Box 3.11 Aid Worker Security Database

The rising number of armed attacks against civilian aid operations in current conflicts has spurred new efforts to improve the capacity of aid workers to assess and mitigate their security risk. An important component of this effort is better reporting, tracking, analyzing, and sharing of information among humanitarian organizations on these attacks. Over the past several years, incident data tracking by individual agencies has begun to improve; however, gaps and underreporting continue, and the vast majority of organizations have no means or a very inconsistent approach to incident tracking and analysis. Partly because aid agencies have relied for so long on perception and anecdotal information to drive their security decisionmaking, they find it difficult to shift to a more standardized, centralized approach to documenting and analyzing security incidents. As a result, while aid personnel tend to agree that a centralized tracking system would help individual and collective decisionmaking, the opportunity and organizational drivers to realize such a system have been missing. Seeking to fill this information gap, on 19 August 2010, marking the second World Humanitarian Day, Humanitarian Outcomes launched the online version of the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD).

The AWSD tracks major incidents of violence against aid workers, with data going back to 1997. Initiated in 2005, the AWSD remains the single most comprehensive global source of this data, providing a much-needed quantitative evidence base for analysis of the changing security environment for civilian aid operations. Statistics provided by the AWSD formed the basis of a major study released in September 2006 by the Humanitarian Policy Group of the Overseas Development Institute and the Center on International Cooperation at New York University, as well as briefing papers and data updates in 2006 and 2009. The AWSD figures and related trend analyses have been extensively cited in reports and official statements by the United Nations, nongovernmental organizations, governments, and a wide range of media outlets.

With the launching of the related website (www.aidworkersecurity.org), for the first time global data on attacks against aid workers are publicly accessible. Having removed details such as the names of individual organizations and victims, the online version of the database contains all major incidents of deliberate violence (resulting in death, abduction, or serious injury) committed against aid workers across the world. Each incident report contains the location, date, type of organization (e.g., local and international NGOs and Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies, UN agencies, and the ICRC), and whether the victims were national or international staff. The AWSD also records the type of tactics or means of violence used in the attacks. Incident reports are systematically collected from public sources and augmented by internal information provided directly to the project by aid organizations. The project has also formed agreements with a number of regional and field-level security consortiums for direct information sharing and verification of incidents. Incident reports are cross-checked and verified with the relevant agencies on a quarterly basis.

High insecurity for aid workers can significantly reduce access to a needy population and limit both the amount and quality of aid provided. To better understand and measure this serious implication of aid worker attacks, the research team is increasing documentation of the impacts of this insecurity, such as suspensions of programs and withdrawals in the aftermath of attacks.

Over the next few years, the AWSD research team will provide constant monitoring and updated analysis of trends in the security environment for aid operations. It will refine and further systematize its methodology for gathering and verifying incident data, and will seek an institutional partner within the international aid community to house and sustain the database for the use of all humanitarian practitioners, policy makers and researchers in future.