



At the end of 2022 Ethiopia remained in a period of food insecurity that the World Food Programme (WFP) in its Famine Early Warning System reported as “among the worst globally, with record-breaking food assistance needs driven by the impacts of prolonged drought and ongoing insecurity”. In May 2018 the United Nations (UN) Security Council adopted **Resolution 2417**, which “recalls the link between armed conflict and violence and conflict-induced food insecurity and the threat of famine”. Resolution 2417 also called on all parties involved in armed conflict to comply fully with international humanitarian law (IHL). The large-scale deterioration in food security in Ethiopia suggests that conflict dynamics have affected aid access and food security. This brief examines examples of conflict events that have affected aid access and humanitarian efforts to address food insecurity in Ethiopia, and is part of a **wider series of analytical reports** that discuss conflict and hunger in a variety of settings and from different perspectives.

Aid agencies have implemented targeted interventions to reduce food insecurity in Ethiopia. In October 2022 the **WFP** reported that it provided food assistance to 2.8 million people and specialist nutrition programmes for 143,000 malnourished children and mothers in the country. However, conflict violence, restrictions, looting and attacks on aid agencies’ reputation as neutral humanitarian actors have made aid access difficult. The safety and well-being of aid workers remain a serious concern.

Twenty-eight aid workers have reportedly been killed in 22 separate events and at least 14 kidnapped since the intensified conflict in Ethiopia started in November 2000. Means of transport and storage facilities for food and fuel have also been attacked and looted. Social-media-driven **disinformation campaigns** have spread false information alleging that aid agencies are supporting conflict parties, including through food deliveries. Such disinformation has been used to explain violence against aid operations, highlighting how online information can impact aid security on the ground, adding to the complexities of the links between conflict and hunger.

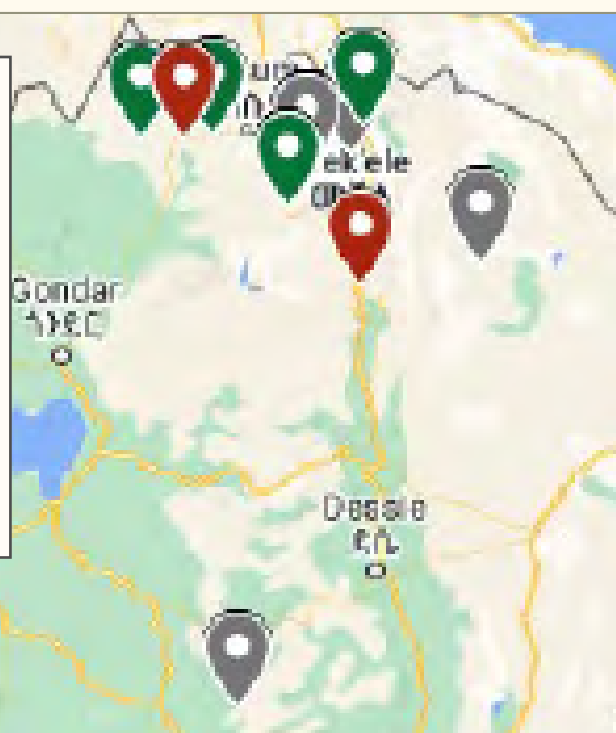
Reported aid worker deaths in Ethiopia, November 2020-October 2022

Wed Madani

25 aid workers deaths occurred in Tigray two in Oromia and one in Afar.

Nine were killed with firearms and two by **armed drones**. The circumstances of several aid worker deaths during the early months of the conflict remain unclear.

All except for two were Ethiopian nationals. Eleven worked directly for international aid agencies, while 14 worked for Ethiopian NGOs subcontracted by international aid agencies to carry out front-line work.



Source: [Insecurity Insight](#)

Drone attack **Firearm** **No information**

The links between conflict and food insecurity are complex and multifaceted. This brief examines a specific link of this kind: how food insecurity is aggravated by conflict dynamics that affect aid access and aid security. Where displacement- and weather-induced food crises occur on a large scale, populations depend on external aid to fulfil their food needs. Consequently, the effects of conflict that limit the possibilities for humanitarian action to fulfil this need aggravate food insecurity.

This brief highlights that, generally, aid workers are at greatest risk of death or injury during periods of active ground fighting. The presence of armed actors and violence seriously affects aid access. In addition, a wide range of restrictions are shrinking the humanitarian space and therefore the ability to deliver much-needed food aid. The brief focuses on two issues in particular: firstly, the way in which **disinformation campaigns undermine aid agencies' humanitarian principles by falsely claiming that they deliver aid in support of conflict parties**. Addressing disinformation on social media can be challenging for aid agencies.

Secondly, the brief discusses the way in which the **increasing use of remotely delivered explosive munitions has increased the complexity of the risks faced by aid workers and humanitarian operations on the ground**. It is difficult for aid agencies to effectively protect their staff and equipment against explosive weapons, which are inherently indiscriminate, because their wide-area effects mean that their ability to destroy and kill always spreads beyond the intended target.

The most concerning factor, however, is that these two issues are linked. Accusations supported by social media disinformation campaigns have been used to explain why aid workers are harmed in the course of their work. For example, when a WFP driver was injured and his vehicle damaged by debris from a drone strike targeting Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) military targets in Tigray, the Ethiopian government accused the TPLF of "using aid trucks for transporting its fighters", and advised aid agencies to limit their movement in areas of active fighting. These accusations were further spread on social media. Read **social media reactions** for more information.

Image from social media suggesting that the WFP functions as the 'logistics department for the TPLF'

Weeks & months pass by and we have yet to hear launch of any investigation into stolen vehicles and stolen fuel by TPLF. This leads only to one conclusion. @WFP was complicit. @WFP is trying to cover up for TPLF. There can be no other logical explanation. #SayNoMore #DisarmTPLF



WFP
The Logistics Department of TPLF

4:05 PM · Oct 28, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

389 Retweets 16 Quote Tweets 338 Likes

Source: Twitter

Image from social media suggesting that the WFP convoys are used to transport TPLF fighters.



Source: Twitter

This brief is intended to support aid agencies' management of the security risks they face in Ethiopia by raising key questions that need further attention. On a wider level, it is designed as a contribution to the understanding of how hunger and conflict are linked in complex ways and, as such, is intended to strengthen preparedness and resilience within the aid sector to enable effective responses to food insecurity in conflict-affected areas in accordance with humanitarian principles.

Background: ongoing insecurity in Ethiopia

Historical tensions within Ethiopia escalated into armed conflict in November 2020 when the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) entered Tigray. The ENDF withdrew from Tigray in June 2021 and the Tigrayan Defence Forces (TDF) in turn entered neighbouring regions. In December 2021 the TDF almost took the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, until it was forced back by the ENDF.

The conflict has been exacerbated by Eritrea's military support to the **Ethiopian government** and Eritrean forces' incursions into Tigray and Oromia. The Amhara special and militia forces have also supported the Ethiopian government, while the TDF developed an alliance with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA).

A first ceasefire was signed between the TPLF (the political wing of the TDF) and the Ethiopian government in March 2022, but in August 2022 fighting resumed. A second ceasefire with the declared intention to start a peace process was signed in November 2022. The conflict in Oromia continued, however, with the ENDF attempting to subdue the **OLA**. Fighting in **Amhara and Afar** also continued sporadically, affecting communities in North Gondar, North Wollo and Wag Hemra zones in Amhara region, among others.

Food insecurity and aid response

By November 2022 food insecurity levels had risen dramatically in large areas of Ethiopia. Over **24 million** people were projected to have been affected by drought at the end of October 2022, and according to the **WFP**, an estimated 13 million people needed food assistance across the northern part of the country. The WFP predicted that food insecurity would remain at Phase 4 (Emergency IPC Phase 4) and Phase 3 (Crisis IPC Phase 3) until at least January 2023 in northern, central, southern and south-eastern Ethiopia.

Heavy rains and flood in **Gambella** between August and October 2022 aggravated food insecurity as over 90,000 people were displaced throughout Afar, Amhara and Gambella, with the majority – 86,000 – in Gambella alone. A widespread **cholera outbreak** throughout the Oromia and Somalia regions reinforced the need for a widespread and robust nutritional support system to be implemented to avoid the worst impact of the current famine, which was caused by both drought and floods.

Aid operations and conflict

According to the **UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs** (OCHA), over 22 million people in Ethiopia received some form of humanitarian assistance between January and August 2022, including ten million across drought-affected areas. The various phases of the conflict affected aid operations in different ways, and this brief highlights some distinct elements that hindered humanitarian access.

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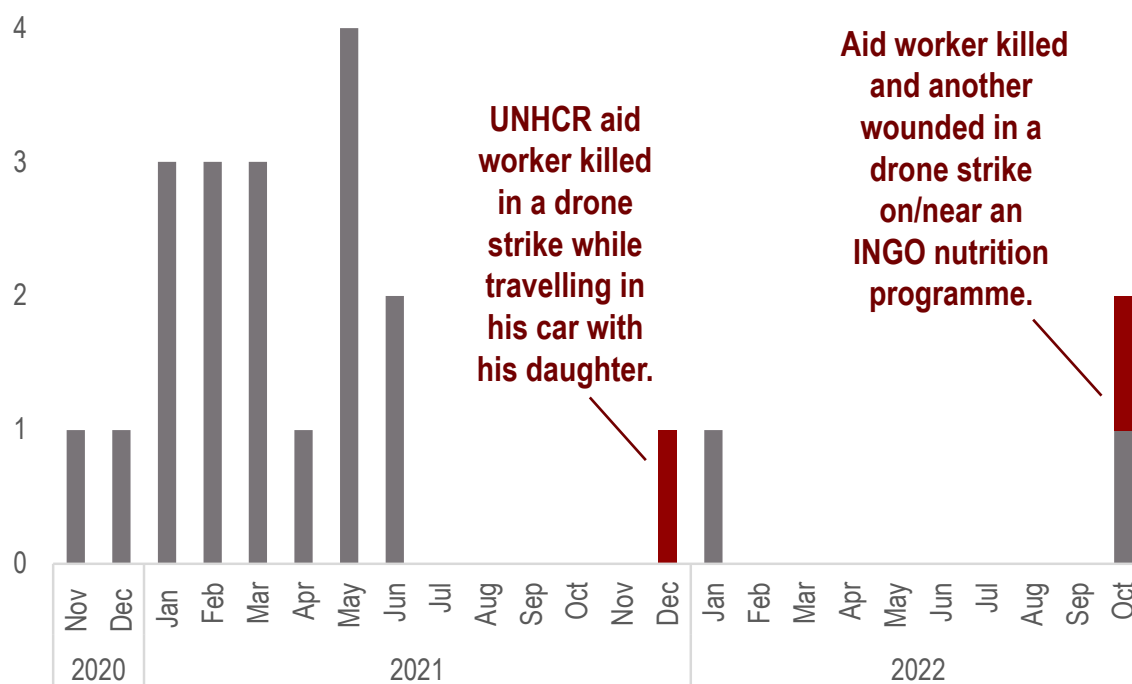
Risk for aid operations among moving ground troops

Aid workers were most at risk of death or serious injury during the first phase of the conflict between November 2020 and June 2021, which was marked by troop movements and ground fighting across Tigray, Oromia, Afar and Amhara. A total of 24 aid workers were reportedly killed during this seven-and-a-half-month period.

This means that on average an aid worker lost his or her life every ten days.

Reported aid worker death events in Ethiopia, November 2020-October 2022

Aid workers were most at risk during the period of ground fighting. Two of the most recent aid worker deaths were caused by drone strikes.



Aid worker killed by drone strike event (2) All other aid worker death event (20)

Source: [Insecurity Insight](#)

Aid worker kidnappings

While the first ceasefire improved the overall situation for aid agencies in Tigray, four aid workers were reportedly stopped and held by unidentified armed forces in Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz regions between June and July 2022.

In two cases the aid workers were reportedly questioned and later released unharmed. These incidents underline the suspicion with which aid activities are frequently viewed and highlight the precarious situation in which aid workers are trying to deliver aid.

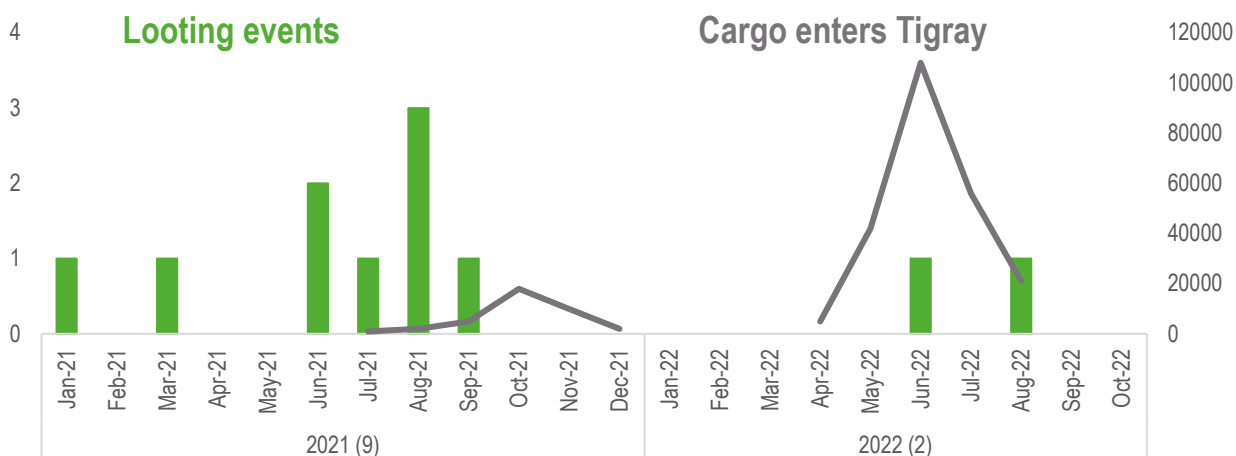
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Challenges in running aid programmes during supply shortages

Following the ENDF’s June 2021 decision to withdraw from Tigray, the movement of fuel and food supplies into the region was controlled and restricted. Electricity, telecommunications and banking services were cut off, and Tigray was effectively placed under blockade. As a result, aid agencies struggled to work with limited supplies. Aid access improved during the period of the first ceasefire signed in March 2022, and aid delivery increased.

During periods of extreme shortages, aid agency supplies are at risk of looting. In at least one incident this also led to the kidnap and death of aid workers.

Reported looting of humanitarian aid events and cargo entering Tigray via road convoys, January 2021-October 2022



Source: Insecurity Insight and ACAPS

Reported looting of humanitarian aid, January 2021-October 2022

- 12 fuel trucks were stolen from a WFP warehouse in Mekelle by TPLF members (Aug. 2022). Read [social media reactions](#) to this event.
- An LNGO convoy of ten trucks were commandeered by armed forces in Tigray. Five drivers returned safely, two were killed, and three are unaccounted for (Jun 2021).
- Several aid warehouses were looted, a health centre broken into and an LNGO aid worker injured during a distribution activity at Bambasi Refugee Camp in Benishangul-Gumuz region (Jun 2022).



Source: Insecurity Insight

Risk for aid operations from air strikes

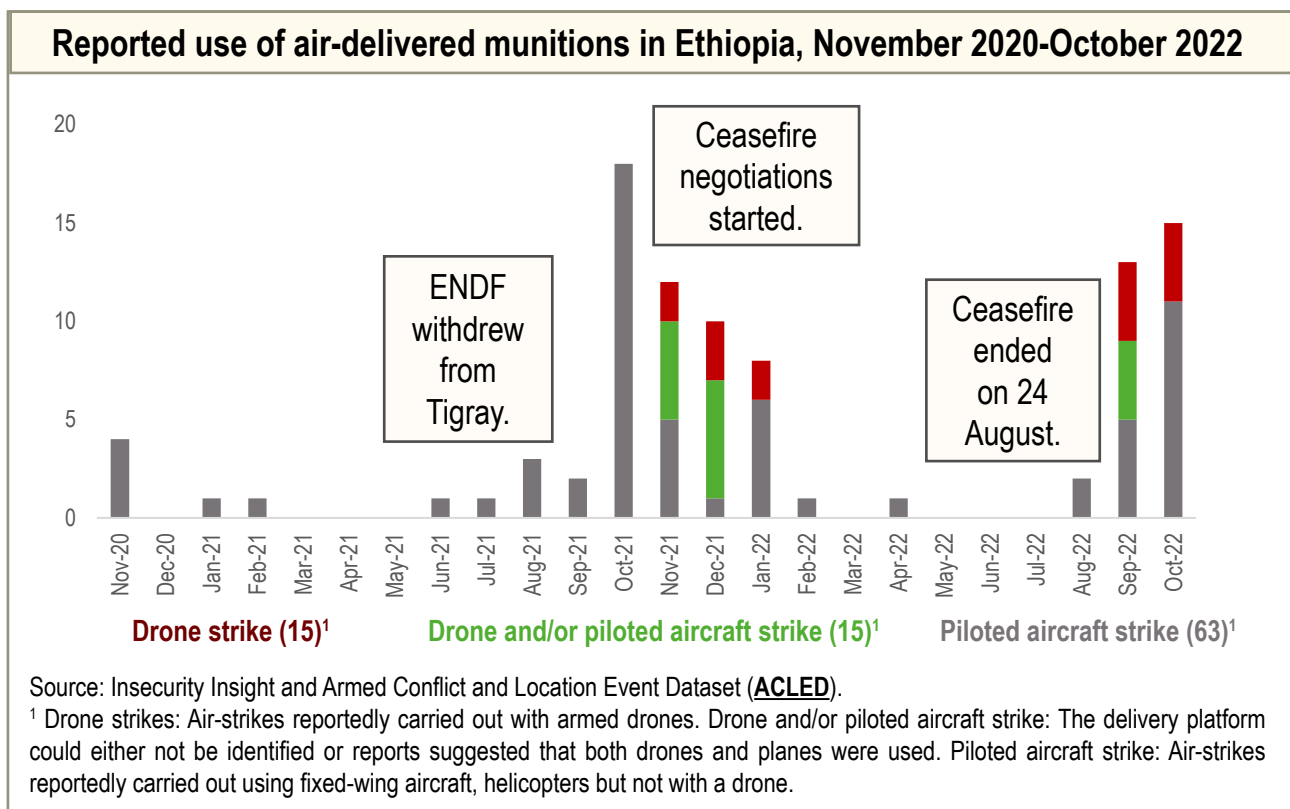
Air strikes have been an important element in the conflict in two distinct phases so far. Following its troop withdrawal from Tigray, the ENDF started an air strike campaign that intensified from October 2021. In November 2021 the use of armed drones was first reported. The use of air strikes died down in February 2021, but was resumed in August 2022 after the ceasefire ended. Air strikes pose specific risks for aid agencies because they can be indiscriminate, often not fulfilling the IHL obligation to distinguish between civilian and military objects. For example, an authorised UN flight into Tigray had to be **aborted** because air strikes were ongoing at the time when the aircraft had been cleared to fly, and it risked being shot down by air-defence systems.

However, while a total of 93 air strikes by piloted aircraft were recorded between November 2020 and 30 September 2022, no aid worker was reported to have been killed by the indiscriminate destruction caused by the explosives these aircraft dropped. Two aid workers, however, were killed in what appear to be targeted drone attacks:

A UNHCR aid worker was killed in a drone strike while travelling in his car with his daughter in December 2021 and an aid worker was killed and another wounded in a drone strike on/near an INGO nutrition programme activity (October 2022).

The nature of the armed drones used in these attacks makes it highly likely that the attacks were targeted at the car and those present on the ground during the nutrition programme activity in Tigray. However, there is no information as to whether the vehicle and people were targeted because they were mistaken for military vehicles/gatherings of combatants or knowingly targeted as aid workers on an aid activity. Read our **analysis** on armed drones and the humanitarian consequences arising from their use.

These two incidents highlight that the introduction of unmanned armed drones in November 2021 raises several policy issues that require further attention from the wider policy community, such as how aid agencies can demand clarification around tragic incidents such as the ones described, what the appropriate mechanisms are for accountability following civilian harm in conflict-related activities, and how aid agencies should mitigate the risk from armed drone attacks.



Disinformation spreading doubt about aid agencies' humanitarian intentions

On 24 August 2022 members of the TPLF forcibly broke into a WFP warehouse in Mekelle city, Tigray region, and looted 12 full fuel tankers loaded with 570,000 litres of fuel intended for WFP operations, putting millions at risk of starvation as a result. This **incident was exploited in a social media disinformation campaign** claiming that the WFP had deliberately aided the TPLF with food and arms supplies.

Looting does not only put aid workers at risk, but also causes the loss of stocked supplies such as fuel, medication or food, which are often hard to replace. When supplies are stolen by conflict parties, these incidents can also be exploited in social media disinformation campaigns claiming that the real reason behind such lootings is that of providing covert support to a conflict party.

Looting by conflict parties carries a high risk of undermining trust among both civilians and the government itself in the humanitarian principles of neutral aid.

Multiple social media influencers regularly posted allegations that called into question the neutral humanitarian objectives of the aid intervention. In such allegations food aid is misrepresented as support for a conflict party. Reference to disinformation is then used to justify aid restrictions and even harm inflicted on aid workers.

For example, in September 2022 a WFP driver was injured and his vehicle damaged by debris from a drone strike targeting TPLF military targets in Tigray. The Ethiopian government accused the TPLF of “using aid trucks for transporting its fighters” and advised aid agencies to limit their movement in areas of active fighting.



Conflict, hunger and aid access

As we have seen, in May 2018 the UN Security Council adopted **Resolution 2417**, which stressed that

responding effectively to humanitarian needs in armed conflict, including the threat of conflict-induced famine and food insecurity in situations of armed conflict, requires respect for international humanitarian law by all parties to conflict, underlining the parties' obligations related to protecting civilians and civilian objects, meeting the basic needs of the civilian population within their territory or under their effective control, and allowing and facilitating the rapid and unimpeded passage of impartial humanitarian relief to all those in need.

This brief with examples from Ethiopia highlights that respect for IHL needs to be strengthened to ensure aid access. While aid agencies firmly subscribe to the fundamental humanitarian principles guiding their work, far too often their activities are perceived to be linked to the interests of individual conflict parties. If the objective of a conflict party is to attack a specific social group, access to food itself becomes a tool in the conflict, and food aid is instrumentalised as part of the conflict.

Aid agencies have a duty of care towards their staff members when operating in conflict zones. Each death of those trying to provide aid in difficult circumstances is a tragedy for families and colleagues, and often causes lasting trauma for surviving aid workers. Such tragic deaths affect how aid agencies are able to deploy personnel on the ground. The experience of losing colleagues changes the extent to which aid agencies are prepared to expose staff to risks, which in turn affects their ability to reach those in need of aid.

The review of the patterns of harm among aid workers in Ethiopia highlights the following points:

- Troop movements on the ground continue to pose particularly high risks to aid workers and aid operations that are exceptionally challenging at all times and require high levels of situation awareness.
- The use of unmanned armed drones creates new risks that will require both the adaption of aid implementation strategies and a wider process to demand IHL-related explanations in relation to remotely planned and executed attacks using drone technology.
- The increasing use of social media to falsely represent aid agencies' intentions requires attention and intervention from social media platform administrators.
- Aid agencies need to be aware that non-critical incidents, such as warehouse break-ins and looting, can be particularly vulnerable to misrepresentation for the purpose of spreading disinformation.

The way forward: aid delivery in the age of unmanned armed drones

The ability of armed drones to hit specific targets is becoming increasingly accurate, and therefore their use should reduce the indiscriminate violence that often results from attacks using air-delivered munitions. Better information on how intelligence is gathered and used for the selection of targets is needed to help aid agencies take measures to avoid being accidentally mistaken for military targets. There is also a need for a process of accountability when aid operations are targeted.

Recommendations

Communications in the age of social media

Social media are increasingly used to spread doubts about aid agencies' neutral and independent humanitarian agenda. This is one of the factors that increase risk to aid agencies and can be used to justify limiting access to populations in need. The impact of online disinformation on security contexts on the ground needs to be better understood and better mitigated.

The following is therefore recommended to help deal with this issue:

- Better mechanisms are needed to request the removal of false and misleading information from social media platforms. Humanitarian principles need to be communicated more proactively both on social media and offline in a format that is accessible to a wide variety of audiences.
- Aid agencies need to be aware of events that can be misrepresented on social media and develop appropriate response mechanisms. For example, they need to ensure transparency and provide channels for civilians to ask questions about their work.

- Education is required on the central role aid agencies play in providing humanitarian aid in a wide variety of settings.
- Aid agencies should be aware of how non-critical security incidents, such as looting, may be exploited on social media to misrepresent their work.

Armed drones

- Aid agencies should consider how aid operations may look from the potentially blurred aerial platforms used to guide armed drones and avoid situations or actions that may give the impression of military troop movements.
- Aid agencies should avoid operations that require large groups of people to gather in one place at the same time or that deliver aid close to buildings that could potentially be mistaken for military objectives.
- The aid sector as a whole should identify ways to request explanations for targeted drone attacks on aid operations with the support of the wider UN system.

Methodology

Insecurity Insight monitors the way in which conflict directly impacts aid operations, health, education and food security, as reported in publicly available sources. Identified information is shared with the link to the original source via news briefs (see [aid](#), [health](#) and [education, protection](#)). All incidents, including those reported after the publication of news briefs, are collated in the Security in Numbers Database (SiND) of the Aid in Danger (AID) project to allow the analysis of patterns of harm. Insecurity Insight also collaborates with [ACLED \(Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project\)](#). For this brief, Insecurity Insight used incident information provided by ACLED on the use of air-delivered explosives. ACLED data was accessed on 5 November 2022. Background information has been compiled using publicly available reports and documentation. Social media analysis has been carried out using social media searches, and additional images have been viewed to assess the use of armed drones.

Further resources

- Data on violent and threatening incidents affecting aid operations, education, health care, refugees and IDPs, and publicly-reported cases of sexual violence by law enforcement bodies, conflict actors, conflict-related sexual violence, and sexual violence that targets IDPs/refugees or vulnerable beneficiaries in Ethiopia to ensure staff safety and better response outcomes is available on [HDX](#).
- [Ethiopia](#) and [Social Media Monitoring](#) websites
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