with 46% (6/13 and 10/22)

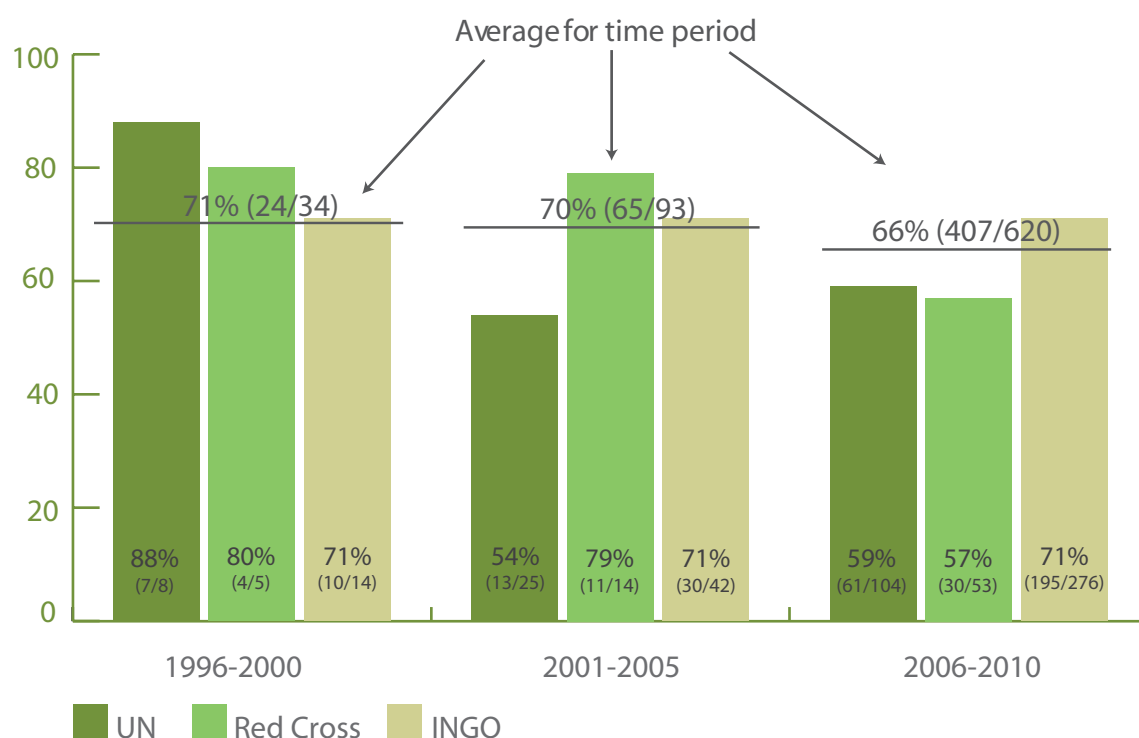
The slight increase in the proportion of abducted international female employees suggests that the trend is not due to a change in female employment overall, since in this case we would expect the kidnapping proportions to decline as well. Again, multiple possible explanations exist for the finding. The difference might be due to perpetrator attitudes, including a willingness to abduct (vs. kill) women, or that perpetrators may consider female hostages easier to abduct and control than men. All of these explanations remain speculative. To understand this phenomenon better we need more quantitative and qualitative data on gender (Wille and Fast 2011), and greater understanding of perpetrator motives and attitudes to women's security within humanitarian organisations.

## Shifts in exposure between UN agencies, the Red Cross Movement and INGOs

The notion of 'risk transfer' suggests that the UN and Red Cross organizations have shifted the burden of exposure to insecurity to INGOs. As discussed in the methodology sections (see boxes 4, 5, 6, and 7), it is difficult to paint an accurate picture of the changing nature of security events affecting UN agencies, the Red Cross or INGOs by simply reporting the proportional change from events in our database, since different sources of information affect these proportions to an unknown extent and therefore have the potential to bias our conclusions. To mitigate the effect of this potential bias on the data we used two different methods (Methods A and B – see boxes 6 and 7 for details) to examine trends in how security events affect different categories of humanitarian aid providers. We compared the observed proportion against the overall trends within the database and against expected proportion based on the extent to which a particular provider is represented within a sample. This analysis suggests that both the UN and the Red Cross have reduced their share of security events in rural areas while INGOs have not. It further shows that the UN did so earlier than the Red Cross (already after 2001 as compared to 2006) and at a time when the overall proportion of events affecting the UN still increased slightly (see figure 9).

**Figure 9 Security events in rural areas**

Proportion of severe events in rural areas by category of humanitarian provider, 1996-2010, Compared against the average of all severe events in rural areas for that period



## Box 6: Description of Method A

We suspect that there is a strong imbalance in the proportions of INGO, UN, and Red Cross security incidents within the SiND. As the SiND dataset includes data directly reported by INGOs since 2009, we assume we have a bigger sample of INGO events and fewer UN and Red Cross events in our database, since these are derived from the media. Moreover, as the number of contributing agencies has increased over time, we would expect this effect to be stronger in later time periods than in earlier ones. If we now used our data to simply report the proportion to which we have UN, Red Cross or INGO security events within our three time period samples then the results run the risk of being a reflection of sampling bias rather than a real trend. We would expect to find a higher proportion of INGO events, and we would expect that this proportion would increase over time as more partners joined the SiND. Unlike with the analysis of events reported from rural areas (see box 5 above) we do not use the proportion of events affecting different providers as an indicator of changing trends.

To reduce the effect of this possible bias we examined separately events that occurred in a specific context (e.g. rural or urban environments, or during active fighting or generalized insecurity) for each time period and compared the proportion to which different provider categories (e.g. UN, the Red Cross or INGOs) were affected in these specific contexts. We assumed that the potential bias of under- or overrepresentation of particular provider categories would not be particularly different between the different contexts. For example, table 2 below examines the question of whether INGOs or UN agencies are disproportionately affected by severe events in rural areas. For this case, we calculate a benchmark measuring the proportion of severe events occurring in rural areas for all provider categories for each time period. We then look at events affecting just UN agencies and just INGOs and calculate the proportion of severe events occurring in rural areas for each category. Where the calculated percentage is greater than the benchmark level for the time period we can assert that this category has experienced a disproportionate risk of experiencing severe events in rural areas.

**Table 2 Proportion of severe events in rural areas among all humanitarian aid providers and the UN**

	All humanitarian aid providers			UN only			INGOs only		
	Number of severe events	Number of severe events in rural areas	% of severe events that occurred in rural areas	Number of severe events	Number of severe events in rural areas	% of severe events that occurred in rural areas	Number of severe events	Number of severe events in rural areas	% of severe events that occurred in rural areas
1996-2000	34	24	71%	8	7	88%	14	10	71%
2001-2005	93	65	70%	24	13	54%	47	30	71%
2006-2010	620	407	66%	104	61	59%	276	195	71%

In this case we find that UN agencies appear to have become proportionately less exposed to severe events in rural areas over time (the greatest reduction occurring between 1996-2000 and 2001-2005). INGO exposure to severe events in rural areas has not changed in proportional terms. This approach allows for a comparison of common INGO and UN security events in rural areas because the average, which we use as the benchmark, is only affected by the expected over-representativeness of INGOs in as far as INGOs have a specific profile that would influence the average towards a pattern typical for INGOs.

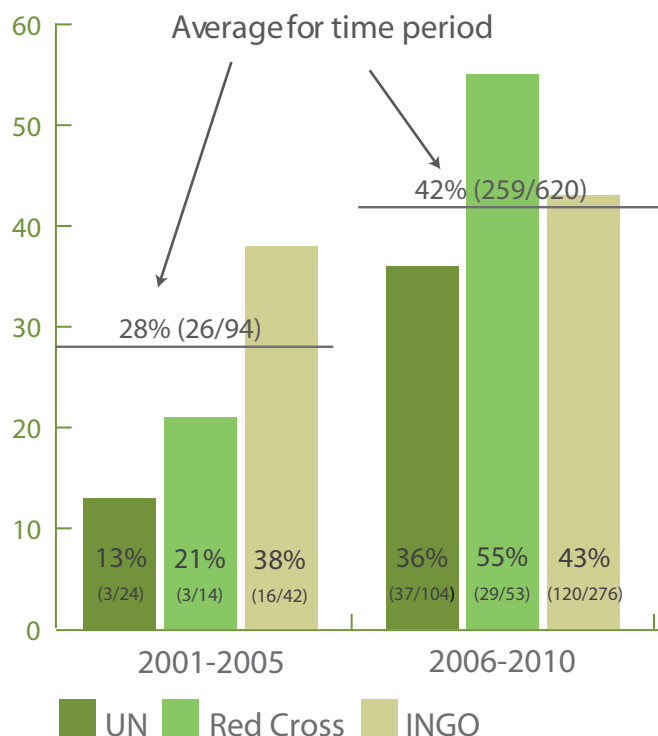
The data, presented in terms of proportions, are shown in the graphs. Despite the impression given of accurate proportions of events that affect different humanitarian providers in these graphs, we do not claim that these figures accurately represent how the security events discussed in this report affect each provider category. Nevertheless, we believe that the overall trend visible within the selected figures reflects general tendency in one or the other direction.

Before including any particular figure in the overall analysis, we cross-checked the findings based on analysis using Method B (see box 7 below) to ensure the same results. However, we only present one or the other method in the text. The figures that use shades of green indicate the use of Method A whereas those figures using shades of grey represent the use of Method B. We presented more information using the method described in this box as we assume that it is easier for the reader to see the changes than in graphs based on the use of Method B.



**Colombia** Medics on their way from Negrito to Barbacoas on the Espi River. © **CICR/VON** ChristophToggenburg, 25/01/2010

Figure 10  
**Proportion of security events en route by provider category, 2001-2010,**  
 compared against the average of all severe events en route



The period 1996-2000 had to be excluded from the analysis as the sample size was of nine events on the road among all three providers was too small.

The data show that UN agencies have consistently experienced a lower exposure to incidents while travelling on the road than the Red Cross and INGOs. Interestingly, the events recorded by the Red Cross that occurred while en route have risen just above the average for the last period (see figure 10).

How should we interpret these trends? These data might indicate a proportional decline in UN and Red Cross presence in rural areas as compared to INGOs. The changes could also be due to modifications in security measures in particular for the UN, such as the introduction of armed escort (Kingston and Behn 2010) or the use of other modes of travel (e.g., aircraft) to reduce their exposure to insecurity. It could also indicate that perpetrators target the UN less in rural areas, although there is little evidence to support this.

## Urban security challenges

One noticeable trend is the increased proportion of security events occurring in urban areas. Although more than half of all events affecting the delivery of aid continue to occur in rural areas, the proportion of events in cities of more than 100,000 people has grown from around 15 percent (1996-2000) to nearly 30 percent of all events (2001-2010) (see figure 11).

This trend may be partly a reflection of urbanisation in the countries covered by the database. According to UN statistics, since 2009 the number of people living in urban areas has exceeded the number of those living in rural areas.<sup>4</sup> Rapid urbanisation has increased the absolute numbers of highly vulnerable people in urban centres, including refugee populations. Humanitarian agencies have responded with more urban-based support programmes, according to anecdotal evidence from service providers.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the increase in urban events likely reflects higher levels of urban crime, which increasingly affects aid agencies. Analysis of urban security events has shown that ordinary crime is an important subcategory of security events (Wille and Fast 2010).

The SiND data indicate that UN agencies have experienced a higher proportion of urban security events than other humanitarian aid providers. INGOs have experienced proportionally fewer urban security events, while the proportion for the Red Cross has increased since 2006 (see figure 12).



Because anecdotal evidence does not indicate that the UN and Red Cross directly implement more urban programming than INGOs,<sup>6</sup> it appears unlikely that the observed variation reflects differences in the presence of these providers in urban areas. Instead, the trend in security events could reflect a tendency within the UN to centralise programme management in urban areas, thus keeping more staff in urban offices (thereby making them more exposed to insecurity in urban areas) and less in rural field stations. The reduction in the number of events reported as occurring on the road would support the interpretation of a greater urban presence and visibility for the UN. It is also possible that UN employees are more visible or may be seen as more lucrative targets for criminals, given the reputation of high levels of UN remuneration as compared to INGO pay scales. This could also explain their higher share of events in urban areas.

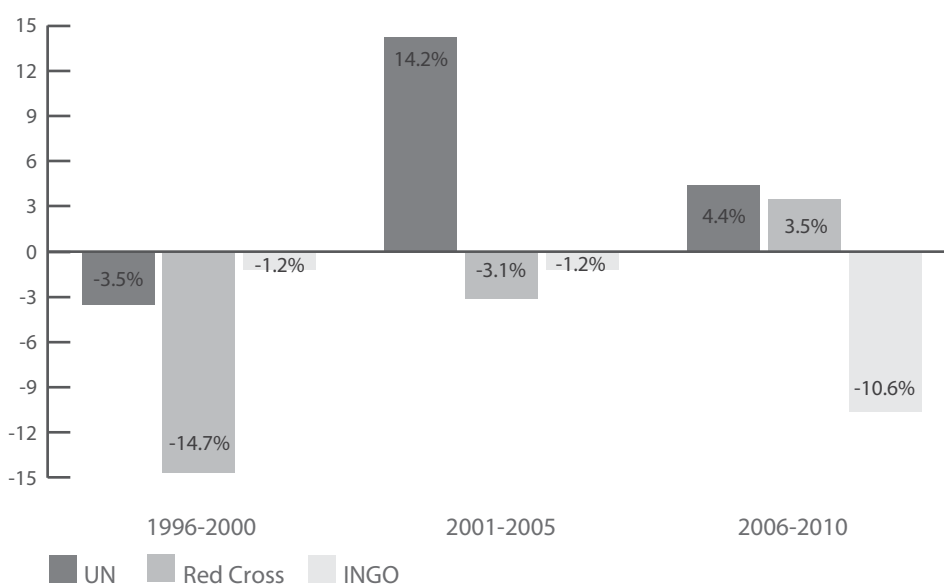
Given that the Red Cross also faces higher levels of exposure to insecurity in urban areas and exposure to incidents on the road, it is possible that Red Cross agencies maintain a strong presence in urban areas and also travel more to implement programmes. Further analysis of agency programming and security management policies would be needed to test these hypotheses. It also remains to be determined whether these changes are the result of a conscious reduction in exposure to rural environments or whether the reduction in rural security events is the result of other factors.

**Figure 11**  
Distribution of reported severe events between rural and urban



**Figure 12 Urban events by different providers, 1996-2010**

Expressed in the difference between the expected to actual proportion of urban events, by provider category



**1996-2000:**

UN: -3.5 = 20.0% (1/5)-23.5%(8/34)  
 Red Cross: -14.7 = 0.0%(0/5)-14.7%(5/34)  
 INGO: -1.2 = 40.0% (2/5)-41.2%(14/34)

**2001-2005:**

UN: 14.2 = 40.0% (10/25)-25.8%(24/93)  
 Red Cross: -3.1 = 12-0%(3/25)-15.1%(14/93)  
 INGO: -1.2 = 44.0%(11/25)-44.5%(276/620)

**2006-2010:**

UN: 4.4 = 21.1%(37/175)-16.8% (104/620)  
 Red Cross: 3.5 = 12.0%(21/175)-8.5% (53/620)  
 INGO: -10.6 = 33.7% (59/175)-44.5% (276/620)



## Box 7: Description of Method B

To address the problem of sampling bias in our data we have adopted an approach of analyzing subsets of our data separately. Method A separated the data according to context (e.g. rural, active fighting) and compared how well each category of humanitarian provider was represented in each context for each time period compared against the benchmark of the average for all providers in the whole dataset for the selected context and period. Method B takes a similar approach, but separates the data according to provider category within each context and for each time period.

For example, Table 3 addresses the question of whether UN agencies are over- or underrepresented in severe events in rural areas. We start by calculating the percentage of severe events affecting UN agencies for each time period. If UN agencies were equally exposed to severe events in rural and urban areas we would expect to observe the same proportion of UN events as included in the SiND for each time sample of rural and urban contexts. Comparing the actual proportion of UN security events in rural areas to the expected proportion based on how many UN events we have in our sample indicates whether UN agencies are over- or underrepresented in severe events that take place in rural as compared to urban areas. We express this comparison in terms of a difference between the observed and expected proportion: a positive figure indicates disproportionate exposure to a particular event type.

**Table 3**  
**Proportion of UN events among all severe events and among all severe events in rural areas**

	All severe events	All severe events affecting the UN	% of UN severe events among all severe events	All severe events in rural areas	All severe events in rural areas affecting the UN	% of UN severe rural events among all severe rural events	Difference between the % of all severe events in rural areas affecting the UN
1996-2000	34	8	24%	31	7	23%	1 (24-23)
2001-2005	93	24	26%	63	13	21%	5 (26-21)
2006-2010	620	104	17%	274	61	22%	-5(17-22)

In this example UN agencies appear to be overrepresented in severe incidents occurring in rural areas for the time periods 1996-2000 and 2001-2005. However, for the time period 2006-2010 UN agencies appear to be proportionally less exposed to severe events in rural areas. This finding is consistent with the results of the analysis using Method A described in box 6.

We have opted to present information by this method whenever we compare three categories of humanitarian providers over three different time periods with each in a single graph, as it allows us to use the zero on the y-axis as the average for every subgroup. This avoids the necessity of drawing nine separate 'average' lines within the graph. We use variants of grey for these types of graphs (e.g., figures 12 and 13).

## Increasing humanitarian activity during periods of active fighting

The data indicate that active fighting – defined as events occurring during a military engagement between two or more conflict parties, or as the result of shelling or bombardment during a period of intensified conflict – has a greater impact upon the delivery of aid today than in the past. The share of severe events that occurred during periods of active fighting has steadily increased from a rare occurrence – not a single death during active fighting was recorded for the period 1996-2000 – to about one in eight severe events between 2006 and 2010. The share of events that occurred during periods of generalised insecurity (e.g., riots or roaming armed gangs), by contrast, has declined in proportion over the last five years from 15 percent to less than five percent of recorded events. Despite the decline in the observed proportions, such events have still increased in absolute numbers.

Severe events during periods of active fighting between two or more conflict parties affects the Red Cross in particular, but also the UN to a certain degree, above the expected ratio (see figure 13). This trend was particularly marked between 2001 and 2005 but has reduced slightly since then. As discussed above, the staff members affected by active fighting are almost exclusively national staff across all humanitarian providers.

**Figure 13 Events during active fighting among different providers providers (UN agencies, Red Cross and INGOs) 2001-2010**

Expressed in terms of the difference between the expected to actual proportion of events during active fighting by provider category <sup>7</sup>

**2001-2005:** UN: 11=36.4% (4/11)-25.8% (24/93)  
 Red Cross: 21=36.4% (4/11)-15.1%(14/93)  
 INGOs: -27=18.2% (2/11)- 45.2% (42/93)

**2006-2010:** UN: 3=20.0% (16/80)- 16.8%(104/620)  
 Red Cross: 12=20.0% (16/80)-8.5% (53/620)  
 INGO: -16=28.8%(23/80)-44.5%(276/620)



How should we interpret these data? Most likely they are an indication of the relative presence of different agencies during periods of active fighting. The Red Cross and UN agencies may have increased their engagement during periods of active fighting in comparison to INGOs. This calls into question the blanket assertion that the UN and Red Cross have 'transferred risk' to INGOs in all situations.

## The rising use of explosive weapons

Linked to the increasing number of severe events during active fighting is an increase in the use of explosive weapons in events affecting aid providers. In the early years, the use of explosive weapons occurred only rarely; it is now the reported weapon type in one in seven events. Among the types of explosive weapons used, landmines have fallen, from 66.6 percent of reported explosive use between 1996-2000 to 3.9 percent over the last five years. The use of explosive devices in suicide bombings has risen, from no reported events during the first period (1996-2000) to approximately nine percent of events involving explosive weapons between 2006 and 2010. The most important increase is the use of explosive artillery shells, mortar rounds, and bombardment employed in military campaigns. Explosive weapons caused 36.2 percent of all reported aid worker fatalities that occurred during periods of active fighting between 2006 and 2010, as compared to none during 2001-2005. Between 2001-2005 firearm use caused all fatalities during active fighting.

## More humanitarian activity during periods of conflict

What are the underlying global trends that can explain the increasing vulnerability of aid workers during periods of active fighting? The increase in aid worker fatalities occurs against the backdrop of decreasing direct (i.e., battle-related deaths) and indirect (i.e., fatalities from war-related disease or malnutrition) deaths in armed conflict. As the Human Security Report (HSR) 2009/2010 suggested, the number of armed conflicts has declined, as have battle-related deaths and the indirect civilian death toll in armed conflict. The HSR attributes the reduced death toll in armed conflict partly to changes in the nature of conflict, where smaller forces fight with small arms and light weapons (SALW) as opposed to large armies fighting with conventional weapons. This, in turn, results in lower death tolls among combatants and civilians. More importantly for this discussion, the report also highlights two equally important factors as the reason for the declining death toll from conflict. First, the HSR identifies 'a substantial increase in the level and scope of humanitarian assistance since the end of the Cold War' (p.103). Between 1990 and 2006, aid per displaced person in war-affected countries increased more than three-fold between 1990 and 2006 (p. 118). Second, the success of public health and immunization campaigns, particularly for reducing under-five mortality rates, has helped to make populations more resilient in periods of acute crisis. The HSR cites various studies that underscore the important role the humanitarian community has played in bringing about this global decline in the indirect death toll. For example, epidemiological surveys from refugee and internally displaced person camps have shown a rapid decline in mortality rates upon the arrival of humanitarian assistance, such as food, shelter, and access to clean water (p. 119).

We propose that the worsening death toll among aid workers is directly related to this generally positive global trend. Humanitarian assistance has increased and is more effective in reaching large segments of populations, even in difficult environments. Aid workers risk their lives, but they are contributing directly to saving thousands of lives. This is an important and unfortunate consequence of the decreased global death toll from violent conflict.

Our data on severe security events also suggest that humanitarian aid providers, and national staff in particular, increasingly remain active during periods of heightened violence. Earlier events recorded during periods of active fighting (between 2001 and 2005) tended to occur mainly during highly localized confrontations between government forces and rebels or even refugee populations. One or two aid workers were killed either in the crossfire or in attacks (e.g., while burying dead) in countries like Liberia, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Chad. Such events also occurred between 2006 and 2010 in Afghanistan, Somalia and the DRC, but for the first time our data

include a number of aid worker fatalities that occurred during intensive military campaigns covered by the global media. These include the Sri Lankan Armed Forces defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in northern Sri Lanka in 2009 and the Israeli Defence Forces Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip in 2008/2009. A significant number of aid personnel killed during these campaigns were national healthcare providers attempting to save lives, who also received support and assistance from humanitarian agencies. Of these, a large number died as a result of the indiscriminate use of explosive material that makes it nearly impossible for military parties to distinguish between a neutral humanitarian actor, a civilian, and a military target.

The rise in aid worker fatalities during active fighting is also likely the result of an increased risk tolerance among humanitarian aid providers, whether the UN, Red Cross or INGOs. As donors, governments and the public demand immediate and visible action at times of crisis, humanitarian agencies have responded to demonstrate their relevance and commitment. The use of explosive weapons around civilian populations assisted by aid agencies has raised the risk for humanitarian providers who cannot rely on their emblems and brands to protect them from such weapons.



**Sudan** Bir Meza. ICRC mobile surgical team performing an operation. ©CICR/ Virginie Lois 31/08/2005

## Conclusions

The death toll among aid workers and the number of kidnappings has risen to previously unseen levels in recent years. This is due to a greater humanitarian presence in dangerous contexts, which suggests a higher risk tolerance among humanitarian actors, as well as an increasingly complex operating environment in which perpetrators may target aid agencies for a variety of motives. Security incidents have increased over the past 15 years as humanitarian support has expanded into areas of active fighting and into urban areas, where crime is a bigger issue. The Red Cross and UN agencies continue to assume a large share of all security events in these contexts, a phenomenon that challenges the generalized statement that the UN and Red Cross have 'transferred risk' to INGOs in the most insecure areas. However, INGOs appear to have assumed a greater share of the insecurity in rural areas than they did in the past. Among all aid providers, individual aid workers are particularly vulnerable during periods of active fighting, especially with regard to the use of explosive weapons and in urban areas. The indiscriminate effects of explosive weapons make it difficult, if not impossible, to apply principles of respect for the neutral, impartial, or independent character of humanitarian work. The protection of aid workers, therefore, must be linked to the broader issue of the protection of civilians (see Fast nd).

The fifteen-year time period examined here, however, shows a clear trend of increasing victimisation of national employees. The escalation in national staff deaths and kidnappings likely reflects the growing numbers of locally employed staff working for international humanitarian agencies and the increasing use of remote management in insecure environments. At least four factors could explain the increasing numbers of national staff affected by insecurity. First, international providers strive to deliver programmes in a culturally sensitive way and seek acceptance in local communities, which often involves hiring national staff members. Increased security awareness and agencies' reluctance to expose international staff to high-risk environments could also be driving this development. Third, donor demands to limit expenditures may partly explain this trend. This factor might help to explain why the trend is more marked among UN agencies than INGOs, where the greater disparities between international and local salaries allow for even greater savings by employing national staff.

Finally, the higher exposure of national staff to insecurity could also reflect the types of jobs they hold within organizations. Those working in security management generally recognize the increased risks for guards and drivers, which are directly related to their work. Likewise, individual agency policies differentially apply to international and local staff members, which can affect risk. National staff typically do not live in agency-rented or owned compounds, unless they have relocated from another part of their country as part of their work. As a result, many national staff live in the surrounding community and are not subject to the same security measures related housing or the use of transport outside of working hours. Equally important, however, is the recognition that national staff also face differential risk (see also Fast et. al 2011). For example, a university-educated employee from the capital (whose linguistic, ethnic, or religious identity may be different) sent to work in a remote local community is likely as unfamiliar with the local environment as an international staff member. Without better data on the positions and occupations of those affected by severe incidents, it is difficult to definitively assess the connection between job category and insecurity.

Intense media coverage of human suffering mobilises public opinion to respond to humanitarian crises. As a result, donors encourage involvement in increasingly fragile environments, whereas in the past agencies might have withdrawn from high-risk contexts. Although humanitarian assistance has helped to reduce the global death toll from conflict, it is equally important to consider the negative effects for the frontline humanitarian aid workers who provide this assistance.



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**Libya** Misrata A medic on the front line checks for medical evacuees ©CICR/ André Liohn 23/04/2011



<sup>1</sup>The Aid Worker Security Database recorded 86 aid worker fatalities and 95 kidnappings in 2011 compared to 27 fatalities and 43 kidnappings in 2001. <http://aidworkersecurity.org>, accessed 27 November 2012.

<sup>2</sup>The high proportion of 'unspecified' nationality for kidnapping victims within the data is more likely to explain the smaller increase in kidnappings among national staff as compared to the sharp rise in national fatalities than a real difference in the way kidnapping affects nationals and expatriate staff. The proportion of kidnapped expatriates is not all that different from the proportions reported for expatriate fatalities (see figure 3). Our experience from processing reported cases of kidnapping suggests that kidnappings of international staff is of high interest to the media, especially in the country of origin, and tends to attract more detailed reporting, including the nationality and other victim details. We therefore believe that a higher proportion of aid workers who are reported simply as 'kidnapped,' without any additional information on their national background, will be national rather than international staff.

<sup>3</sup>The analyses for the first period (1996-2000) and for national staff have not been included because the numbers were too low (e.g., the total number of reported fatalities in 1996-2000) or because the ratio of unreported sex was too high to allow for any meaningful interpretation (for national staff and female fatalities between 1996-2000 as well.)

<sup>4</sup>UNDESA, 2011. World Urbanization Prospects, the 2011 Revision. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Online data on urban and rural populations. <http://esa.un.org/unup/>. Accessed 5 November 2012. Last updated 26 April 2012.

<sup>5</sup>For discussions of the changing urban context for humanitarian interventions see for example the blog on the ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action) website. <http://www.alnap.org/ourwork/urban.aspx>

<sup>6</sup>Telephone interview with security official. 17 November 2012

<sup>7</sup>11.9 and 12 percent of all recorded severe events occurred during periods of active fighting both for the period 2001-2005 and 2006-2010. If all events would be equally distributed between providers we would expect all providers to record about 12 percent of severe events during periods of active fighting.



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