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Afghanistan - the world's most dangerous place for aid workers

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KABUL, 18 April 2013 (IRIN) - Attacks on aid workers in Afghanistan - the world's most dangerous country for aid workers - are likely to be as high in 2013 as the worst year on record, 2011, according to a new report from the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO) published today.

The latest figures - which tally only incidents affecting NGO personnel, excluding UN aid workers - show that in the first three months of this year, NGOs were affected by 39 separate incidents of violence, a 63 percent increase over 2012. Twenty incidents were attributed to armed opposition groups, 11 to pro-government forces and eight to criminals.

The latest incident involving violence against aid workers, not included in the report, occurred on 15 April. Two members of an Afghan Red Crescent Society medical team were killed and two others injured when gunmen attacked them as they travelled back from Sheberghan, the provincial capital of Jowzjan Province.

"It seems to be a deliberate act, however, we cannot speculate on who committed the acts. The Afghan Red Crescent emblem was clearly marked on the car," Gherardo Pontrandolfi, head of the International Committee of the Red Cross delegation in Kabul, told IRIN.

"This is a tragedy, not only for the families of the deceased, but for all those needing medical attention, because now units like these might find it even more difficult to work in certain parts of the country," Pontrandolfi said in a statement.

The increase in attacks on aid workers follows a rise in all attacks across the country, ANSO director Tomas Muzik told IRIN.

"Last year, we saw significantly less opposition activity in the field due to winter conditions and it being the first year international forces started to downsize.

"This year is quite different. We have once again seen a 47 percent increase in the opposition attacks [overall]. Since we are already seeing this data in the first three months, it is quite strong for us to anticipate that this year will be as violent or slightly less violent than 2011 for NGO workers."

Aid workers vulnerable

According to the 2012 Aid Worker Security Report - which includes NGO and UN aid workers - 308 aid workers were killed, kidnapped or wounded worldwide in 2011, up from 245 in 2010.

These were the highest figures ever recorded, and Afghanistan had the highest number of attacks that year, with 51 of the total 151 violent incidents. In those attacks, 31 aid workers in Afghanistan were killed, 29 wounded and 32 kidnapped.

The Aid Worker Security Report says aid workers are most vulnerable to attacks in weak, unstable states with active, internal armed conflict.

"There is so much violence in the field that NGOs, given their presence in the field, are exposed to this. It doesn't mean they are the ones targeted, it means they are the ones that accidentally receive rocket fire during engagements," said Muzik.

In addition to opposition-related violence, NGOs have seen a spike in intrusions into NGO project sites by Afghan and international security forces, from three cases last year to 11 this year, according to the ANSO figures.

Anti-government groups are responsible for 40 to 60 percent of NGO attacks, but the majority of these cases are thought to be collateral or accidental exposure to violence rather than direct targeting, said the ANSO report.

"We understand that neither the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the Taliban, nor any other factions such as Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin would be averse on a political level to NGO existence in the country," said Muzik.

ANSO also highlights a decline in rural criminal offenses against aid workers. In the first three months of last year, Afghanistan had five NGO casualties, all tied to criminal activity. In the same period of this year, nine NGO casualties were recorded, all linked to opposition attacks.

Humanitarian access unstable

Aid workers and civilians exist alongside armed militias, formal security forces and criminal groups, and telling them apart can often be a challenge, according to research by Human Rights Watch.

Aid groups spend a long time negotiating for humanitarian access, but analysts and officials say unstable command structures in anti-government groups mean those armed on the ground may not be under the strict control of their leaders.

The situation is complicated in Afghanistan by the desire of humanitarian actors - both UN aid agencies and NGOs - to distance themselves from the United Nation's Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), a political mission working closely with the government.

"We as humanitarians want to distinguish ourselves from this whole thing," said one UN humanitarian official in Afghanistan, who asked not to be named, referring to UNAMA.

"But still for people in the field in the villages, it's all UN," he said.

Looking ahead

With international forces continuing to hand over responsibility for security to Afghan government forces, the security situation will likely change over the next two years.

A recent report by the Overseas Development Institution (ODI) suggests that after the withdrawal of international security forces, aid agencies will need to work more with opposition forces.

"Aid agencies' access negotiations with the Taliban will be critical after 2014. Establishing effective engagement policies is fundamental to reaching all Afghans in need," said the report.

That will mean NGOs will need to establish clear engagement policies if they are to continue to operate with a degree of safety throughout the country, says Muzik.

"NGOs will be able to operate in Afghanistan to the extent that we are able to negotiate access with the combatants and that the combatants do not directly target NGOs," he said.

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