

# Risky Business: 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Changing Dynamics of Insecurity in Humanitarian Operations

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**Abstract:**

The turn of the millennium witnessed significant security challenges in the humanitarian operating environment. Delivering humanitarian aid became risky business. Targeted and collateral attacks against aid workers increased particularly in some high risk humanitarian environments. This was on the background of rise in humanitarian crises causing displacement of millions of people and growth in aid worker numbers to respond to the crises. The reliance on security assurances from host governments and good intentions of humanitarian work, respect of international humanitarian law and principles, and organization humanitarian mandates, to shield humanitarian operations and aid workers from untoward action waned. This was compounded by the rise in fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism in some contexts, with some non-state armed groups seeing humanitarian action and aid workers as legitimate targets for diverse reasons. This paper presents an overview of the changed security dynamics in humanitarian operational environments since the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It also explores the reasons and consequences of insecurity and the measures taken to address security risks in humanitarian operations.

**Keywords:** Consequences of insecurity, Contemporary humanitarian security environment and Humanitarian Security Management.

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## 1. Introduction

The turn of the millennium has witnessed unprecedented increase in humanitarian crises in many regions of the world. There have been record numbers of forced displacements primarily due to political events such as armed conflict, requiring enormous humanitarian interventions and assistance [1]. In paradox, the contemporary humanitarian operational environment has also become highly insecure in some contexts, particularly in conflict affected, since the turn of the millennium. Some contemporary humanitarian operational environments are highly insecure with active armed conflict. Post conflict humanitarian contexts face diverse security threats and risks, and the environment is sometimes fragile and volatile making it a difficult and dangerous operating ground. Humanitarian operations are also conducted in environments beset with high crime rates, including organized and transnational crime, human trafficking, gender-based violence and armed criminal violence among other threats. In addition, fundamentalism particularly religious, terrorism, extremism, civil unrest, and natural hazards are among other constant dangers in humanitarian operational environments. Operating in insecure humanitarian contexts requires concerted effort to address security risks in the environment to meaningfully deliver aid to millions of displaced people and other communities in need. Further, operating in diverse and complex insecure humanitarian environments requires sound security risk management strategies to ensure

sustainable humanitarian aid delivery. The safety and security of humanitarian personnel and operations, the aid beneficiaries and all others supporting humanitarian work is therefore an imperative if humanitarian assistance is to be delivered safely and according to the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence [2].

Assisting people in need has become risky business since the turn of the millennium in diverse insecure humanitarian contexts with grave consequences in some countries [3]. This is so particularly in conflict and post conflict high risk environments. High-risk environments are associated with any or a mix of, general insecurity, armed conflict, fragile post-conflict situations, weak or nonexistent governance and security systems, widespread violence, international law and national law violations, human rights abuses, political instability or repression and civil infrastructure collapse [4, 5]. In some such humanitarian contexts, state and non-state armed actors, fundamentalists, extremists, criminal groups, and individuals, directly or indirectly target humanitarian personnel, humanitarian operations and aid beneficiaries in some instances. The United Nations (UN), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other independent humanitarian organizations (e.g., Red Cross) have become “legitimate” targets by some of the actors [6]. In numerous high risk humanitarian environments, aid workers and peacekeeping operations (UN and regional) have been targeted for attacks with many casualties [6, 7]. Examples include Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mali, Niger, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, Sudan, Afghanistan [7, 8].

What has really changed of security in humanitarian operations since the turn of the millennium? Why does supposedly good intentions of humanitarian action no longer guarantee safety and security of humanitarian staff and operations? In answering these questions, the paper presented an overview of the changed security dynamics in humanitarian operational environments since the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It examined the reasons and consequences of insecurity on humanitarian service delivery. The measures taken by humanitarian organizations to address insecurity are explored. Recommendations to sustain humanitarian operations in insecure environments are proffered in a world facing “multilateral challenges but deficit of multilateral solutions” [8].

## **2. The Contemporary Security Context of Humanitarian Operations**

Contemporary humanitarian operations in insecure environments are conducted in complex field environments characterized by one or more and a mix of the following [6].

- i. International armed conflict. That is, conflict between two or more sovereign states. Contemporary examples include Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Afghanistan. This context inevitably causes internal and or external displacements of people. Humanitarian aid has to be delivered to affected communities wherever they are.
- ii. Internal armed conflict. That is, an environment where there is active fighting (including cross border) between the state and one or more internal armed groups (rebels/ insurgents). Civil war and rebellions are in this category. (e.g., Syria, Somalia, Sudan, DRC, Yemen, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Iraq, Myanmar). This context causes displacements (internal or external) and affected communities have to be assisted wherever they are.
- iii. Post- conflict. Countries that experienced international armed conflict and or internal armed conflict (civil war) and remain fragile. Typically, this was fighting between the state and another state (international) and or the state fighting one or more organized armed groups within the same country or with group/s based outside the country. In some countries it was organized non-state armed groups fighting each other within same country. Examples of post conflict include Iraq, Colombia, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, Central Africa Republic (CRA). This context may interfere with or disrupt humanitarian operations.

- iv. Terrorism and fundamentalism (particularly religious) from internal and external groups targeting state actors/ governments, country security forces (including law and order entities) and civilians, causing substantial displacements and or disruption of delivery of humanitarian and development assistance (e.g., Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Mozambique, Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, Yemen, Somalia). The affected communities have to be assisted wherever they are.
- v. Presence of localized armed groups pursuing localized interests (tribal/ community/ militias/ vigilantes/ youths). The groups intermittently disrupt or interfere with humanitarian and development activities if their interests, or demands are not fulfilled by governments, humanitarian organizations or others. Typically, such groups are found in conflict and fragile post conflict countries with weak law and order systems and or experiencing general insecurity. ( e.g., Yemen, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Somalia, CRA, Colombia, Libya).
- vi. Presence of armed combatants or ex-combatants in displaced persons camps (e.g., refugee or internally displaced persons (IDP) camps) and in local communities. The groups or individuals could be the de facto authorities in their localities. In some contexts, they create parallel administrative structures, disrupt effective civilian administration of the camps, and interfere with humanitarian operations. This is typically found in refugee and IDP situations.
- vii. High crime levels with significant impact. For example, armed robberies, theft, kidnapping and abduction, vehicle hijacking, human trafficking, gender-based violence e.g., rape, cybercrime and extortion affecting local communities, displaced persons (refugees and IDPs) and other aid beneficiaries, humanitarian personnel and organizations. Organized and transnational criminal groups also pose significant threats to humanitarian operations in some contexts.
- viii. Civil unrest (demonstrations/protests/strikes) by citizens, displaced persons (refugees and IDPs), and host communities causing intermittent disruption of humanitarian services for a variety of reasons including non-fulfillment of certain expectations.

The diverse and complex security challenges faced in insecure humanitarian operational environments must be delicately navigated if humanitarian aid programs are to be implemented safely to communities in need. States have the primary responsibility to provide security to everyone in their territories. Yet, as noted by Makova [5], the reality on the ground in some humanitarian contexts is that some states often fail to fulfill their security obligations to citizens, aid beneficiaries and humanitarian operations. More so to some of the most vulnerable groups such as refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) who need greater protection. This compels humanitarian organizations to complement governments security efforts to the extent possible. This is done by developing and implementing security risk management strategies that contribute to the safety and security of humanitarian operations, humanitarian staff and aid beneficiaries, particularly in high-risk environments.

### **3. 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the Changing Security Dynamics in Humanitarian Operations**

Aid work has always involved elements of risk everywhere. The extent differs from context to context and humanitarian organizations are not affected in the same way. The threats and risks in the humanitarian environment, particularly high risk, are broad and diverse. Some of the direct and indirect security threats seen in humanitarian high risk contexts include bombing, missile and artillery attacks, improvised explosive device attacks, ambush, crossfire, shooting, kidnapping/ abduction, arbitrary detention and intimidation [6, 10]. Others are gender-based violence (e.g., rape), sexual exploitation and abuse, human trafficking, extortion, armed robberies, cybercrime, thefts and road traffic accidents. [6, 10]. The security risks include death, injury, and health related risks, for example, illness, stress, and psychological and mental problems [6,10].

Security threats and risks in humanitarian operational environments significantly evolved on turn of the millennium particularly in high-risk environments such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, South Sudan, Sudan, Iraq and Yemen [11, 12]. This was on the background of increase in humanitarian crises, significant rise in aid

organizations and personnel to respond to the crises and increased targeted and collateral violence against aid workers. Corollary to this, humanitarian organizations progressively institutionalized and professionalized security management in order to viably operate in insecure environments. This led to the development and implementation of systematic humanitarian security risk management strategies to address inherent security risks in the operating environment.

Humanitarian operations have relied and continue to rely on security guarantees provided by governments as the primary means of protection as prescribed in international humanitarian law and reaffirmed in several UN resolutions [13]. It becomes complicated when governments are conflict parties and or have no or little capacity to uphold security guarantees in their territories. In addition, humanitarian organizations also relied on supposedly “good intentions” of humanitarian work, respect of international humanitarian law and principles, and organization mandates which were seen as good enough to shield them from untoward action [14]. This is particularly so, post second world war up to the end of 1990s. Before then, security management in humanitarian organizations was not institutionalized, structured, coordinated, and professionalized [6]. According to Kadwo [15], “the post second world war period presented its security challenges but was broadly permissive of a *laissez-faire* security management system, emphasizing host nation security guarantees” (p.27). The reliance on security assurances from host governments and “good intentions” of humanitarian work generally worked well in different contexts of humanitarian operations, post second world war up to 1990s [6]. For the UN, the UN flag was seen as good enough for the protection of the UN personnel and assets and to be identified as a neutral, impartial, and benevolent actor in world affairs [16]. Targeted attacks and other malicious acts against the UN were then generally perceived as isolated events with no significant implications on humanitarian and development operations of the UN [16].

The turn of the millennium witnessed significant incidents of insecurity in humanitarian operational environments in some contexts, particularly high risk. The environment was confronted with increasing incidents of targeted and collateral attacks against humanitarian operations and aid workers, significantly disrupting humanitarian service delivery. The dependency on host government security guarantees, good intention of humanitarian assistance, respect of the UN flag, international humanitarian law and principles, in humanitarian work for safety and security considerably changed, particularly in insecure environments [6]. Significant increase in incidents of violence against aid workers were witnessed in countries such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, and Iraq [11, 12]. High profile incidents included the murder of six International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) staff in Chechnya in 1996 and the 2003 bombing of UN headquarters in Baghdad. The Baghdad bombing killed 22 people including the UN Secretary General’s Special Representative for Iraq and wounded more than 160 others [17]. The UN subsequently passed Security Council Resolution 1502, which declared deliberate attacks against humanitarian organizations or peacekeepers, a war crime [18]. Other high profile incidents include the August 2006 murder of 17 Action Against Hunger aid workers in Sri Lanka and the December 2007 twine suicide bombing of UN offices in Algiers which killed 17 humanitarian and development workers [19, 20, 21].

The incidents and many others in different humanitarian operations were testimony of the changed security dynamics in humanitarian operating environments with some contexts being particularly more dangerous. Targeted and collateral attacks against aid workers became a matter of serious security concern for everyone. Concerned were hosting governments, humanitarian organizations, aid workers, donors and beneficiary communities among other many interlocutors. Insecurity had negative impact on aid delivery with both humanitarian access and space being compromised. Since the turn of the millennium, the volatility in some humanitarian operational contexts significantly contributed to the advancement of humanitarian security risk management discourse to address the risks.

To put into perspective, statistics of major attacks on aid workers presented in Table 1 and Table 2 below for the period 2001 to 2022 are instructive [3]. The statistics show that the total number of incidents, aid worker victims, aid workers killed, aid workers injured, aid workers kidnapped, maintained an upward trajectory since 2001 in relative and absolute terms. Majority of the incidents happened in a few high risk contexts. From 1997 to 2022 the high incident contexts in descending order are Afghanistan, South Sudan, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, Democratic

Republic of Congo, Central Africa Republic, Pakistan, Mali and Yemen [3]. Some of the high risk contexts also had the largest concentration of aid workers at a given time. There appeared to be a correlation between rising attacks and increased humanitarian personnel presence [3].

The following Table 1 gives a snapshot of the summary statistics of major attacks on aid workers for the period 2001 to 2010.

**Table 1 Major attacks on aid workers: Summary statistics, 2001-2010**

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Number of Incidents	29	46	63	64	74	107	124	165	155	131
Total aid worker victims	90	85	143	127	172	240	221	278	295	251
Total Killed	27	38	87	56	53	88	91	127	108	73
Total Injured	20	23	49	46	96	87	87	91	94	85
Total Kidnapped	43	24	7	25	23	65	43	60	93	93
International victims	28	17	26	26	14	26	35	51	74	41
National victims	62	68	117	101	158	214	186	227	221	210
UN Staff	28	18	31	11	27	61	39	65	103	44
International NGO staff	48	49	69	71	108	111	133	158	128	151
National NGO staff	0	5	15	32	27	37	27	43	31	45
Other staff (Independent organizations)	14	12	28	12	8	17	12	7	33	11

Source: Aid Worker Security Database

Table 1 shows that since the turn of the millennium the number of incidents, aid workers victims, aid workers killed, aid workers injured, and aid workers kidnapped, increased. The statistics for the period 2001 to 2010 show a general increase in the trajectory of incidents of attacks against aid workers. Between the years, the numbers fluctuated, but maintaining an upward trend since 2001. The total security incidents against aid workers rose from 29 in 2001 to 131 in 2010. In between in 2008 and 2009, 165 and 155 were recorded, respectively. The ten year average (2001-2010) was 95.8. For the years 2006 to 2010 the total number of incidents were above the ten year average of 95.8. Total aid worker victims were 90 in 2001 and 251 in 2010 with a ten year average of 190.2. The number of those killed were 27 in 2001 and 73 in 2010. The ten year average death was 74.8. For the years 2003 and 2006 to 2009 the total numbers killed were above the ten year average. The statistics reflect both relative and absolute increase in the numbers of aid workers victims, aid workers killed, aid workers injured, and aid workers kidnapped. The question is do the numbers really reflect dangerous humanitarian working environment? This paper takes the position that one life lost is one too many. There is nothing like acceptable casualties in humanitarian work.

Table 2 gives a snapshot of the summary statistics of major attacks on aid workers from 2011 to 2022.

**Table 2 Major attacks on aid workers: Summary statistics, 2010-2022**

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2

<b>Number of Incidents</b>	152	170	265	193	150	164	160	229	276	283	268	235
<b>Total aid worker victims</b>	309	277	474	333	290	296	315	409	481	484	461	444
<b>Total Killed</b>	86	71	159	123	111	109	140	131	125	117	141	116
<b>Total Injured</b>	127	115	179	89	110	99	103	147	234	242	203	143
<b>Total Kidnapped</b>	96	91	136	121	69	88	72	131	122	125	117	185
<b>International victims</b>	29	49	60	33	30	43	28	29	27	25	23	23
<b>National victims</b>	280	228	414	300	260	253	287	380	454	459	438	421
<b>UN Staff</b>	92	48	115	64	44	71	48	70	39	58	55	76
<b>International NGO staff</b>	135	97	142	152	173	162	109	186	260	228	198	162
<b>National NGO staff</b>	67	92	145	71	39	40	84	128	154	168	187	185
<b>Other staff (Independent organizations)</b>	15	27	58	43	31	21	74	25	16	28	11	9

Source: Aid Worker Security Database

Table 2 shows that for the period 2011 to 2022 number of incidents, aid workers victims, aid workers injured, and aid workers kidnapped generally went up compared to the period 2001- 2010. Though there were fluctuations between the years the numbers did not go below the 2010 figures. The total number of incidents were 152 in 2011 rising to 235 in 2022. The ten year average (2011- 2020) was 204. If we compare averages for the periods 2001 – 2010 and 2011 -2020, it shows a more than 112% increase from the average of 95.8 (2001 – 2010) to 204(2011 -2020). Total aid worker victims were 309 in 2011 rising to 484 in 2020. The average aid worker victims for the ten year period 2011-2020 was 366.8 compared with 190.2 for the period 2001-2010, a 92.8% increase. Total aid workers killed were 86 in 2011 rising to 117 in 2020. The ten year average death (2011-2020) was 117.2 while for the period 2001-2010 it was 74.8, representing 56.6% increase. Comparing the averages for the two periods, 2001 to 2010 and 2011 to 2020, the statistics reflect absolute percentage increase in the numbers of aid workers victims, aid workers killed, aid workers injured, and aid workers kidnapped, for the latter period. Though there were fluctuations in numbers between some of the years, it is important to emphasize the fact that there is nothing like acceptable loss with human life in humanitarian operations. One life lost or one casualty is one too many. As such, the fluctuations in casualties between the years which are attributed to various factors do not take away the fact that casualties have grown in humanitarian work.

#### 4. The Reasons for the Increased Attacks

The underlying reasons for rising attacks on humanitarian aid workers since the turn of the millennium are complex, multifaceted and intertwined and varies from context to context. The reasons also evolved from context to context over time. The reasons apparent in first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, were not necessarily the same in the second decade, though there was some commonality in some contexts. As highlighted, majority of the incidents have happened in few high risk countries impacted by conflict and in fragile post conflict countries [3]. Some of the reasons identified in some studies and reports over time include:

1. Surge in humanitarian crises leading to significant increase in humanitarian personnel to deal with the crises. This exposed more humanitarian personnel to potential harm particularly in high risk contexts as direct and or collateral targets by diverse actors. The exact numbers of humanitarian aid workers in any given context have been acknowledged to be difficult to ascertain primarily because some humanitarian organizations are not

forthcoming with their staff numbers for diverse reasons [24, 35]. However, some available estimated statistics give a general direction of the numbers. The number of international non-governmental (INGO) aid workers were estimated to be 115,000 in 1997, 210,000 in 2008, and 450,000 in 2014 [35, 36]. In 2017 the estimated humanitarian field staff was estimated to be 570 000[33]. The total number of aid workers in emergency settings as of 2020 were estimated to be 632 000, rising 40% since 2013 and 90% were national staff [34]. For the UN, the civilian staff was 48497 as of 31 December 2001[37] growing to 82737 by 31 December 2009 [38]. The numbers further grew to 83 400 in 2012, 120 000 in 2021 [39, 40] and 125436 as of 31 December 2022 [41]. As of 2020, about 66 000 UN civilian staff were working in emergency situations [34]. The estimates reflect an increase of humanitarian personnel both in relative and absolute terms. The rise in humanitarian personnel scattered in different geographical locations implied their increased vulnerability to harm particularly in some high risk contexts depending on local security and political dynamics.

Humanitarian organizations have also increased since the turn of the millennium, The exact numbers are as difficult to ascertain just as the personnel numbers. However, some estimates are instructive. According to the global database of humanitarian organizations compiled by Humanitarian Outcomes, the estimated number of organizations providing humanitarian aid in the world, were 4894 in 2006, 4960 in 2008, 5075 in 2010, 5095 in 2014, 5127 in 2016, 5146 in 2020[42]. The above estimates show an increase of humanitarian organizations in relative and absolute terms. The increase in humanitarian organizations corresponded with increased personnel spread over wider geographical locations in areas of operation. This implied potential increase in exposure of the humanitarian staff to the diverse threats and risks in the environment.

2. Increase in conflict zones with more aid workers deployed to conflict zones. Some of the conflict zones were or are associated with increased aid worker attacks as direct or collateral targets. A study by Hoelscher *et al.* found out that aid workers were in more danger in conflict settings and the more violent the conflict the greater number of aid worker attacks [32]. According to Fast [36], then available qualitative evidence appeared to suggest that conflict dynamics played a significant role in how and where aid workers were targeted. Since the turn of the millennium, high risk environments which are mostly conflict and fragile post conflict affected environments recorded majority incidents of aid worker attacks [3]. The statistics confirmed the correlation between conflict and fragile post conflict contexts, with increased incidents of attacks against aid workers. Major conflict zones since the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some of which are still ongoing, causing significant humanitarian crises include, Afghanistan 2001- 2021, Iraq 2003 -2011, Sudan- Darfur 2003 to 2020, Yemen intermittent conflict since 2004, current conflict 2015 to date, Central Africa Republic, 2004 to 2007 and 2012 - 2017 and Somalia current conflict 2006 to date. Other conflicts are Chad- 2005- 2010, Syria 2011 to date, Libya 2011 to date, Sudan- South Kordofan and Blue Nile states- 2011 to date, SAHEL region (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad) 2011 to date, South Sudan 2013 and 2016, Myanmar 2016 to date. The latest conflict zones are Ukraine – February 2022, Gaza in Palestine October 2023. In some countries though conflict formally ended, the countries remain fragile, post conflict. For example, Iraq, South Sudan, Sudan, CAR. More than 630,000 humanitarian staff were estimated to be working in countries with humanitarian crises in 2020 and over 90% of these staff were national staff (34). The rise in numbers of humanitarian personnel working in conflict and fragile post conflict environments potentially exposed the personnel to potential harm from different actors with diverse political, ideological, economic and other agendas.

3. Significant presence of non- state armed groups in conflict and fragile post conflict zones. The presence of non- state armed groups in humanitarian operational environments did not necessarily constitute a threat to humanitarian operations. However, in some contexts such as Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan, the non- state armed groups were hostile to humanitarian action for diverse reasons. The reasons included allegations that some humanitarian organizations and their staff were Western countries spies, collaborators and profited from the humanitarian assistance business [43,44]. The non- state armed groups deliberately targeted aid workers and humanitarian operations in general. Some of the armed non-state actor groups (fundamentalists, terrorists, militants, insurgents, and rebel groups) questioned the independence and neutrality of the humanitarian and development action [11, 15, 45, 46,]. The non-state armed actors were,

and some still remain significant players in some conflicts. They are not only in control of territories, but they even carry out quasi-state functions in those territories and have the power to block or facilitate humanitarian operations. For example, in 2011 and 2012, Al Shabab barred 19 international aid organizations, including UN agencies and some major INGOs, from South Central Somalia and threatened to harm anyone who dared not complying with the order (24, 25, 43, 44). Bizarrely Al Shabab demanded payments from some aid organizations to access famine-affected areas under its control. [24, 25]. In 2013 and 2014 Islamic State in Syria threatened and expelled international aid organizations from areas under their control [24, 25]. Most International NGOs left transferring program activities to be managed by national staff or national partner organizations [24,25].

The non- state armed groups in conflict zones and fragile post conflict zones with significant presence and able to determine what happens in territories under their control include the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIS) and associates in Iraq and Syria. Al Qaeda and affiliates in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen Pakistan, Mali, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Niger, Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria and Taliban in Afghanistan before they took power in August 2021. Some of the armed groups did not (still some do not) view humanitarian work as being neutral and impartial and as such considered humanitarian organizations as “legitimate targets” [25, 45, 46]. The Taliban accepted some humanitarian organizations to work in sectors palatable to its political and religious ideology since taking power in August 2021. In fragile post conflict countries like Iraq, Central Africa Republic, South Sudan and Sudan, the national governments struggled and continue so, to offer protection to citizens and humanitarian organizations. Many localized non- state armed groups are scattered throughout the countries, and some have disrupted humanitarian operations. The groups generally reflect the weak national capacities and governance systems to deal with internal insecurity exposing humanitarian workers to targeted and non-targeted attacks. South Sudan remains one of the most dangerous countries for aid workers in the world despite having one of the largest peacekeeping missions in the world [3]. The study by Hoelscher *et al* appeared to confirm that states with functioning governance systems had lower risks and as such witnessed fewer aid worker attacks [32].

4. Rise in fundamentalism particularly religious, extremism and terrorism in diverse forms to achieve political, religious and other aims. Fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism have always been there, but the turn of the millennium saw more groups emerging, others metamorphosize and or expanding. Examples of such groups include Boko Haram , Islamic state (ISIS), Al Shabab, Al Qaeda and affiliates in several countries and other localized radical groups. Some ideologies of the fundamentalist and extremist groups did not and still do not respect some human rights, international humanitarian law and humanitarian action. In addition, some of these fundamentalist and extremist actors claimed that international aid was a proxy to western politics and dominance and or military agendas [24, 25]. Some of the groups did not tolerate presence of humanitarian organizations and deliberately targeted humanitarian operations and personnel. Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria, Islamic state (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria, Al Shabab in Somalia, Al Qaeda and affiliates in several countries including Afghanistan, Pakistan and SAHEL region (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria) have targeted humanitarian and peacekeeping operations with many casualties [6,10,45,46].

5. Humanitarian efforts being associated with some donor occupying states and their military blurring the lines between military and civilian actors compromising humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality or independence [47, 48]. Links between aid actors and donor governments including ties of some states with occupying forces and or militaries was seen as a motivating factor to attack humanitarian operations and personnel [32]. It was argued that such links led to politicization of humanitarian aid and loss of neutrality, impartiality and independence by humanitarian organizations [49]. Abiew [50] argued that “the integration of politics and humanitarian action was major reason behind the attack on humanitarian aid workers and their inability to deliver aid to the neediest” p.208. For example, USA policies in Iraq and Afghanistan after its invasion of the two countries in 2001 and 2003 respectively was seen as case in point. The USA policies in Iraq and Afghanistan appeared to assert that the U.S. government and NGOs shared the same values and had to combine efforts in humanitarian assistance [49, 51]. In Iraq, NGOs were seen as of strategic value to the USA clearly associating humanitarian assistance with the political objectives of the USA [51]. In Afghanistan, then US



Secretary of State, Colin Powell, identified international NGOs in Afghanistan as ‘force multipliers’ in the war on terror clearly politicizing their role, creating doubts about their impartiality, neutrality and independence [19]. This stance particularly endangered humanitarian organizations which were not associated with American intervention and had significant implications on humanitarian aid delivery and its perception [51]. Further, embedding humanitarian operations with military actors and or militarization of aid as in Iraq and Afghanistan, increased the exposure of aid workers to frontline fighting, targeted attacks or crossfire [47, 52].

6. Negative perception of the United Nations in some contexts leading to the targeting of UN personnel and UN peacekeeping contingents. Despite the prominent humanitarian role of UN humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR, World Food Programme (WFP), World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and others, the UN was and has sometimes been perceived as a political actor compromising its impartiality, independence, neutrality, [10, 15, 23]. UN civilian staff were targeted in Iraq 2003, Algiers in 2006 and many other places thereafter with many casualties [17,21]. Further, UN peacekeeping operations have been particularly viewed negatively in some contexts by political actors’ state and non- state. This has seen some politically motivated direct attacks against UN civilian staff and peacekeeping forces in some contexts as they are not seen as neutral, impartial and independent actors. A study by Hoelscher *et al* [32] found out the presence of peacekeeping forces increased the risks to aid workers and the risks increased as the peacekeeping got larger. For example, UN peacekeeping missions in Central African Republic (MINUSCA), Mali (MINUSMA), the DRC (MONUSCO), Sudan -Darfur (UNAMID), South Sudan- (UNMISS) and Afghanistan (UNAMA) have had many casualties [7, 53]. In December 2017, 15 peacekeepers were killed in DRC in a single incident [54]. According to the statistics from United Nations peacekeeping department, between 2001 and September 2023, an estimated 2629 peacekeeping forces and associated civilian component staff were killed in peacekeeping operations [55]. The study by Hoelscher *et al.* [32] found out that traditional UN peacekeeping operations with mandates such as observing peace agreements, saw more attacks on aid workers.

7. Sanctions and threats of sanctions and labeling of some non-state armed groups (e.g., Al Shabab in Somalia) as terrorists made some operational contexts difficult for humanitarian staff [ 24,25, 48]. State actors and non- state armed actors sanctioned or threatened with sanctions routinely targeted humanitarian organizations assets. For example, sanctions imposed by UN against Sudan made the operational environment very difficult [10]. Humanitarian assets were targeted including frequent vehicle hijacking in areas controlled by rebel groups and by the government of Sudan [56]. In December 2008, then Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, John Holmes, told the Security Council that 261 vehicles had been hijacked and 172 compounds broken into in Darfur that year [56]. More serious, in 2009 13 International NGOs were expelled from Darfur-Sudan [10]. The humanitarian NGOs were labelled as being part and parcel of the “conspiracy” against Sudan government and its people [10]. In Somalia, some major donors did not approve of aid distribution to areas occupied by Al- Shabab for political reasons such as the so called global war on terror [48]. Al-Shabaab had been listed as a foreign terrorist organization by several countries after proclaiming allegiance to Al-Qaeda in February 2008 [48]. This restrained some humanitarian organizations from accessing and delivering humanitarian aid to areas controlled by Al- Shabaab designated as terrorist organizations at the instigation of donors [48]. Such links between humanitarian organizations and donor governments was a source of resentment endangering international NGOs aid workers. In 2011 and 2012, Al Shabab barred 19 international aid organizations, including UN agencies and some major INGOs, from South Central Somalia. Among the reasons were that, the aid organizations were associated with Western aid which was viewed as not being politically neutral [24, 25].

8. Criminal motivation. Conflict areas are permissive grounds for organized criminal syndicates, some with transnational tentacles, and violent extremist groups. Humanitarian operations are often caught in this. The most serious crimes in humanitarian operations with significant impact include murder, kidnapping/abduction, human trafficking, extortion, armed robberies, gender-based violence (e.g., rape), sexual exploitation and abuse. Kidnapping, which has profound psychological and physical effects on victims, remains one of the greatest threats in humanitarian work. A perusal of the kidnapping statistics from Aid Worker Security Database shows that the number of kidnappings more than doubled from 43 in 2001 to 93 in 2010 rising to 136 in 2013 and 185

in 2022[3]. Transnational criminals and violent extremist groups often conduct kidnappings, extortions and human trafficking for financial gain. Humanitarian staff and assets are seen as soft targets. Some non- state armed groups such as rebels, militias, religious extremists and those involved in acts of terrorism sometimes work with organized criminals to conduct kidnappings. Kidnappings help to achieve, economic, political and visibility goals of the groups [22]. In Afghanistan kidnappings were carried for both ransom and to exert pressure on Western governments while in South Sudan non-state armed groups carried abductions to control or divert aid [57]). In Mali, kidnappings were conducted by non-state armed groups displeased with humanitarian organizations programming or trying to exert control [58].

There are many other reasons for attacks on aid workers as the humanitarian environment has diverse actors with divergent motivations, particularly in conflict and post conflict contexts. The reasons for attacks vary from context to context and from one actor to another actor. What has been substantiated through various studies is that conflicts increase risks for humanitarian staff. Who are the main perpetrators of violence against aid workers is not for this paper. However, ordinarily, state actors are easy to account for, but the many independent non-state actors in some humanitarian contexts, some with blurred or no command and control structures, are difficult to account for. Some studies and reports suggested that armed non- state actors were generally the main perpetrators of attacks in some humanitarian operations particularly in conflict and post conflict environments. For example, according to the UN Secretary General report, A/77/362/21 of September 2022, covering incidents which affected the UN from 2017 to June 2022, humanitarian personnel were targeted mainly by non-state armed groups, violent extremists, and criminals.

### 5. The Consequences of Insecurity on Humanitarian Operations

There are several consequences or effects of insecurity on humanitarian operations. They vary from context to context and time to time, particularly in insecure environments where the security dynamics and actors are sometimes very fluid. Even within the same context the effects may vary from geographical area to geographical area. However, there are some consequences which are homogenous particularly in high risk environments. Some of the consequences noted in some studies and reports include:

*Increasing number of aid worker casualties.* The statistics from the Aid Worker data base for the period 2001 to 2022 quoted in section 3 are instructive. It is worth emphasizing that majority incidents were in a few highly insecure countries, such as Afghanistan, Syria, South Sudan, Sudan, Iraq, DRC [3]. The following Table 3 gives summary of major attacks for some selected years.

**Table 3 Major attacks on aid workers: Summary statistics**

Year	2001	2004	2008	2013	2016	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of Incidents	29	64	165	265	164	276	283	268	235
Total aid worker victims	90	127	278	474	296	481	484	461	444
Total Killed	27	56	127	159	109	125	117	141	116
Total Injured	20	46	91	179	99	234	242	203	143
Total Kidnapped	43	25	60	136	88	122	125	117	185

Source: Aid Worker Security Database

Table 3 shows that major attacks on aid workers have been rising since 2001. This number of incidents were 29 in 2001 rising to 265 in 2013, 283 in 2020, 268 in 2021 and 235 in 2022. Total aid worker victims were 90 in 2001, rising to 474 in 2013 ,484 in 2020, 461 in 2021 and 441 in 2022. The total aid workers killed went up from 27 in 2001, to a high of 159 in 2013, 141 in 2021 and 116 in 2022. 2013 was particularly bad for all categories, driven by conflicts and deteriorating governance issues in Syria, South Sudan, Sudan Afghanistan and Pakistan [28]. The five countries accounted for three quarters of the attacks on aid workers in 2013 [28]. The statistics confirm that

the humanitarian operational environment has casualties. The statistics also suggest the humanitarian operational environment progressively became more dangerous than it was at the beginning of the millennium. The casualties kept rising from 2001. The incident trends and patterns differed from context to context. While there are no acceptable casualties in humanitarian work, the reality in humanitarian field environments is that this is inevitable. As such, security risk management strategies adapted by humanitarian organizations must aim to lower security risks to minimize casualties.

*Humanitarian coverage becomes disrupted and or diminished.* The provision of humanitarian aid in insecure environments is disrupted and or diminished as access to communities in need may be difficult leaving them without essential humanitarian assistance. Regular and irregular fighting, presence of unexploded ordnance and other explosive remnants of war and mining of roads make it impossible to access communities in need. The humanitarian space (ability to conduct operations according to international humanitarian law and principles) also shrinks. A study by Stoddard *et al-* *The Effects of Insecurity on Humanitarian Coverage* conducted in some of the world's most insecure operational settings of Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria substantiated this assertion [24]. The study found out that:

- I. Humanitarian organizations responded in smaller numbers to insecure contexts, compared to more stable contexts,
- II. Insecurity dictated where aid agencies operated within high-risk countries, resulting in unequal coverage of needs.
- III. Insecurity limited technical complexity and targeting of aid.
- IV. Affected populations surveys confirmed under-covered geographical areas and needs.
- V. Policies of some donor governments were counter-productive to getting aid to insecure areas, resulting in de facto partiality in humanitarian coverage.
- VI. Aid organizations had incentives to appear more present than they actually were, which obscured the reality that widespread needs were going unmet.

The constraints to aid delivery due to disrupted and or diminished humanitarian coverage are significant challenges in some insecure environments. Contemporary security risk management strategies have progressively addressed some such challenges and other security risks allowing aid workers to stay and deliver in insecure environments. In this regard, embracing security risk management strategies suitable to specific contexts is vital to lower security risks to levels that allow safe and secure humanitarian operations.

*Insecurity prevents humanitarian aid from being accessed by the neediest communities.* Stoddard *et al.*, in a research paper *Out of Reach: How Insecurity Prevents Humanitarian Aid from Accessing the Neediest* [25] found out that humanitarian operations were “highly determined by security conditions, more than any other factor and was the strongest determinant of aid presence leading to unequal coverage” (p.1). Insecurity made it difficult to reach people in need of humanitarian assistance limiting humanitarian organizations from providing it and beneficiaries accessing it [25]. The study also found out that insecure countries particularly high risk environments attracted smaller pool of humanitarian responders as humanitarian organizations were generally reluctant to operate in violent, conflict-driven emergencies, even if funding was available [25]. The development and implementation of modern security risk management strategies has helped to deal with some of the security challenges faced in high risk environments. There is now significant focus on security strategies which aim at lowering security risks to acceptable levels, allowing humanitarian organizations to deliver humanitarian assistance even in high risk environments. Contemporary security risk management has enabled humanitarian organizations to carry out their mandates while at the same time managing staff security risks [10].

*Principled humanitarian action is compromised.* Principled humanitarian action includes practical application of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, transparency, accountability, adherence to standards and attention to quality and quantity of aid [11, 45]. Unprincipled humanitarian action leads to partial and uneven distribution of humanitarian aid. Studies by Stoddard *et al.* noted that in countries such as Afghanistan, Somalia

and Syria, the delivery of humanitarian aid was “uneven relative to need and appeared politically skewed in favor of areas under control of Western-supported conflict parties” [24]. For example, areas under the control of AL- Shabab in Somalia and Taliban in Afghanistan were deliberately excluded from some humanitarian assistance programs. This compromised the principles humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence [24]. Quality and quantity of aid was also affected [11, 24, 45, 59].

*Infrastructure damage, destruction and obstruction* compromises access and delivery of humanitarian assistance. Conflict leads to damage, destruction, and or obstruction of roads, highways, bridges and airports by both state and non-state armed groups for political and strategic control [60]. The infrastructures are critical for humanitarian assistance delivery and are core to access. Infrastructure damage impedes delivery of humanitarian assistance, leaving vulnerable communities without essential resources and lacking protection. Further, insecurity also prevents aid beneficiaries and other communities from accessing other critical infrastructure such as schools and health centers causing among others physical and psychological trauma [60]. In Yemen, the war has caused significant damage to infrastructure such as seaports, airports, roads and bridges. These have been damaged or destroyed by shelling, air strikes, landmines, and improvised explosive devices [61]. Citizens movement and humanitarian assistance delivery is severely curtailed.

*Tendency to take avoidance risk management strategies:* Avoidance means either not to engage or withdraw from a specific geography due to presence of higher risk [62, 63]. Humanitarian Practice Network [p.50] refers to avoidance as removing a whole organization from the threat, either temporarily or for good [46]. Remote management and risk transfer are part of the avoidance strategy [11, 23,46, 64]. Stoddard *et al.* [25] asserted that “humanitarian coverage in Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria, all war zones then, was lower than it outwardly appeared. Aid organizations tended to remain in the country (even after suffering attacks) but reduced and contracted their field presence, adopting new, often suboptimal, means of programming” (p.1). It has been argued that avoidance impacts negatively on quality and effectiveness of humanitarian intervention with limited accountability [23, 62,65]. In some contexts, the avoidance strategy encourages the tendency to avoid insecure areas more easily even if there is great need [23, 62, 64, 65].

*Human rights violations as a consequence of conflict.* Armed conflict often leads and exposes communities to widespread human rights violations and other inhuman degrading treatment. Such violations are committed by both state and non-state actors. The human rights violations include murder, extrajudicial killings, torture and ill-treatment, disappearances, arbitrary detention, gender-based violence (e.g., rape), sexual exploitation and abuse, human trafficking, kidnapping, freedom of opinion, assembly and movement curtailment. Women are particularly prone to gender-based violence while youths are vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups. In Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), some non-state actor armed groups were accused of wantonly attacking civilians in eastern DRC despite presence of UN forces and troops from the East African Community such as Kenya and Burundi [66]. DRC government forces were accused in some instances of conniving with some armed groups sympathetic to the government to attack communities perceived to be sympathetic to rebel groups [66]. In Syria, both state actors and the plethora of non- state armed groups active in the country have been accused of gross human rights violations with impunity [66].

## **6. Adapting to the Reality of Insecurity in Humanitarian Operations**

The surging violence against aid workers and humanitarian work in general, since the turn of the millennium, meant significant action had to be taken to address insecurity in humanitarian operational environments. In order to significantly operate in insecure environments and better protect humanitarian staff and aid beneficiaries, humanitarian organizations including the UN, had to adapt to the realities of the insecure environment. This allowed humanitarian organizations to meaningfully operate in insecure environments, carrying out their mandates to meet their stated objectives while managing security risks [10]. Given the surge in humanitarian crises, the magnitude of humanitarian needs and the consequences of failing to meet them, humanitarian organizations had responsibilities and accountabilities to develop and implement security management frameworks that realistically addressed security threats and risks in their operating environment. This was a *fait accompli*.

Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the UN, humanitarian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) and other independent humanitarian organizations (e.g., ICRC) significantly invested in security management in order to operate in highly insecure environments. Security risks had to be systematically managed for humanitarian assistance to be delivered safely to communities in need. This meant developing security management frameworks and implementing security risk management strategies suitable to the operating contexts. The first steps were to institutionalize and professionalize security management. This process was gradual as it depended on diverse internal and external factors. In particular, the resources to institutionalize and professionalize security management varied from organization to organization.

Typically, over time, humanitarian organizations invested in security risk management strategies which aimed lowering security risks to enable aid workers to operate in insecure environments. Developed and implemented were new and additional security guidelines, security plans, policies, procedures, security risk assessments and analysis, security incidents databases and recruitment of dedicated security staff [45, 67]. In addition, coordination of security approaches, formation of security organizations dedicated to humanitarian organizations (e.g., International NGO Safety Organization (INSO), Global Interagency Security Forum), among other many initiatives [45, 67]. Importantly, some major donors supported the initiative to enhance the safety and security of humanitarian operations and staff [45, 67]. The UN system also significantly invested in security management with the promulgation of the security risk management (SRM) approach. The SRM process was launched in 2004 as a “system-wide managerial tool to analyze and manage safety and security risks to United Nations personnel, assets and operations” [68, p.52].

The surge in violence against aid workers and humanitarian work in general also progressed the academic discourse on humanitarian security management. According to Beerli [69], the humanitarian security management framework was “formally codified in 2000 as a distinct form of expertise that differs from other methods of protecting personnel and assets” (p. 72). Humanitarian security management emerged as a “technocratic-managerial approach to “insecurity” and a professional practice which touched not only on the organization of humanitarian operations but equally on the daily lives of field staff (p.72). The origin of humanitarian security management was traced to the evolving trends of systematic analysis, performance of risk analysis, systematization of bureaucratic tools and procedures designed to manage insecurity, contingency planning, professionalization of security staff and security planning processes to predict and eliminate “unjustified risks” [46, 69,70].

There is a wealth of studies and reports on humanitarian security management in complex environments since the turn of the millennium. One of the pioneer compilations on security management strategies in humanitarian operations is the *Operational Security Management in Violent Environments: A Field Manual for Aid Agencies* published in 2000 [71]. This is commonly referred to as Good Practice Review Number Eight (GPR 8 ). The GPR 8 was revised in 2010 [ 46]. According to Beerli and Wiseman [70], conceptualized for the first time in GPR 8 (2000) are three ideal security strategies for humanitarian organizations. The strategies are *Acceptance*, *Protection* and *Deterrence* and are commonly referred to as the security triangle [46, 71]. These strategies are widely applied by humanitarian organizations particularly in high risk environments. They have evolved over time to consider the complex and rapidly changing humanitarian environments with diverse threats, which vary from context to context, and from time to time. Other strategies such as *Avoidance and Risk transfer* later emerged in some humanitarian contexts [6, 10]. The UN system developed the UN Security Risk Management (SRM) approach to manage security risks in 2004 [72]. Significantly, acceptance, protection and deterrence strategies are incorporated and compatible with the UN SRM approach and are widely used by UN agencies particularly in high-risk environments [15, 72].

Some other notable studies and reports are by Egeland *et al.*, [11], Jackson and Zyck [45], both commissioned by UN OCHA, Kadwo [15] and Stoddard *et al.*, [19, 22, 23, 24, 25]. ALNAP reports on *The State of the Humanitarian System* [33, 34,35]. Humanitarian Outcomes, Aid Worker Security reports [26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31]. UN Secretary General reports on Safety and Security of Humanitarian Personnel and Protection of United Nations personnel among many others. Most of the studies and reports acknowledged that the humanitarian environment became more insecure in 21<sup>st</sup> century. The studies and reports also acknowledged the importance

of systematic security risk management in humanitarian operations in order to meaningfully operate in insecure environments.

## 7. Security Management in Insecure Humanitarian Environments

Adapting to the insecure operating environment meant security risks had to be lowered or reduced to acceptable levels. Institutionalizing and systematizing security management by humanitarian organizations became an imperative. To achieve this, humanitarian organizations had to first define their philosophical approach to security management. That is, their security strategy. Security strategy “is the overarching philosophy that explains and justifies the application of approaches, and use of resources that frame organisational security management” [11, p. xv]. The security strategy defined the overall strategic organizational security management posture. It was particularly important for humanitarian organizations to have a security strategy as both conceptual and operational basis for security management [10]. Defining security strategy is a strategic organizational decision. This led to the development and implementation of security risk management strategies which addressed the security risks in the operational environment.

The security risk management strategies widely implemented since the turn of the millennium include the classical security triangle of Acceptance, Protection and Deterrence conceptualized for the first time in GPR 8 (2000). They combine to form an overall security strategy. The strategies remain relevant today though their application has evolved over time to consider current security dynamics and the different contexts. The UN SRM approach promulgated in 2004 remains the primary UN security risk management strategy. However, aspects of acceptance, protection, deterrence, are extensively applied by UN agencies and are widely integrated and compatible with the UN SRM approach. Below is the summary of security strategies commonly applied in insecure environments since the turn of the millennium.

### 7.1 Acceptance strategies

Acceptance strategy has traditionally been the cornerstone of humanitarian security risk management approach [2]. Bickely [73] defines the acceptance approach as “practices to build a safe operating environment through consent, approval and cooperation from individuals, communities and local authorities”(p.72). Acceptance aims at removing or reducing the motivation to target and attack aid workers and humanitarian operations [10]. Acceptance is premised on humanitarian work and staff being accepted by and within the communities they work based on understanding, assumptions, or belief that local communities and authorities will or are willing to cooperate and consent to the humanitarian work in their locality [6]. As such, there is no *prima facie* desire to harm humanitarian work and staff.

Acceptance security risk management strategies include developing, engaging in and building sustainable relationships with the diverse actors in a particular geographical location, environment or context [6, 10]. This leads to acceptance by the local actors enabling humanitarian activities to proceed safely. The actors could be state, non-state including non-state armed actors, conflict parties, local communities, influential groups, or individuals (e.g., religious leaders and traditional leaders) and aid beneficiaries. Other acceptance security risk management strategies include implementing participatory programming approaches, accessibility, visibility and presence in area of operation, community engagements and accountability to beneficiary communities [6, 10]. Regular community feedback forums, attending to beneficiary community complaints, progressive employment opportunities for locals including promotion of diversity, inclusion and equity, addressing the quantity and quality of aid and effective communication are also acceptance security risk management strategies [6, 10].

UN agencies, humanitarian NGOs, and other independent humanitarian organizations (e.g., ICRC) actively implement acceptance risk management strategies in their operations. However, the scope differs from organization to organization according to the mandate, funding, size, complexity of operational area and risk

toleration, among other considerations. The acceptance approach has been found to be inadequate in some humanitarian contexts necessitating a mix with other approaches to suit the environment. Some conflict and post conflict environments and contexts affected by terrorism and fundamentalism may require more than acceptance to operate safely. Acceptance risk management strategies also require substantial effort, commitment, and staff time to build. Acceptance should never be assumed and goes beyond just aid delivery as community relations are complex and sometimes fluid [65]. Further, it is important to consider contextual factors that might affect acceptance. The contemporary focus of acceptance is on principled humanitarian action which includes practical application of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence [10,11,45]. This includes transparency, accountability, and adherence to standards. It is also critical to pay attention to quality and quantity of aid, and to address complaints. [10,11,45]. Wholistic and systematic approaches to acceptance has become critical. As observed by Makova [6]

*Building relationships with all stakeholders, implementing participatory programming approaches, accessibility and regular community feedback forums, progressive employment opportunities for locals including promotion of diversity and accountability to beneficiary communities among other acceptance approaches, should not be treated in isolation or as independent activities. They must be approached as components of an overarching acceptance strategy. Substantial effort, commitment, and staff time have to be invested in this [p.34].*

### 7.2 Protection Security Risk Management Strategies

Protection strategy aims at reducing exposure or vulnerability to current and conceivable threats [2, 46]. A protection strategy is aimed at hardening the target and has no concern to the threat itself, and therefore, it is effective to mitigate impacts of targeted attacks and to prevent opportunistic crimes [11, 46]. Security risk management strategies under the protection strategy include building facilities for physical security protection, use of armored vehicles, building bunkers/safe rooms, security training, among others [6, 10,11,45]. Some of these only apply in high risk environments, for example, use of armored vehicles, bunkers/safe rooms, and blast resistant devices/tools. Humanitarian organizations including UN agencies widely use protection risk management strategies in their operations in different environments, making substantial investments in physical security [6, 10]. Examples include use of security guards (armed or unarmed), reinforced walls and fencing, closed circuit television (CCTV), blast resistant devices, lighting, emergency alert and response systems. The aim is to lower the impact if an incident occurs. Protection approaches are often exemplified in environments with armed conflict, high rates of crime and terrorism [10]. The strategy is to mitigate against attacks and intrusions.

Protection risk management strategies application is sometimes affected by the context and humanitarian organizations need to critically analyze the contextual dynamics. Protection strategies also carry with them substantial costs and some humanitarian organizations with limited funding, find it difficult to implement them. The practical realities in humanitarian field environments, is that protection be complemented by other strategies, for example, acceptance, deterrence, and other security approaches.

### 7.3 Deterrence Security Risk Management Strategies

Deterrence strategy aims to deter a threat with a counter-threat. It ranges from legal, economic, security, to political sanctions applied to the agent posing threat [73]. It can also include the use of force [46, 65]. Security risk management strategies under deterrence strategy include the use of armed protection, application of sanctions and use of force. Aspects of deterrence are widely used in some humanitarian operations in some contexts. UN peacekeeping and humanitarian operations widely use deterrence. For example, use of UN armed peacekeepers in the protection of civilians and humanitarian personnel is a typical deterrent security risk management measure used by the UN and by extension to willing NGOs [46]. Another deterrent measure is the use of armed protection from state security forces and in some instances non-state armed actors e.g., armed militias and armed private guards by UN agencies [46]. Sanctions or threats of sanctions against individuals or groups destabilizing humanitarian operations, by the international community individually or collectively, is also a deterrent security risk management measure. Sanctions may include arms embargoes, travel bans, financial

or diplomatic restrictions and referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC) [11, 46]. Sanctions or threats of sanctions are ordinarily applied and implemented by states. Humanitarian organizations have no such capacity.

Deterrence security risk management strategies were classically taken as a last resort as they were primarily associated with the use of armed protection. Humanitarian NGOs generally had serious reservations with armed protection. The security dynamics in the humanitarian environment have significantly evolved with the threat environment being complex, unpredictable and fluid, with diverse actors [11, 46, 65]. Armed protection has become first line of protection to humanitarian operations in some humanitarian contexts. For example, contexts with active armed conflict, experiencing terrorism, religious fundamentalism or high crime levels with targeted attacks against humanitarian operations. The reality and context on the ground determine the best approach to deal with the threats and risks. In high risk humanitarian field environments, deterrence strategies are complemented by other strategies, for example, acceptance, protection, and other security approaches.

#### 7.4 Avoidance Risk Management Strategies

Avoidance strategy has emerged and advocated for in some humanitarian contexts. Avoidance means either not to engage or withdraw from a specific geography due to presence of higher risk [62, 63]. Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) [46] refers to avoidance as removing a whole organization from the threat, either temporarily or for good. Childs (65) and Renouf (64) see avoidance as a tactic within any of the three main strategies of acceptance, protection, and deterrence. Security risk management strategies under avoidance include remote management and risk transfer [11, 23, 64]. Avoidance as a security strategy is contentious, particularly, some aspects such as remote management and risk transfer. It has been argued that avoidance impacts negatively on quality and effectiveness of humanitarian intervention with limited accountability [23, 62, 65]. In some contexts, the avoidance strategy encourages the tendency to avoid insecure areas more easily even if there is great need [23, 62, 64, 65]. UN organizations typically practice avoidance by transferring project or program implementation to their implementing partners, who are mostly NGOs [46]. In this way, UN organizations also transfer security risks to NGOs as legal entities to manage. Avoidance and risk transfer must be seen as some of the options available to manage security risks.

#### 7.5 UN Security Risk Management Strategy

The UN SRM approach promulgated in 2004 is the primary UN security risk management strategy. The UN SRM approach assess the operational context of UN activities, clearly identifying the threats that the UN may face in order to identify the risk levels [72]. This becomes the basis upon which security management decisions are made with the aim of lowering the risks to acceptable levels [68, 72]. The approach instructively requires the UN system to develop and implement security policies, procedures, processes, practices and measures that are relevant, area and context specific based on security risk assessment (SRA) [10]. SRA identifies the threats which could affect UN personnel, assets, or operations. It looks at the UN's vulnerability to these threats while assessing the risks to the UN in terms of likelihood and impact [6, 10]. The SRA prioritizes assessing risks while identifying prevention and mitigation strategies and security measures to address the threats with the aim of lowering the risk [6, 10]. The threats which must be addressed under the SRM approach are in categories of armed conflict, terrorism, crime, civil unrest, and hazards [68]. The security risk management measures implemented are generally classified as security management procedures, physical security, equipment, and supplies, medical, telecommunications, vehicles and training, in a particular geographical location and for a specific time frame [6, 10].

The SRM approach has arguably allowed UN agencies to operate in high-risk environments, accepting the reality that it is impossible to reduce risks to zero [6,10]. The SRM approach has been particularly successful for UN humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF and WHO, allowing the agencies to continue operations even in some of the most complex and dangerous environments in the world [2, 6,10]. This is exemplified in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Sahel region, Iraq, DRC, CRA, South Sudan, Nigeria, Myanmar, and Sudan among other high-risk countries [2, 6,10]. In some of these countries UN has been a direct target. The UN



SRM approach requires good knowledge of the context and analytical skills to be able to identify all or majority threats and risks that may affect UN personnel and operations in a particular context [6,10]. These skills might not be readily available. The SRM approach also requires substantial funding and not all UN agencies are able to afford such funding without diverting resources from other needy areas.

#### 7.6 Risk Reduction Security Strategies

Complementing the security strategies, humanitarian organizations implement risk reduction security strategies such as relocation, evacuation, and alternative work modalities [2]. Relocation is the movement of personnel from one duty station to another within the country to avoid risks. Evacuation is the movement of personnel from their duty station to a location outside the country to avoid risks. Alternative work modalities are measures that reduce exposure to unexpected situations that can bring risks, e.g., work from home or closure of offices. In most cases these are temporary strategies.

Other risk reduction strategies are Accept (different from acceptance), Control and Transfer (ACT) [68]. Accept means risk is accepted with no further mitigation [72]. This normally happens where the risk is considered or assessed low and there is no need for further action. Control means implementing security measures to control or reduce risk to acceptable levels [72]. Transfer means contracting implementation of project or program activities to other parties. In this way, risk is also assigned or transferred to other parties [72]. Remote programming is also a risk reduction strategy. Remote programming refers to the delegation of authority to partner organizations or local staff to run specific projects and managing them remotely (i.e., not in person) [74]. Supporting and coordinating security risk management within the broader humanitarian community in a specified geographical location under Saving Lives Together (SLT) framework, collaborative standard operating procedures (SOPs), contingency plans, and crisis management systems are some of the risk reduction security strategies implemented by humanitarian organizations [2, 10, 11, 45].

#### 7.7 Duty of care approaches

Duty of care approach addresses risks stemming from the work environment. Humanitarian organizations have moral, legal and financial obligation to ensure staff security, staff well-being and health and to proactively address conceivable risks stemming from the work environment [11]. In this way they fulfill duty of care obligations and is context specific. The United Nations High Level Committee on Management (HLCM) [75] defines duty of care as “a non-waivable duty on the part of the organizations aimed at mitigating or addressing foreseeable risks that may harm or injure humanitarian personnel and their eligible family members” (p.4). The objective of duty of care is to address conceivable risks stemming from the work environment and is a security risk management strategy. Duty of care and security risk management are inextricably linked but not interchangeable. Duty of care is widely applied by humanitarian organizations particularly in high risk environments. Duty of care for the UN agencies, consists of two aspects, security management and staff occupational health and safety [10]. Security management addresses staff insecurity, linking security risk management to the protection of staff from intentional and malicious acts [75]. Staff occupational health and safety focuses on protection and promotion of the health and safety of staff at workplaces and the prevention of work-related injuries and diseases [75]. In Humanitarian NGOs and other independent organizations, duty of care is about providing a safe working and living environment as can conceivably be achieved. It is both a moral and legal obligation [76].

Under the duty of care framework, the following indicate duty of care: good security practices, policies, and procedures; security preventive and mitigation measures; security risk assessments; contingency plans such as relocations and evacuations plans; informed consent to work in a particular context, appropriate insurances for staff in event of injury or death; crisis management plans; and balancing between benefits and risks (program criticality) in high-risk environments [11,75]. So are occupational health and safety policies and practices promoting the well-being of staff members. For example, medical care and psychosocial support [11,75].

## 8. Application of Security Strategies

The practice for most of humanitarian organizations has been a mixture of strategies that consider local security realities, cultures, and conditions as the situation on the ground in most cases is fluid. In this regard, acceptance, protection, deterrence, avoidance and UN SRM approach, constitute a range of security risk management options available that contribute to ensuring the safety and security of humanitarian personnel and sustainability of humanitarian operations. Determining to what extent these strategies have worked for humanitarian organizations individually and collectively is a complex task. The scope of implementation differs from organization to organization depending on the mandate, funding, size, complexity of operational area, risk threshold, among other considerations. Risk acceptance levels also differ between local and international humanitarian NGOs. All the same, it is important to note that humanitarian organizations, particularly UN agencies and International NGOs, take security risk management seriously as there are serious legal and financial repercussions under duty of care to ensure staff safety and health and well-being. The case of Steve Dennis Vs Norwegian Refugee Council highlighted the legal consequences of neglecting duty of care in humanitarian organizations [76]. Steve Dennis successfully sued Norwegian Refugee Council for failure to provide duty of care. He was kidnapped and injured in 2012 in Dadaab refugee camps, Kenya [76].

A review of some of the statistics from the AWDB [3] may partly assist to answer the enquiry whether the adapted security strategies have been effective in limiting casualties in humanitarian operations. According to the AWSD the total aid workers victims were 90 in 2001, 240 in 2006, 251 in 2010. The numbers rose to 474 in 2013, 484 in 2020 and dropping to 444 in 2022. The total aid workers fatalities were 27 in 2001, 127 in 2008, 159 in 2013, 141 in 2021 and 116 in 2022. 2013 was bad driven by conflicts and deteriorating governance issues in Syria, South Sudan, Sudan Afghanistan and Pakistan. The statistics show rising aid worker victims and fatalities from 2001. Arguably, the victims and fatalities were at those levels and possibly not more because of progressive implementation of security risk management strategies by humanitarian organizations. The numbers should be judged in proportion to the estimated 115 000 international NGO staff (i.e., excluding national NGO staff) in 1997, growing to 210,000 in 2008, 450,000 in 2014 [33, 35, 36]. In 2017 the estimated humanitarian field staff was estimated to be 570 000 [33] and in 2020 about 632 000 humanitarian staff were in emergency settings [34]. The total aid worker victims and fatalities though rising in relative and absolute terms from 2001 cannot be judged as catastrophic. However, one casualty is one too many and all efforts must be made to prevent even one casualty. The reality of most humanitarian environments is that risk can be reduced but never eliminated. Injuries and in some instances, fatalities will occur even after appropriate security measures have been applied. UN fatalities excluding peacekeepers from 2005 to 2022 were as follows.

**Table 3. Fatalities of UN staff**

<b>Year</b>	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<b>Fatalities</b>	11	12	34	16	31	5	26	19	18	15	23	10	9
<b>Year</b>	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022								
<b>Fatalities</b>	11	11	4	7	11								

Source: Safety and security of humanitarian personnel and protection of United Nations personnel, A/67/492/Oct 2012, A/77/362/ Sep 2022 and A/78/369 Sept 2023

Table 3 shows that during the first decade (from 2005 when the statistics were compiled) the number of deaths were 11 in 2005 rising to 34 in 2007 and declining to 5 in 2010. In the second decade, the fatalities were 26 in 2011 and have been dropping in relative and absolute terms since then. The fatalities significantly dropped to 4 in 2020. In 2021 and 2022 the fatalities were at 7 and 11, respectively. The SRM approach, arguably, has

minimized the number of fatalities of UN civilian staff in all contexts of UN operations. This should be judged in proportion to the UN staff population worldwide and those in emergencies. To put in into perspective, the UN civilian staff was about 48497 as of 31 December 2001 [37] growing to 82737 by 31 December 2009 [38]. The numbers further grew to 83 400 in 2012, 120 000 in 2021 [39, 40] and 125436 as of 31 December 2022 [41]. As of 2020, about 66 000 UN civilian staff were working in emergency situations with substantial numbers in high-risk environments [34]. It can be argued that fatalities were at those levels and possibly not more because of the effective implementation of security risk management strategies by UN agencies. With rising humanitarian crises in 21<sup>st</sup> century and significant growth of UN personnel in emergency situations, that the fatalities have been dropping since 2011 could be a sign that the security risk management strategies adapted by the UN are lowering security risks and ultimately casualties.

### **9. Recommendations to Improve Security Management in Insecure Humanitarian Environment**

Security risk management strategies of humanitarian organizations should be sustainable, relevant, context specific and reviewed regularly. Sustainable security risk management strategies must confront most of the dangers to reduce risk to acceptable levels enabling safe and secure humanitarian operations. Insecure humanitarian environments require systematic security management to meaningfully manage security risks for humanitarian organizations to be able to cope with unforeseen and conceivable events and provide a sense of stability to humanitarian work [77]. Sound humanitarian security risk management strategies must be enablers of safe and secure humanitarian operations, including protection of aid workers and aid beneficiaries. Security risk management strategies must remain relevant all the time through regular appraisals of their applicability and being context specific.

Understanding the context is very important if security risks are to be managed. The security risk management strategies, be it acceptance, protection, deterrence, SRM approach or risk reduction strategies, require good understanding of the context, the actors and local community and security dynamics [11, 45, 46]. This leads to the development and implementation of appropriate security plans, policies, procedures, processes, and measures that address the specific security risks in the environment. Good intentions of humanitarian work, does not necessarily translate into security depending on the actors and context. In this regard, it is particularly important to strengthen context analysis, strengthen accountability to aid beneficiaries and follow principled humanitarian action for the security risk management strategies to be sustainable [10, 46, 65].

Coordination and cooperation with state and non-state actors. Effective security management in humanitarian operations will only work in environments where governments proactively support humanitarian operations by fulfilling all basic security obligations of a functioning state. In this regard, active engagement and collaboration between governments and humanitarian organizations on safety and security at all levels is paramount. Equally important is the engagement with non-state armed actors, who may be controlling some territories and conducting quasi government functions in the territories. Their buy-in to allow humanitarian operations and ensure security of humanitarian personnel and aid beneficiaries is critical. Coordination and cooperation can be done at both individual organization level and as a collective effort.

Collective security effort by all stakeholders. Everyone must be involved from state authorities and their security systems and agencies, donors, humanitarian organizations, aid beneficiaries, to hosting communities and influential individuals (e.g., community/ religious leaders). Addressing security risks in the humanitarian field requires improving engagement, collaboration, cooperation and coordination on security matters between various stakeholders at various levels (local/regional/ national) and including the conflict parties. The involvement of the different stakeholders in security decisions and security solutions at different levels is of critical importance for security management. Donors have leveraged over many governments by virtue of them funding humanitarian operations. Donors must continuously be persuaded to engage host governments especially those failing in their security responsibilities.

Collective security approaches by humanitarian organizations must be enhanced and encouraged in all contexts of humanitarian operations. Collective security is premised on humanitarian organizations working in a given context and geographical area sharing available security resources for the common good. This is particularly so in contexts where collective security works as a deterrent from attacks in order to provide humanitarian assistance and also for the protection of aid workers. Collective approaches to security include, joining humanitarian convoys under UN peacekeeping armed escorts or government provided armed escorts. In humanitarian environments with high crime rates and or violence, program or project activities are guarded by armed persons (state or non-state). For example, distribution points, warehouses, office and residential compounds, organized individually or collectively. Collective security helps to improve efficiency and effective use of available security resources for the common good. Collective security has also been conducted under The Saving Lives Together (SLT) approach for humanitarian organizations willing to participate [2, 6, 10].

Humanitarian collaborative approaches to security must be strengthened and made more practical. The Saving Lives Together (SLT) framework provides a collaborative approach to security management in humanitarian operations particularly in complex and high-risk environments. The United Nations Security Management system recognizes Saving Lives Together framework for the humanitarian community, contributing to the collection, analysis and dissemination of critical security and safety information [78]. Systematic application of the SLT can improve cooperation, coordination, and collaboration on security issues between the humanitarian actors, contributing to the collection, analysis and dissemination of critical safety and security information. Indeed, SLT has been a success story in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, South Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, and Kenya, where UN and INGOs actively cooperated on security issues [6, 10]. This should be extended to all high-risk environments and post conflict fragile environments.

Security funding prioritization. Funding for humanitarian and development programs globally is facing serious challenges due to a variety of reasons. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed unprecedented humanitarian crises with exponential rise in displacements and record numbers of refugees, IDPs and migrations. The reduction in funding has serious implications for humanitarian operations as staff security in particular might not be prioritized and therefore inadequately funded. This exposes humanitarian personnel to mortal danger. Balancing security funding and other funding needs (e.g., programs) is a delicate matter which ultimately depends on how a particular humanitarian organization perceives risk. Humanitarian organizations must strive towards allocating adequate resources to security to lower security risks. Equally important is for the donors to seriously consider requests for security funding from humanitarian organizations and governments, particularly funding for the maintenance of law and order.

Training and capacity building of humanitarian staff on safety and security must be a continuous process. It is critical for humanitarian staff to be kept abreast of latest security strategies to manage risks in their operating environments. Further, humanitarian organizations need to proactively identify potential self-generated risks and address them. It is critical for humanitarian organizations to invest resources, time, and effort to analyse self-generated risks. Staff conduct can be a source of insecurity and organization reputational risk. Organization codes of conduct and training that are relevant to humanitarian principles and operations have proven to be successful in limiting the potential of self-generated risks in some high-risk environments [79]. In high-risk environments there may also be a need for capacity building of government law enforcement and other security agencies to ensure observance of international law, international humanitarian law and human rights. This also applies to areas under control of non-state actor armed groups.

#### **10. Addressing the Root Causes**

Addressing the root causes of humanitarian crises has significant influence on security of aid workers and humanitarian operations in general. Conflicts are the primary drivers of humanitarian crises causing unprecedented population displacements. Others are socio-economic problems, lack of democracy, political repression and bad governance, human rights violations, and climate change. The problems which cause

humanitarian crises mostly require political solutions. Resolving conflicts in 21<sup>st</sup> century has been difficult for the international community. The international community under the auspices of the UN, continental and regional organizations (African Union, European Union, Organization of American States (OAS), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Southern African Development Community (SADC), East African community, Arab League, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) etc.) have struggled to resolve the major conflicts in the world and their regions.

Significantly, the UN Security Council, the custodian of international peace and security, has become so much polarized with hardly any consensus on major political issues and conflicts affecting the world. The leadership capacity to resolve conflicts expected of the UN, and the UN Security Council in particular, continues to diminish with increasing geopolitical divisions and diverse strategic interests. Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, South Sudan, Myanmar and DRC are some of the examples where there is no consensus on how to resolve the conflicts by the permanent members of the UN Security Council in particular and UN member states in general. The international community under the umbrella of the United Nations, continental and regional bodies and other influential countries or entities must give diplomacy a chance and work together to resolve conflicts in the increasingly divided multipolar world. The collective responsibilities emanating from the basics of the UN Charter must be upheld by UN member states. The UN Charter (1945) among other provisions, provides that the purpose of the UN is.

*To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace must be respected by all nations (article 1. 1)*

The reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that the maintenance of international peace and security and international cooperation in solving international problems has been on the edge partly due to geopolitical divisions and varied strategic interests by UN member states. As aptly described by the UN Secretary General the world is facing “multilateral challenges but deficit of multilateral solutions” [8]. The increasingly polarized environment in international relations is making it extremely difficult for UN member states to reach consensus on major issues affecting the world making conflict resolution difficult. Major world humanitarian crises (Syria, Yemen, DRC, Somalia, Myanmar, South Sudan, Sudan,) remain unresolved and new ones have emerged (Ukraine, Gaza). Paradoxically, some conflicts were orchestrated by powerful nations and alliances that ordinarily were expected to be at the forefront of resolving the conflicts. Powerful nations (e.g., USA, Russia) and military alliances (e.g., NATO, Saudi coalition) have been accused of orchestrating conflicts in some countries and then leave the countries fragmented and some in almost anarchical state. The invasion of Afghanistan 2001, Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2011 and Yemen in 2015, are examples where powerful nations interfered and then left the countries very fragmented. In this regard, powerful countries must not be left to dictate solutions to world problems as some of the problems were caused by them. Resolving world conflicts will not only help to assist to end humanitarian crises but will go a long way in addressing security challenges faced in humanitarian operations.

## 11. Conclusion

The turn of the millennium witnessed significant security challenges in humanitarian work with the operating environment becoming more dangerous than before. Particularly worrying was the violence targeting humanitarian aid workers and humanitarian work in general. The threat actors were and remain diverse and the threat environment fluid and complex. This is on the background of surge in humanitarian crises in many regions of the world, primarily due to conflict, causing millions of displacements requiring humanitarian assistance. The risky environment no longer relied on security guarantees from host governments and good intentions of

humanitarian work to shield aid workers from untoward action. The statistics from Aid Worker Security Database reflect that the total number of incidents, aid worker victims, aid workers killed, aid workers injured, aid workers kidnapped, maintained an upward trajectory since 2001 in relative and absolute terms. The reasons for the aid workers attacks are diverse and vary from context to context. The consequences also varied from context to context though outcomes such as compromised humanitarian access and space were consistent in all contexts.

Corollary to the evolving insecure humanitarian operating environment, security risk management in humanitarian organizations also significantly progressed to deal with security risks. The professionalization of humanitarian security management framework systematized the development of security risk management policies, processes, procedures, and practices. Security strategies of acceptance, protection, deterrence, UN SRM, risk reduction approaches and duty of care, among other security risk management approaches were adapted. The security risk management strategies have continuously evolved to consider the complex and rapidly changing humanitarian environments with diverse threats, which vary from context to context, and time to time. Arguably, risk management strategies adapted by humanitarian organizations helped to minimize the casualties though the extent is not easy to determine. The biggest challenge is to address root causes of humanitarian crises. The majority of humanitarian crises require political solutions, and this is a challenge for the international community under the auspices of the UN. Due to current polarization of the international community and diverse geopolitical and strategic interests of member states, this proposition will not be easy to achieve, at least in the short term.

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