

Humanitarian Security Needs in the Field

Addressing the Situation in Darfur

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Summary

The recently updated OCHA Aide Memoire for the Consideration of Issues Pertaining to the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict does not propose specific measures on how to improve the security situation of humanitarian personnel. Although not intended as a blueprint of action, the language presented in the Aide Memoire is vague and general in character, as it is intended to fit all conflict settings. However, by performing a within-case analysis of Darfur, portraying humanitarian workers' own perspective of their security situation, I here suggest some additional updates to be made to the Aide Memoire. Humanitarian personnel's security situation in Darfur is characterized by unstable scenarios and insecure environments. Humanitarian agencies base their security mainly on their own image by adhering to humanitarian principles such as neutrality, impartiality and independence, as well as being in proximity to the local population.

As the traditional principles of humanitarian action are still pivotal to the protection of aid personnel, OCHA should incorporate the consideration and operationalization of these more clearly in its Aide Memoire. Furthermore, it should highlight the need for mandatory security training for all humanitarian staff, since this would greatly increase their ability to protect themselves. Finally, the ramification for host governments when they deliberately obstruct humanitarian access should be clearly defined and outlined.

In recent years the United Nations (UN) has increasingly addressed protection of civilians (PoC) in its peace operations. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has been in the forefront of this development and has created an *Aide Memoire* that addresses protection issues on the ground concerning the conflict-affected population and humanitarian operations and personnel. This *Aide Memoire* can be described as a set of guidelines meant to assist parties in handling PoC issues both when planning peacekeeping operations and when in the field, and was recently updated to its third edition. But how well do the protection issues raised in OCHA's *Aide Memoire* reflect the security needs of aid workers on the ground?

In short, the section on "Humanitarian Access and Safety and Security of Humanitarian Workers" of the *Aide Memoire* focuses on the need for all parties to adhere to international humanitarian law and human rights law, and to report to the UN Security Council (UNSC) on steps to improve protection. Moreover, it condemns all attacks on humanitarian workers and calls upon UN peacekeeping forces to provide protection and facilitate access (UNSC 2009). Nevertheless, the *Aide Memoire* does not offer concrete measures to facilitate humanitarian protection. In fact, its language is vague, intended to suit all war-type scenarios and conflict situations. By looking at the micro-dynamics of security on the ground in one particular case, it may be possible to identify specific measures to improve protection and further update the *Aide Memoire*. The conflict and human suffering in Darfur has resulted in a humanitarian initiative previously unprecedented. However, the working conditions for aid personnel have not been unproblematic. It has been characterized by insecurities and sporadic attacks on convoys and personnel, and several aid workers have been

killed. Darfur thus represents a legitimate case for researching the micro-dynamics of humanitarian security.

Darfur's Security Landscape

The 2008 statistics on security incidents that involved humanitarian personnel in Darfur are worrying and reveal an unpredictable and insecure environment. During that year, 277 humanitarian vehicles were carjacked, there were 192 break ins or armed assaults on humanitarian premises, 218 humanitarian personnel were temporarily kidnapped in relation to the carjacking, and 11 people were killed (UN Humanitarian Official 2009 [Telephone interview]). Whilst the security situation has improved slightly for the internally displaced people in recent months, it has grown even worse for the aid personnel working in Darfur (DanChurchAid 2009). This development can be seen as a direct result of the arrest warrant issued for President al-Bashir by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Following the warrant, thirteen humanitarian aid agencies were expelled from Sudan, decreasing humanitarian staff stationed in the region by 40 percent. In addition, attacks on humanitarian actors seem to have become more targeted, which in turn has led to restricted movement and increased precautions. As a consequence, security has become more time consuming, depriving agencies of their precious time spent on aid distribution. This raises questions as to how security may be improved.

According to humanitarian personnel who are working or have worked in Darfur, the most important security measures are acceptance from and proximity to the population. Such ordinary activities as international humanitarian staff drinking tea with the population in the local market may not seem to be a strategic action, but in terms of security this is essential. However, acceptance is not enough to ensure security and needs to be supplemented by protection strategies such as protective walls and gates, safe rooms, communication equipment, clear operational strategies and security training. Although relying too heavily on such measures would be counterproductive as it would alienate aid workers from the local population thus omitting important security information and fostering prejudice.

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During the course of this research it has become apparent that most aid workers lack sufficient security training. While most aid agencies seem to offer their staff a theoretical course before sending them to the field, security is only one part of it. Moreover, the course is often quite generic, lacking country-specific security problems and measures. Roger Håland (2009 [interview]), for instance, admit he would have liked to have some practical security training before he went to Darfur. In his words: "It is not enough to have a good heart; you also need a good head on your shoulders to evaluate the situation and to understand the context you are

in." Several of the informants for this research admit that due to time restraints, sometimes newly recruited staff is sent out without any training whatsoever. Instead, humanitarian organizations seem to base their security knowledge of their staff more on experience rather than training, and experienced staff is supposed to look after and guide their new colleagues. However, as Tony Marchant (2009 [interview]) has pointed out, such experienced personnel can sometimes be hard to come by. Thus, the *Aide Memoire* should highlight the need for mandatory security training for all aid personnel. While the *Aide Memoire* does mention the need for organization personnel to receive training in international law, human rights and refugee law, it does not mention security training. By doing so, however, the *Memoire* would highlight a specific task that would greatly increase the protection of humanitarian workers in the field.

Neutrality

The foundation of the proximity to and acceptance from the local population is grounded in the traditional principles of humanitarian action. In terms of security, neutrality is viewed as the most important of these in addition to impartiality and independence. These principles have their roots in the emergence of the international humanitarian system at the end of the nineteenth century, and represents aid agencies' distinct form of intervention to purely relieve suffering and protect life in conflict. The findings when researching the case of Darfur reveals that these principles are still pivotal in terms of humanitarian security in the field. In Turid Læg Reid's (2009 [interview]), the former Head of OCHA's sub-office in North Darfur, words: "the more difficult the situation is the more important are the principles of humanitarian action. Without upholding these principles the situation would have been worse". The *Aide Memoire* should therefore highlight the importance that all parties involved in a peacekeeping mission should respect these principles and assist aid agencies in maintaining them. For example, military divisions should not distribute humanitarian aid, because this causes a blurring of the lines between civil and military operations, and may ultimately result in a loss of perceived neutrality on behalf of humanitarian actors.

In Darfur, the main security problem for aid agencies is banditry. In terms of neutrality strategies this is a problem, because banditry affects everyone whether you are perceived to be neutral, impartial, and independent or not. Thus, it may be questioned how these principles can be the foundation for security in the Darfur context. On the other hand, it may also be, although difficult to prove, that for the very reason these principles are applied by the humanitarian organizations to ensure security, banditry is the only main threat. If aid agencies in Darfur would have openly taken sides and distributed aid partially, the security situation would most likely have been worse. This is



because the organizations would then be perceived as part of the conflict itself and thus evident targets of attack by enemy groups.

Evelyne Schmid (2009) argues that effective protection strategies should be developed by focusing on the reasons why civilians are deliberately affected. In this case, we might say that the motivation behind the banditry is desperate poverty. Thus, improved living conditions for the Darfur people would increase protection. This, however, is the overall aim of the humanitarian agencies and the reason why they are there. Consequently, and as pointed out by Schmid herself, there might not always be “a system out there that can protect people in ongoing conflict” (Schmid 2009: 357).

Impartiality

Impartial aid distribution based on need is imperative in terms of aid personnel’s security. In this regard, performing their work in an open and transparent manner also builds trust and thus fosters protection. An incident described by Tony Marchant (2009 [interview]), an Emergency Coordinator for Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), exemplifies this. He describes one time his MSF team was driving through a checkpoint in a rebel area to open a clinic there and was stopped by a commander who wanted to take their drugs and equipment. The team asked him what he would do if it was his wife who was ill, and after some tension they were allowed to continue. Later that day the same MSF team returned to the checkpoint carrying a pregnant woman who had to have a caesarean operation or else she would die. Such actions build trust, Marchant explains, because it shows the organization is actually performing the work it set out to do.

Independence

In terms of the humanitarian principles of independence, the greatest issue raised in the Darfur context is aid agencies’ relation to UN peacekeepers and to what extent they coordinate security with the UN. The UN is a large organization with a well-established network, and aid organizations have in general coordinated their security to great extent in Darfur. However, most humanitarian agencies have chosen to stay far away from the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) and would not accept an escort by UNAMID peacekeeping forces as they are not seen as neutral. The previous African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) was perceived as taking side in the conflict by many. Partly because they negotiated the Darfur peace agreement which included some parties but not others. For this reason they were targeted and lost more than 20 people in 2007. Now when the UN has taken over, the same troops are still in Darfur, they have only exchanged their green helmet with a blue one. As a result, UNAMID hampers the security of humanitarian agencies in some circumstances rather than improving it. For example, UNAMID and

UN humanitarian groups utilize similar helicopters and vehicles for transportation with *UN* written on them. This can easily be misunderstood by the local population and the helicopters and vehicles have consequently been shot at several times. Accordingly, the *Aide Memoire* should recommend that peacekeeping forces and humanitarian actors utilize different vehicles with distinctive markings. This might diminish the likelihood of attack and thus improve aid workers’ security.

As mentioned above, having a close relationship with the local population is seen as the most important measure of humanitarian security. However, in situations where the host government is part of the conflict proximity may also have a negative effect. This is because aid agencies might be perceived by the government as taking sides with the local population. In Darfur, proximity to the population may have been one of the reasons for the expulsion of humanitarian organizations in March 2009 following the arrest warrant issued for President al-Bashir. This is because the close relationship between the aid agencies and the population may have caused the government of Sudan to fear they were reporting to the ICC.

Even before the arrest warrant, however, the government of Sudan obstructed humanitarian access by making it difficult for aid agencies to obtain travel permits and visas. In addition, the Sudanese government would make it difficult to commence and close projects by constantly inventing new laws that required the aid teams to implement new procedures. While the *Aide Memoire* rightly highlights the responsibility of host governments to facilitate the provision of humanitarian assistance, it does not include specific measures to be implemented if a government obstructs aid distribution. By outlining specific repercussions, the language of the *Memoire* would appear less vague and obstructing humanitarian access would hopefully become less lucrative for host governments.

Conclusion

When comparing the security needs identified in Darfur to the issues raised in the *Aide Memoire* it becomes apparent that some improvements are called for. Although changing micro-dynamics both within and between conflict environments makes it difficult to establish an all-encompassing *Aide Memoire*, some updates could be made. First, the *Aide Memoire* should focus more on the principles of humanitarian action and on all actors involved in an integrated mission being sensitive and considerate of these. In cases where UN peacekeepers are not perceived as neutral, such as in Darfur, UN forces should focus more on area protection than protecting humanitarian convoys and individual agencies. Clearly distinguishing between UN peacekeeping and humanitarian vehicles with clear markings is also important to this end. In addition, as

most aid agencies lack sufficient security training, the *Memoire* should stress the importance of mandatory security training for all aid personnel who are to work in the field. Such training should entail both a theoretical and a practical segment consisting of simulation exercises as this would greatly increase aid workers' ability to protect themselves. Finally, while the *Aide Memoire* rightly highlights the responsibility of host governments to ensure unimpeded humanitarian access, it should outline more clearly the repercussions when a government deliberately fails to do so.

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