

3.4.1 The Independent Panel on Safety and Security of UN Personnel and Premises Worldwide

On 11 December 2007, the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) detonated a car bomb outside the UN office in Algiers, the capital of Algeria. The attack, which deliberately targeted the United Nations, killed seventeen UN staff, injured forty, and destroyed the building. In response, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon established the Independent Panel on Safety and Security of UN Personnel and Premises Worldwide (IPSS), led by Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi, to recommend improvements to the UN's security management system worldwide.

In its June 2008 report, the panel cited several improvements in the security system since the establishment of the Department of Safety and Security in 2005, including the adoption of threat and risk assessment methodology. Nonetheless, it identified several priority areas—including weak accountability, leadership, internal management, and oversight—that had not been adequately addressed despite similar recommendations made by an independent panel established after the deadly 2003 attack against the UN office in Baghdad, Iraq.

The IPSS emphasized the primary responsibility of member states, and called for more transparent information-sharing by governments on matters concerning the security of UN operations. The panel also reaffirmed the decentralization of day-to-day security decisionmaking under designated officials at the country or mission

level; recommended improving both the security training provided to designated officials and UN security team members in the field, and the recruitment profile for security officers; and called for a proactive balance between security needs and program delivery, particularly humanitarian assistance. Among its urgent recommendations, the panel called for replacing the system of security phases with one based on risk management; implementing minimum security standards for UN offices in vulnerable locations; and reducing the perception of inequity between national and international personnel by improving the transparency and accessibility of information on working conditions.

The public image of the United Nations also has implications for the safety of its operations. The panel argued that some of the UN's decisions and statements “are seen as ignoring the very principles on which the Organization was founded. . . . The UN is then seen by those directly concerned, and by the many millions around the world sympathetic to their causes, as being on the wrong side of justice.” To restore the credibility of the UN, it called for greater adherence to the principles of the UN Charter and greater demonstration of the organization's impartiality and neutrality.

Following completion of the panel's report, the Under-Secretary of Safety and Security, Sir David Vaness, resigned, taking full responsibility for any lapses in security

that may have led to the high level of fatalities in the December 2007 attack. As of late October 2008, he remained at his post, pending identification and confirmation of a replacement.

A subsequent panel, the Independent Panel on Accountability—headed by Ralph Zacklin, former assistant secretary-general of the UN Office of Legal Affairs—was established by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on the recommendation of the IPSS to specifically investigate the individual culpability of UN personnel for security shortcomings related to the Algiers attack. The Independent Panel on Accountability submitted its findings in October 2008, recommending administrative measures against several UN staff responsible for security in Algeria. The report also confirmed findings of the IPSS related to the overall supervision and management of the Department of Safety and Security; the political manipulation of the system of security phases by host governments; and security system inconsistencies from country to country, including a preoccupation with high-risk areas of operation, like Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Somalia, at the expense of other potential sources of threat.

Implementation of the reforms recommended by the independent panels, many of which are systemic in nature, will be contingent upon finances from the assessed and voluntary budgets.