UNHCR Security Policy

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1 Introduction

1.1 UNHCR staff members are exposed to increasing risk in operations. Growing intensity and duration of conflicts, the proliferation of non-state actors, impunity and the erosion of the perceived neutrality of humanitarian agencies are all factors in this trend. For UNHCR staff, mandated to protect and assist those displaced by conflicts, this means that duties will often be carried out in inherently dangerous environments. Furthermore, the instances when the danger to staff is greatest are likely to coincide with those where beneficiaries’ needs are the most urgent; thus, the challenge is to fulfill UNHCR’s humanitarian mandate while ensuring the safety of its staff.

1.2 This document outlines UNHCR’s policy for the management of staff security. It is intended to recall the importance of the reference documents listed at the end of this paper and amplify upon, taking into account UNHCR’s specific context. This paper begins by stating UNHCR’s basic principles of staff safety. Next, it outlines the roles and responsibilities of the officials involved in the security management process at headquarters and in the field, from the line managers to the individual staff member. Finally, it sets forth guidelines on how this policy applies to the various categories of staff, other persons performing services for UNHCR, refugees and persons of concern to UNHCR. While the policy in this paper cannot provide simple answers to the challenge of reconciling humanitarian needs and staff safety, it outlines basic principles and guidelines to help staff manage this process.

2 UNHCR’s basic principles of staff safety

2.1 UNHCR is an active member of the common UN security system, complying with established guidelines, sharing information and contributing recommendations to improve overall security management;

2.2 UNHCR’s security policy emphasises the responsibility and accountability of managers, at Headquarters, at the level of Country Representatives and of heads of field offices, for the security of their staff, and seeks to improve their decision making with technical field safety advice at headquarters, regionally and in the field;

2.3 UNHCR seeks to achieve a proactive security management system, emphasising analysis and early warning, the early integration of security in operational planning, and training;
2.4 UNHCR strives to provide adequate human resources, material and training to achieve established standards of safety;

2.5 UNHCR’s security policy underlines the responsibility of each staff member to be aware of the environment and existing guidelines, and the capacity of each person to improve his or her own safety.

3 The UN security system

3.1 According to generally recognised principles of public international law, primary responsibility for the security and protection of personnel of the UN system lies with the host government. This applies, of course, to UNHCR and its staff.

3.2 The overall responsibility for the UN Security Management System rests with the Secretary General. The Secretary General and specialized agencies are supported in the implementation of this system by the Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) under the direction of the Under-Secretary-General for Safety and Security. The identification of all actors within the UN Security Management System and their respective roles and responsibilities is further outlined in the reference documents below.

4 UNHCR Headquarters

4.1 The High Commissioner is, as UNHCR’s executive head, responsible for ensuring appropriate security measures for UNHCR. This includes identifying competent and responsible managers within UNHCR, setting up a system which ensures that the High Commissioner is properly informed about security issues, instructing managers to set up appropriate security measures and providing for an effective control mechanism. In these respects, he is accountable to the Secretary General.

4.2 The implementation of UN security policy is primarily entrusted to UNDSS and most day to day security matters are delegated to Country Representatives. However, the High Commissioner has to maintain managerial oversight over the safety of UNHCR staff, exercised through the Director of Operational Services (DOS), Emergency Support Service (ESS) and the Chief of the Field Staff Safety Section (FSS), as well as the Bureau Directors and the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations. The High Commissioner has set up a procedure which ensures that he is regularly informed about security issues.

4.3 In this responsibility, the High Commissioner is supported at Headquarters by the Director of Operational Services and the Chief of FSS. The Director of
Operational Services is responsible for the development and mobilization of security resources to support UNHCR’s operations around the world. S/he facilitates the effective use of field safety staff in Headquarters, in the regional hubs and the field and provides advocacy for staff safety issues in internal and external fora, including representing UNHCR at meetings of the Interagency Security Management Network (IASMN).

4.4 The Chief of FSS is UNHCR’s security focal point. His/her primary responsibility is to provide advice to the High Commissioner and the Bureau Directors on technical matters relating to staff safety. The Chief of FSS maintains a co-operative relationship with UNDSS and other UN agencies, representing UNHCR in interagency working groups and making recommendations to improve the security management system-wide, including interventions with UNDSS on behalf of country operations in the event that there is a discrepancy between security and operational policies. S/he screens prospective Field Safety Advisers (FSAs) to ensure that they possess the required technical qualifications as agreed upon with UNDSS and, jointly with the managers, supervises their performance in the field. In consultation with the Bureaux, the Chief of FSS provides advice regarding the deployment of FSAs to the field. S/he provides technical oversight of UNHCR’s FSAs in the field and direct supervision of the headquarters-based FSS team including the roving FSAs.

4.5 The Bureau Directors and Desk Officers play an important part in overall security management, through maintaining situational awareness of emerging threats, proactive security planning and the allocation of funds for security. Of particular importance is their role in ensuring the appropriate priority and programming of resources to address security needs in each region, especially those necessary for compliance with minimum operating security standards (MOSS), and identifying locations needing specialised field safety staff in consultation with FSS. Finally, Bureau Directors exercise managerial oversight over the implementation of security measures in their regions. In exceptional circumstances, they may overrule decisions in the field relating to the safety of staff, in principle after consultation with the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations and DOS/FSS.

4.6 In these areas, Bureau Directors and Desk Officers are assisted by Senior Field Safety Advisers (SFSAs), based in Headquarters, and the Senior Regional FSAs (SRFSAs) based in the Regional Hubs. The SFSAs and SRFSAs provide support and advice to the Bureaux and Desks, including analysis of possible threats to staff safety in their regions and assessment of security gaps and solutions. Equally important, they provide direct support to the field through security audits, training, advice and other services. Both SFSAs and SRFSAs ensure a linkage between headquarters and the regions in all matters pertaining to security.
4.7 In addition to those aforementioned actors who have direct involvement with UNHCR security management, the Inspector General’s Office also plays a role. The IGO, through its mandate to “...support the effective, efficient and accountable management of UNHCR operations”, will initiate an ad-hoc inquiry to investigate any incident which has caused “...fatalities, serious injuries or large-scale damage involving major financial or material losses to the Office.” The IGO is required to draw conclusions and make recommendations in an Inquiry Report that is then submitted to the High Commissioner for action.

4.8 Finally, UNHCR recognises an important connection between staff safety and related issues such as health and staff welfare. FSS is responsible for maintaining linkages with the Staff Welfare Section and Medical Services, identifying potential needs and referring issues for further advice as required.

5 UNHCR security in the field

5.1 Responsibility for the safety of UNHCR staff in the country of assignment lies with the UNHCR Country Representative. The Representative is responsible for ensuring that appropriate security measures are in place to protect staff, and for ensuring staff compliance with security guidelines and procedures established by the Country Designated Official (DO) and UNDSS. This includes, among other things, compliance with policies and procedures for obtaining security clearances for travel to or in areas where this is required. To accomplish this, the Representative must be familiar with the contents of the documents referenced below and incorporate security considerations in operational planning. S/he should participate in inter-agency security and contingency planning, assist in the development of security plans as appropriate, and ensure that staff members are familiar with the contents of such plans. S/he must make budgetary provisions for all security needs, especially those defined as minimum operational security standards (MOSS) and minimum operational residential security standards (MORSS).

5.2 The Representative must be an active participant in the country Security Management Team (SMT), contributing valuable information from all parts of the country where UNHCR is present and making recommendations to improve overall country security management. The Representative should, in his/her capacity as a member of the SMT, assist the DO in developing the MOSS for the country. The SMT also provides the Representative with the means to ensure that UNHCR’s needs and interests are appropriately addressed in the country security system. The responsibility of participation in the SMT should never be delegated except during periods of temporary authorised absence.
5.3 UN and UNHCR Security Policy requires that Representatives seek the concurrence of the Designated Official and UNHCR HQ prior to effecting the relocation of personnel employed by the organization and their dependants or conduct extensive activity outside of the main offices. The establishment of new offices and operations must conform to MOSS.

5.4 Additionally, the Representative must communicate security information to both the Bureau and FSS at headquarters. In co-operation with FSS and UNDSS, s/he should see that periodic safety awareness training takes place, and ensure attendance during mandatory training sessions. Finally, the Representative must set the example for the staff through personal adherence to policies and guidelines and engagement in security matters. S/he shall never instruct, directly or indirectly, any staff member to disregard security policy, rules or instructions, and shall never knowingly allow a staff member to be exposed to unnecessary risk.

5.5 The responsibilities of the Head of a Sub- or Field Office are parallel to those of the Country Representative: ensuring that appropriate security measures are in place, enforcing staff compliance with guidelines and procedures, integrating security planning and budgeting, transmitting security information and setting an example. While not a member of the country SMT, s/he should actively contribute to the local area SMT, if any, in the manner described above. Heads of Office bear particular responsibility when assigned additional duties as Area Security Coordinator (ASC). Here, it is especially important that they understand the security situation and procedures in place. ASCs must comply with regulations set by the DO, but equally play a key role in relaying vital information and recommendations concerning conditions in their areas.

5.6 In most medium- to high-risk duty stations, UNDSS will assign a Chief Safety Adviser (CSA) to advise the DO on all security and safety matters. While the CSA’s responsibilities cover all UN agencies, the scope or geographic separation of UNHCR activities in the field and its distinctive operational requirements sometimes necessitate specialised security support. In these cases, Representatives and Heads of Office may request the assistance of a UNHCR Field Safety Adviser. As security professionals, FSAs have similar qualifications to UNDSS personnel, as well as specific expertise in UNHCR operations such as camp security, refugee movement and repatriation exercises, and urban refugee incident management.

5.7 The primary responsibility of the FSA is to provide technical advice to the management in matters pertaining to staff safety, and to act as the focal point in security-related tasks and processes. Additionally, the FSA is charged with ensuring linkages crucial for staff safety and overall situational awareness, such as those with other UN agencies, local law enforcement and implementing partners. Of particular importance is the relationship with the
UN Security Management System (notably the resident CSA) and any other single agency security officers present; the UNHCR FSA must maintain a cooperative relationship based on coordinated actions, open information sharing and mutual support. Finally, the FSA plays an important part in enhancing staff safety awareness, emphasising the capacity of staff to play a greater role in their own safety.

5.8 The FSA in the field is directly supervised by his/her Representative or Head of Office, as applicable. The Chief of FSS provides technical supervision and input for performance evaluations, with the help of headquarters and of the regionally based Senior FSAs who have been assigned geographic coverage of the operation. The FSA in the field must have direct and unmediated access to the Representative or head of office. While his or her advice should be weighed carefully, the final decision rests with the Representative or Head of Office.

5.9 In offices where no FSA is present, the Representative or Head of Office should appoint a security focal point. The security focal point assumes, within the limitations of professional expertise, many of the functions of the FSA. At a minimum, s/he should be the action officer in realising any security-related projects and participate in any technical-level security working groups on behalf of UNHCR.

6 The individual staff member

6.1 UNHCR emphasises the importance of the individual staff member in the security management process: each person must understand his/her rights, responsibilities and capacity to influence the security environment. It is the responsibility of each staff member to be aware of and comply with security guidelines applicable to the area. It should be clear to all that failure to do this can put not only the staff members themselves but also their colleagues in great danger; UNHCR’s dangerous working environment does not permit any negligence or risk-taking. Staff members who do not adhere to security guidelines, procedures or individual instructions will be accountable under relevant staff rules and disciplinary procedures.

6.2 Equally, staff members should understand their rights. They have the right to receive information on the security situation in the area in which they will be working, through briefings, reports and maps. They may ask to see documents such as security plans and MOSS/MORSS guidelines, except in extraordinary cases where circumstances prohibit this. Staff members have, in exceptional circumstances, the right to refrain from executing instructions in situations where (a) the instruction is in breach of UNHCR or UN security policies and regulations, or (b) where the staff member has reasonable
grounds to believe that carrying out the specific instruction will expose him/her to unnecessary risk.

6.3 In addition, individual staff members should be aware of their capacity to influence their own safety through personal awareness and taking appropriate precautions. Moreover, they can enhance the safety climate of their entire office by creating favourable impressions within the community and immediately reporting information that they consider to have a potential impact on security.
Categories of staff, partners, and persons of concern

7.1 As far as staff safety is concerned, UNHCR recognises no fundamental distinction between categories of staff, such as international and local, professional and general service category; all lives are valued equally. Except where restricted by administrative instructions and applicable laws, safety measures should apply equally to all. Prior planning and consideration must be given to cases where specific limitations apply, and steps taken to ensure the safety of all staff.

7.2 International and national staff, for example, should, in principle, receive the same training and equipment. The same applies to consultants and persons temporarily deployed to UNHCR (e.g., UN volunteers, persons put at the disposal of UNHCR by governments or governmental agencies as so-called gratis personnel), all of whom are required to adhere to established security guidelines. All must be considered in safety planning, and missions deemed unsafe for any one category of persons should not be assigned to another. In instances where entitlements vary among staff members, such as in the case of evacuation, planning should take into account the differences and provide reasonable measures for ensuring the safety of all; e.g., establishing procedures for national staff after an evacuation and providing for continuous contact and advice.

7.3 UNHCR recognises an obligation to assist in the safety of collaborating nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), particularly implementing partners. This practice has been officially endorsed through the Framework document “Saving Lives Together: A Framework for improving Security Arrangements among IGOs, NGOs and the UN in the Field”, co-signed by Jan Egeland, USG Humanitarian Affairs/ERC, and Sir David Veness, USG Safety and Security and approved by the HLCM in November 2006. Offices should seek to help NGOs and IPs to achieve the same level of field safety for their personnel as UNHCR has put in place for its staff, to the extent allowable by mandate and capacity. This begins with open communication and information sharing on safety matters; the recommended means of achieving this is a local security network headed by an NGO security focal point, as articulated in the Inter-agency Standing Committee guidelines for security collaboration between the UN and NGOs. Co-operation may also include UNHCR logistic and administrative assistance. UNHCR should inform collaborating NGOs of the security guidelines in place for its own staff and encourage their adoption by the NGOs as a matter of prudence, while respecting their right of final decision. Similarly, safety planning, including evacuation measures, should account for NGOs as far as it is logistically and financially feasible, permitted by administrative and host-country rules and desired by the individual NGO.
7.4 While staff security must always remain the priority, the physical safety of
refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR fall squarely within
UNHCR’s protection mandate. Such situations may be particularly delicate as
both protection and safety concerns may apply—camp disruptions and urban
refugee disturbances present two examples. In such instances, both staff and
refugees may be exposed to danger. Therefore, managers should consider the
advice of all those with relevant professional experience – Protection, Field
Safety and others – in reaching a decision. Ultimately, as elsewhere, the final
decision and accountability rest with the Representative or Head of Office.

REFERENCE DOCUMENTS:

B. Report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly: Strengthened and unified
security management system for the United Nations (11 October 2005)
C. INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL SECURITY MEASURES, Framework for
Accountability for the United Nations Security Management System;
D. UNDSS Security Directives
E. UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies- 3rd edition (February 2007)
F. Memorandum of the High Commissioner: Measures to Increase UNHCR Staff
Security in the Field (06 July 2001)
G. Saving Lives Together: A Framework for improving Security Arrangements among
IGOs, NGOs and the UN in the Field (2006)