

POLICY NOTE

# ARRESTS AND DETENTIONS OF AID WORKERS

## Key Trends and Implications 1997-2025



## Key Messages

- Arrests and detentions of aid workers have increased sharply since 2021, reaching unprecedented levels in 2025.
- National staff are disproportionately affected, reinforcing structural risk asymmetries within the aid sector, particularly for local partner organisations and volunteer groups.
- Health programmes and multi-sector programmes that combine for example health and nutrition, are particularly frequently affected.
- Recent trends point to fewer but larger-scale incidents, including coordinated or sequential events affecting multiple aid agencies, significantly increasing operational and political impact.
- In most cases, the reasons for arrest or detention are unclear, disputed, or inconsistently communicated.
- Context analysis indicates that arrests frequently occur amid heightened security measures, movement restrictions, military operations, or administrative enforcement related to permits, registration, and despite prior coordination efforts with conflict parties. This suggests aid workers are often apprehended as part of broader measures rather than for individual wrongdoing.
- Many arrests and detentions appear linked to efforts to control, intimidate, or exert leverage over humanitarian actors and access.
- The rising frequency of arrests and detentions highlights the need for more robust, context-specific risk analysis that accounts for perceptions of criminalisation as well as formal legal compliance.
- Arrests and detentions underscore aid agencies' duty of care towards national staff and local partners, including the responsibility to mitigate risks of arbitrary detention and to provide crisis and post-incident support to affected individuals and their families.
- The increase in arrests and detentions reflects a broader erosion of respect for humanitarian norms, reinforcing the need for principled engagement and sustained humanitarian diplomacy, particularly in fragmented and highly securitised conflict environments.

## Background and Scope

This policy brief analyses 701 incidents of aid worker arrest or detention recorded between 1997 and 2025, affecting 1,775 aid workers globally. Arrests and detention are defined as deprivation of liberty carried out by state or non-state armed actors who have assumed the de facto control over a territory. They range from short temporary measures to formal legal acts.

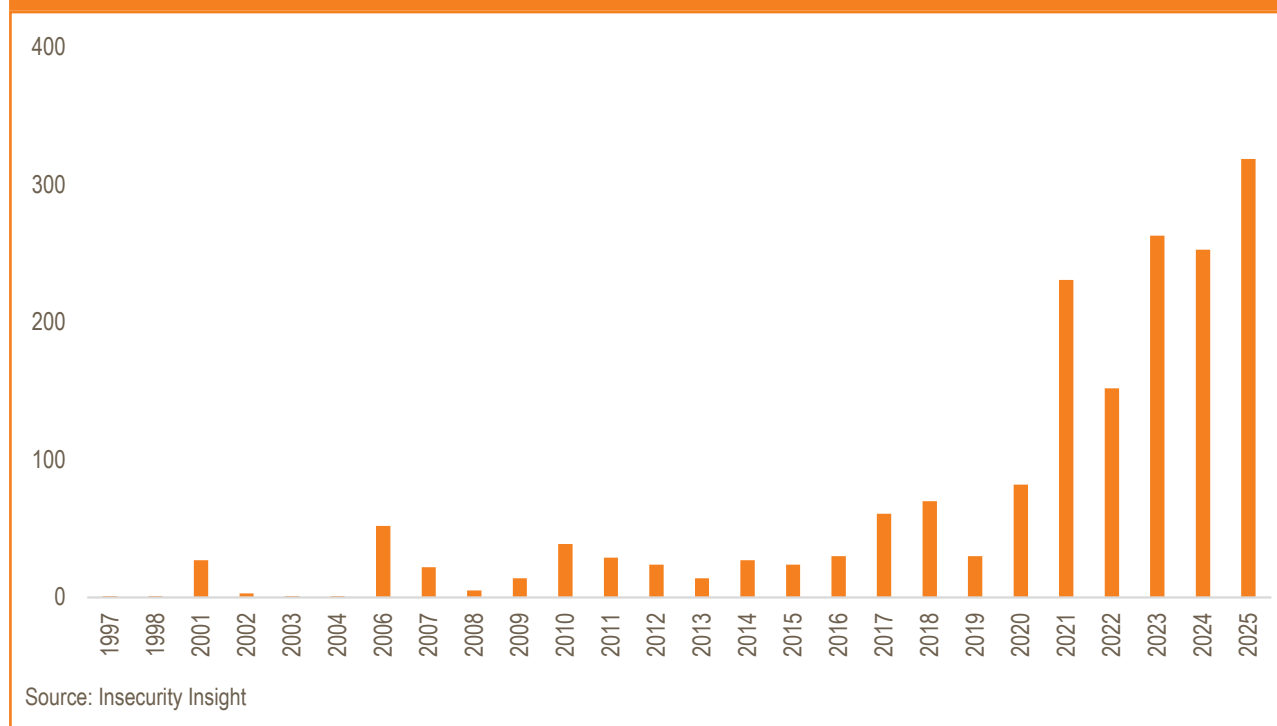
The data was collected by Insecurity Insight from open sources and reflect publicly-reported information. While the dataset is neither comprehensive nor representative, it provides valuable insights into broader global and contextual trends.

## Global Trends

### Rising numbers since 2021

The number of aid workers affected by arrest or detention increases sharply from 2021 onwards (see Figure 1). While the number of incidents peaks in 2023-2024, 2025 records the highest number of individuals affected, indicating a shift toward mass arrest events rather than a simple increase in incident frequency.

Figure 1: Aid workers arrested or detained, 1997-2025



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## Diverging Risk Profile

This divergence suggests that humanitarian organisations face not only a higher likelihood of arrest but also greater operational disruption per incident, particularly when multiple staff are affected simultaneously. The risk increasingly extends beyond individual organisations to the broader aid sector when multiple agencies are targeted within the same context or time period.

## Geographic Concentration

### **Arrests and detentions are highly concentrated in a small number of contexts:**

- Myanmar shows a sustained spike from 2021, consistent with a highly restrictive post-coup operating environment.
- Afghanistan peaks sharply in 2023, suggesting intensified pressure on aid actors over time following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Arrests disproportionately affect health and multi-sector aid workers, consistent with intensified regulation and suspicion of service delivery and data collection.
- The occupied Palestinian territory dominates 2025 figures, where a small number of incidents affect exceptionally large numbers of aid workers. Health and emergency-related programming were particularly often in context of restrictions of movement.
- Sudan (2024) and Yemen (2025) show marked increases in detentions by non-state armed actors, linked to specific groups and locations and associated with efforts to assert territorial control.
- Single high-profile arrests can have a chilling effect on the entire aid sector, often followed by self-imposed restrictions on activities to reduce further risk.

These patterns indicate that arrests and detentions are closely linked to political and conflict dynamics rather than evenly distributed global risk. Their impact is shaped not only by frequency, but also by perceptions of risk, which are influenced by communication, narratives, and precedent within specific contexts.

## Arrests and Detentions by State and Non-State Armed Actors

### **Arrests and detentions by state actors**

Arrests by state actors often occur in contexts of heightened security control, administrative enforcement, or conflict escalation. Allegations of espionage or support to opposing factions are commonly cited. Even routine aid activities, such as needs assessments or data collection, may be interpreted as intelligence gathering.

### **Detentions by non-state armed actors**

Detentions or de facto arrests by non-state armed actors are fewer in number but have had a significant operational impact, particularly in Sudan and Yemen. These incidents often appear deliberate and coercive, suggesting their use as a tool to influence humanitarian access, visibility, or political leverage.

## Who Is Affected

### National vs. international staff

Where staff status is known, national staff account for the majority of arrests and detentions, particularly in cases involving non-state armed actors. This reflects greater exposure, visibility, and more limited protective leverage compared to international staff.

While arrests of international staff are less frequent, they can have a disproportionate operational impact, often triggering organisational risk mitigation measures such as suspension of certain activities and staff travel.

### Gender

Gender-disaggregated data remain incomplete. Available records indicate that arrests of male aid workers are more frequently reported. It is unclear whether this reflects workforce composition, differential risk exposure, or underreporting of arrests involving female aid workers. Improved gender-disaggregated reporting is needed for more robust analysis.

### Programme types affected by arrests and detentions

Across the dataset, arrests and detentions most frequently affect aid workers engaged in health-related programmes, followed closely by incidents involving multi-sectoral programming, reflecting the centrality and visibility of these activities in high-risk environments as well as Insecurity Insight's specific focus on health programmes that may have resulted in an over identification of health programmes compared to other activities.

The high rate in which health programmes were affected by arrests, underscored the heightened exposure of medical staff operating in contested, militarised, or heavily policed settings, including at checkpoints, during referrals, or in camp environments. Multi-sector responses often involving integrated health, protection, food security, and coordination functions are also heavily impacted, suggesting that large-scale or highly visible operations face elevated scrutiny and enforcement risk.

A substantial proportion of incidents are recorded with no programme information, reflecting limitations in public reporting, but overall trends indicate that programmes central to life-saving assistance and coordination are most exposed to arrest-related risks, particularly in highly securitised and politically sensitive contexts.

## Locations and Modus Operandi

- State forces most commonly arrested on roads, at checkpoints, and in refugee camp settings, indicating enforcement linked to movement and access control.
- Non-state armed actors more frequently detained aid workers in homes and offices, suggesting targeted, intelligence-led actions by de facto authorities.

These patterns point to distinct risk environments requiring different mitigation approaches. However, they may also reflect context-specific dynamics rather than universal differences in state versus non-state operational behaviour.

## Stated and implied contexts of arrests and detentions

Public reporting on aid worker arrests rarely provides clear or verifiable reasons. Where explanations are offered, they are typically framed in security or military terms, including allegations related to terrorism, national security, or emergency regulations.

Many incidents occur in the context of movement restrictions, such as arrests at checkpoints, during travel, or following curfew enforcement, indicating that aid workers are often apprehended as part of broader mobility and access control measures rather than for individual actions.

Administrative and bureaucratic factors also feature in a subset of cases, including issues related to permits, registration, visas, coordination requirements, or authorisation to operate. In several contexts, arrests coincide with heightened political tension, protests, or active military operations, suggesting aid workers may be caught up in wider crackdowns.

International staff are at times targeted due to nationality amid geopolitical tensions rather than their role in humanitarian work. Detentions by non-state armed actors are less likely to be accompanied by stated reasons but often occur amid contested territorial control, stalled access negotiations, or efforts to exert leverage over humanitarian presence.

Overall, these patterns suggest that arrests and detentions are context-driven rather than individual, reflecting shrinking humanitarian space, increasing securitisation of aid, and deteriorating operating environments rather than credible criminal allegations against individual aid workers.

## Policy Implications

### **Trauma caused by arrest requires strengthened mental health support for aid workers.**

Aid agencies have a duty of care to staff who have experienced arrest and detention, including providing structured post-release support to help them recover from the long-term psychological impacts of a deeply distressing experience.

### **Context-specific risk analysis is essential**

Arrest and detention trends are shaped by local political and conflict dynamics rather than universal global patterns.

### **Protection of national staff requires greater prioritisation**

The disproportionate impact on national staff and local partners highlights persistent inequities in risk exposure and protection.

### **Mass and cumulative arrests demand coordinated responses**

The rise in large-scale incidents and multi-agency arrests requires coordinated legal, diplomatic, and operational strategies to preserve humanitarian access.

### **Rising arrests signal declining respect for humanitarian norms**

Increasing arrests and detentions underscore the need for principled engagement and sustained humanitarian diplomacy, particularly in fragmented and highly securitised conflict environments.

## About Insecurity Insight

Insecurity Insight aims to enable a world in which civilians are protected from violence in armed conflict, and in which local, national, and international civilian organisations are empowered to mitigate the consequences of violence by effectively delivering assistance, healthcare, educational opportunities, and protection to people affected by armed conflict. As an H2H (humanitarian to humanitarian) association, Insecurity Insight supports the work of aid agencies and other civil society organisations by providing publicly available information and analysis for evidence-based policies.

Insecurity Insight applies a comprehensive data quality assurance process to maintain the accuracy, credibility, reliability and ethical integrity of its datasets verifying data credibility and applying privacy and security policies while ensuring transparency, accountability and understandability.

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