SECURITY CHALLENGE: ABDUCTION OF HEALTH WORKERS

Recommendations for work in the DRC in the context of the Ebola emergency response 2019-20

In September 2019, suspected Mai Mai militia entered a hospital in Mususa commune, Butembo, and kidnapped a doctor and two nurses. The doctor was reportedly tortured and threatened with death in retaliation for collaborating with Ebola responders.

CONTEXT AND KEY CHALLENGES

Using open sources, key informant interviews and data shared by response actors, **Insecurity Insight** has identified a heightened risk of the abduction of healthcare workers in the DRC.

- In 2019, at least **14 healthcare workers were abducted** in the DRC.
- Abductions occurred while individuals travelled to and from intervention sites, at healthcare facilities or during wider assaults on the area.
- The majority of abductions took place in North Kivu.
- Many healthcare workers in the area work in constant fear of abduction and physical harm.
- Around half of those who were abducted were released within a few hours.
- The status of at least four healthcare workers remains unknown.

SECURITY STRATEGY

The exact reasons for abductions will vary from case to case. However, some abductions may be motivated by community or other stakeholders' mistrust of and resentment towards response actors, or are part of a larger strategy by particular stakeholders to undermine response activities for political, economic or other reasons.

Preventing and responding to such attacks requires a combination of acceptance, protection and deterrence strategies. It is important that organisations are appropriately prepared to respond to the possible abduction of a staff member.

Response organisations can use three security strategies in humanitarian settings:

- **Acceptance** involves building a safe operating environment through the approval, consent and cooperation of communities, local authorities and other stakeholders in the operational area.
- **Protection** involves reducing risk by reducing the vulnerability of the organisation and its employees, e.g. through the use of walls, fences and armoured vehicles..
- **Deterrence** involves reducing risk by containing external threats through the use of counter-threats, e.g. obtaining armed protection and exercising diplomatic/political leverage.

Most response organisations will adopt a combination of these approaches, based on what they perceive as being appropriate to a particular setting. However, it is important to remember that the behaviour and approach of a response actor will impact future efforts to develop community acceptance, e.g. the use of armed protection.[1]

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SECURITY RISK MANAGEMENT MEASURES

In the DRC Ebola response, response actors are encouraged to include the risk of abduction of healthcare workers and other national staff members in their security plans.

Be aware that each abduction incident will be different and will require a unique response. Responding to an abduction incident is a very sensitive and complex process that requires a professional intervention and the involvement of experienced and trained individuals. However, organisations should take the following steps, as appropriate:

- Carry out regular contextual analyses and map local actors in order to understand the role of the various actors in the operational area and the power dynamics involved.

- Conduct a risk assessment to understand the risk of abduction, including likely targets, in a specific operational area. To date, abductions in the DRC have targeted national healthcare workers and predominantly taken place in North Kivu.

- Develop positive relationships with local stakeholders, including community members, local leaders and others. The acceptance and support of these local authorities can sometimes be crucial to preventing abductions in the first instance. These local authorities can also play a crucial role in supporting the positive resolution of an abduction incident should one occur.

- Plan and prepare for the possible abduction of a staff member by developing a crisis management plan that clarifies the crisis management structure, and policies and procedures to be followed in the event of an incident.

- Manage an incident from initial response through to the incident's resolution or closure. The security of information in an abduction incident is particularly important.

- Manage post-incident activities, including aftercare for affected individuals.

Response organisations that experience a staff abduction are encouraged to seek professional advice immediately. More information can be found in EISF's guide '**Abduction and Kidnap Risk Management**'.

Security risk management process

To improve the security of response actors and their access to affected communities, organisations should follow a security risk management process that involves the identification of risks and implementation of mitigating measures. Broadly, this involves:

- carrying out a contextual analysis and mapping the actors in each operational area;

- assessing the risks that response actors will face in each operational area (i.e. by carrying out a risk assessment);

- identifying possible risk management measures to mitigate identified risks. These include:

    - measures that prevent the risk altogether (e.g. not operating in a given context);

    - measures that reduce the likelihood of risks occurring (e.g. implementing a curfew for healthcare responders);

    - measures that reduce the impact should an event happen (e.g. evacuation and emergency medical support);

- developing a security plan that incorporates these identified measures and provides guidance for staff on how to implement them through detailed standard operating procedures and contingency plans;

- implementing a security incident information management system through which security incidents are reported, analysed and used to inform improved security risk management measures.

FURTHER READING

Geneva Call: www.genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/GC-Negotiation-of-humanitarian-access-in-NK_EN2.pdf
ODI: www.odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/GPR_8_revised2.pdf
Devex: www.devex.com/news/minimizing-aid-worker-risk-in-dangerous-environments-94446\
ReliefWeb: www.reliefweb.int/report/world/humanitarian-groups-seek-ways-reduce-attacks-aid-workers
EISF: www.eisf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/0120-Buth-EISF-2010-Abduction-management.pdf
AWSD: www.aidworkersecurity.org/sites/default/files/AidWorkerSecurityReport_2013_web.pdf

OTHER DOCUMENTS IN THE SERIES

1. *Introduction* **to delivering aid and emergency healthcare in insecure settings**
2. **Introduction to** *Security Risk Management*
3. **Security challenge:** *Non-state armed groups*
4. **Security challenge:** *Community resistance and mistrust*
5. **Security challenge:** *Arson attacks on healthcare facilities*
6. **Security challenge:** *Abduction of health workers*
7. **Security challenge:** *Sexual violence and abuse*

RESOURCES OFFERED BY INSECURITY INSIGHT

Mailing list

- Sign up to receive all the *latest news and resources* from Insecurity Insight.

Reports

- *Aid Workers Kidnapped*: This offers an overview of reported verified submissions from Insecurity Insight partner agencies and open-source incidents of aid worker kidnappings and highlights the key trends in 2018..
- *Monthly News Briefs*: These provide briefings on safety, security and access incidents that affect healthcare workers, infrastructure and services around the world. They are compiled from open sources with links to the original information where possible, and provide a summary of WHO SSA-reported events.
- *Attacks on Health Care in the Context of the Ebola Response*: This provides an overview of reported verified submissions from Insecurity Insight partner agencies and open-source incidents affecting the delivery of healthcare in the DRC in 2019.

Datasets

- *Attacks on Health Care in the DRC during the Ebola Response*: This dataset contains verified submissions from Aid in Danger partner agencies and open-source data on incidents affecting the delivery of healthcare in the DRC between January 2018 and November 2019.

Podcasts

- *Humanitarian Incidents podcasts*: These constitute a series of conversations with experts discussing how to understand, manage and use information on incidents, and how this can improve organisations' risk management procedures and access to crisis-affected populations. Developed together with EISF and RedR UK.

Handbook

- *Security Incident Information Management (SIIM):* This guidance handbook and tool kit shares best practice, guidelines, tools and recommendations to enhance organisational security incident information management. Developed together with EISF and RedR UK.

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