EVACUATION PLANNING

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1. Introduction
The aid community is facing a situation of ongoing insecurity in which it is one of a number of key targets of an insurgency operation which commenced at the time of the US-led military intervention in Iraq of March 2003 and which shows no sign of abating. While agencies have, up to now, responded by seeking to maintain their operations to the extent possible, albeit with growing restrictions on staff mobility, there is the ever present risk that circumstances may dictate an emergency evacuation of agency personnel, both Afghan and international. It is likely that most agencies will have already drawn up emergency evacuation plans in relation to their programmes in Afghanistan. This briefing is aimed at the few agencies which would find it helpful to benefit from a comprehensive overview of the procedures normally in place to deal with emergency situations. It may also be found useful for individuals travelling to Afghanistan as researchers or consultants, to help them ensure that they are covered by the evacuation plans of their commissioning agencies.

2. Formal Evacuation Plans
Agencies tend to draw up separate plans for their Afghan and their expatriate staff to cover emergency situations.

The emergency evacuation plans of some NGOs are maintained in a permanent state of readiness while others aim to update theirs periodically or have no written plans. Plans, where they exist, are normally kept in both the main and sub-offices within Afghanistan as well as at headquarters.

The most comprehensive plans include communication procedures and designated security staff, both international and Afghan. The security staff maintain an ongoing awareness of the political and security situation and are able to draw on information from a variety of sources.

Some agencies have occasional assessments made of their security arrangements by a risk management organisation with the aim of making improvements.

It is normal practice for Afghan staff to be advised to remain at home until the security situation improves or the agency decides that it can no longer continue to operate. Such staff are often given salary advances for up to three months. Staff which are away from their home bases on field visits may be advised to remain where they are. However, if they are at risk, the agency will need to make arrangements for them to be evacuated. There may be instances where Afghan members of staff need to be taken out of Afghanistan.

Expatriate staff may well be safer where they are. Evacuation carries a significant degree of risk. However, at a time of heightened tension, the situation needs to be monitored very carefully as a sudden deterioration could require that an evacuation be attempted, in spite of the risks. Evacuation could mean removal to another part of Afghanistan. It does not have to involve leaving the country. There have been many examples in recent years of the local situation suddenly deteriorating, with aid staff actively targeted. In such cases, evacuation to Kabul has taken staff out of danger. It may, nonetheless, be advisable to evacuate the staff members concerned to their countries of origin if they have suffered considerable trauma as a result of a particular episode.

The use of the following levels of security to indicate action is commonly understood: Level 1 - relatively safe; Level 2 – a high level of vigilance to be maintained; Level 3 – possessions packed and ready to go immediately; Level 4 – evacuation.
Road routes out of the country, including borders, are kept under constant review so that they are known at any one time. It should be noted that borders may close during periods of instability.

Vehicles need to be available, serviced, filled with fuel and ready to go. Agencies also need to be in close contact with the UN, ICRC or other flight operators if they intend to use their flights as part of their evacuation plan.

In an emergency situation, the designated security officers are responsible for making contact with all the staff of their agency, using radio, satellite phone, email, vehicle or other means at their disposal.

The British embassy has undertaken to accept responsibility for the evacuation of all British nationals in Kabul who have registered with them. It operates a warden system, with each warden having responsibility for about 10 people. In the event of an emergency, the wardens should make contact with those on their list. However, this system can only be effective if agencies are able to contact their own staff quickly.

It is important for all staff, if at all possible, to hold visas for countries to which it might prove necessary to be evacuated, whether by land or by air. However, this may be difficult to achieve. All of the countries bordering Afghanistan place significant restrictions on the issuing of visas at one time or another in response to changes in the international political climate or for internal reasons. Agencies may, therefore, need to commit considerable staff time to their efforts to obtain the necessary visas. It may be useful to draw on the experience of other agencies as to how best to proceed in relation to any given neighbouring state. The Afghan Government may also require that exit visas are obtained in advance.

3. Gathering Places
It is important that agreed gathering places for emergency evacuation are identified through NGO Coordination meetings. These will depend on the most suitable exit routes for particular staff and the method of transport to be used. It may be necessary to organise evacuation from more than one site, with particular gathering places for particular exit routes. The nationalities of staff may determine exit points, with an Indian national, for example, needing to leave via Iran, Dubai or one of the Central Asian Republics, rather than Pakistan. The evacuation routes for Afghan staff will need to be identified carefully, in the light of the prevailing political and security situation. Gathering places are often closed areas, such as agency compounds, so that convoys can be assembled in relative security. It is prudent for such gathering places to have at least two week’s essential food supplies so that, if it proves too dangerous to leave the compound when Level 3 is reached – packed and ready to go – those assembled can survive.

4. Co-ordination
It is advisable for agencies to regularly attend NGO security meetings, whether in Kabul or in the regions. Discussion at these will include plans for evacuation. Agencies will inevitably want to keep their evacuation plans confidential but this has to be balanced against the desirability of sharing information with other agencies so that risks to the collectivity of NGO personnel are minimised.

In some regions there is a security ‘tree’, giving a contact person for each agency. This is normally updated weekly. In an emergency the security ‘tree’ would be activated and an emergency meeting convened. In other areas there are informal security ‘task forces’ that perform a similar function to the ‘trees’.
In considering evacuation, agencies need to take on board the possible increased risk to their national staff if all expatriates were evacuated. They also should consider how both the national staff and expatriates would view such an evacuation.

Whatever exit strategy is in place it is clear that organisations on which you hope to rely for help, including UN/ICRC flight operations and agencies which have agreed to act as gathering places, will need to be advised of your intentions. All parties should be clear as to their responsibilities so as to avoid confusion. RedR workshop feedback indicates that this is not always the case.

5. Communication Systems for the family members of expatriate NGO staff
It is rare for the families of expatriates to be in Afghanistan but agencies that permit family members to be in the country would normally include them in the communication loop.

6. Visitors
Visitors to an NGO are expected to abide by the security policy of that organisation. They should be given copies of written security protocols and handbooks, where these exist.

7. Collection points
Those agencies employing large numbers of staff operate several collection points from which staff would depart for the ‘gathering places’ for evacuation.

8. Profile
It is important for expatriate staff to keep as low a profile as possible in the event of heightened tension. They should thus minimise their movements and avoid travel, if at all possible, in the immediate aftermath of events likely to arouse public hostility to those associated with the West.

It may be wise to take the advice of Afghan staff as to whether it is better to travel in highly visible agency vehicles, which may have the benefit of radio communications, or in taxis.

9. Transportation
Agencies need to ensure that the drivers on whom they would rely for emergency evacuation operations maintain an ongoing awareness of open routes and of the overall security situation. There need to be sufficient vehicles available for the number of staff who might need to evacuate.

It is recommended that expatriate staff do not travel alone. At least one person should have a reasonable level of experience of working in Afghanistan so as to be better able to handle any difficult situations that may arise.

10. Armed protection
The general consensus amongst NGOs is to avoid armed protection, if at all possible, both because it compromises the neutrality and impartiality of NGOs and also because it places NGO staff at even greater risk.

It should be noted that the mandate of ISAF does not provide for the armed protection of aid personnel and there have been examples of ISAF not intervening when aid staff were clearly at risk. Agencies should therefore not plan on the basis that ISAF could assist, as a last resort. Further, any attempt to seek the protection of international forces, whether ISAF or US-led coalition forces, will immediately associate aid personnel with these forces and make them even more of a target. NGOs can no longer assume that their humanitarian neutrality and impartiality will be respected. Experience has shown that, when anti-western feeling has been aroused, aid personnel have been actively targeted.
11. Assessment of risk
It is essential that agencies have well-established systems in place to assess the degree of risk that staff could potentially face. Most of the larger agencies have specific security officers in the field who plan possible scenarios, weigh up risk factors and amend operational procedures accordingly. It is also crucial that staff induction includes an element on security so that new staff recognise the importance of compliance with security procedures. There is the ever-present risk that inexperienced staff will make light of possible security risks or become complacent. Staff should be aware that it is not only themselves that they are putting at risk but also their Afghan colleagues who would be called upon to extract them from dangerous situations.

12. Training
Centurion Risk Assessment Services Ltd (See Appendix 1 – Publications and Courses on Security) offer a 5 day residential staff course on security training in the UK.

RedR also provides high quality courses on security for NGOs and periodically provides such training within Afghanistan.

Some organisations have their own in-house training. This is complemented by informal training by security staff in the field situation.

13. Recommendations for action
Before you go:

- Attend a course on security and risk assessment. (See Appendix 1 for details of RedR and Centurion courses). If this is not possible, read publications on security (see Appendix 1) and also seek advice from experienced staff.

- Make sure you will be met on arrival and can travel safely to secure, pre-arranged accommodation

- If possible, arrange to have a mobile or walkie talkie for use when you arrive (while recognising that this is not always easy to achieve)

- Read the latest Foreign and Commonwealth Office Travel Advice (see Appendix 1 for web-link and current advice)

- Arrange for multiple-entry, flexible, long-term visas to neighbouring countries, if at all possible.

When you arrive:

- Keep a low profile, dress and behave modestly.

- Get a security briefing at the earliest opportunity.

- Register with the British Embassy - kabulconsular@fco.gov.uk

- Ensure you can be contacted at all times.
Know where the local collection points and gathering places are for
your organisation in the event of an emergency. Know how you would get there.

Do not travel alone, even in Kabul, and make sure that at least one of you has experience
of local conditions.

General advice for organisations

Review your policy on security regularly and make printed copies available to all staff,
international and national

All organisations should have a security plan for each region in which they are working.

Attend meetings on security and co-ordinate with other organisations.

Take account of the needs of national staff. They will need a different set of plans in
certain circumstances.

Ensure that all staff have the opportunity for both formal and informal training in security
and risk assessment, in the UK and in the field.

Have one or more designated security officers in all regions who can 'plug in' to the
relevant information networks and so keep staff aware of security risks.

Check out, on a regular basis, that the organisations on which you are relying for
assistance will actually be able to assist you in the event of a crisis. This is particularly
important if the situation appears to be deteriorating.

Make sure that your communications systems work at all times and that staff are on-hand
to make full use of them.

Keep transport well-maintained and fuelled, ready to go.

Make sure all staff know their collection points and 'gathering place' if evacuation
becomes necessary.

If the security situation is thought likely to deteriorate, consider reducing, in advance, the
presence of non-essential staff in high-risk areas so as to minimise the number of people
needing emergency evacuation.

Impress upon all staff the need to take security seriously.
APPENDIX ONE – Further information:

Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice for Afghanistan
The Foreign Office website provides regular updates on general travel advice for Afghanistan, click on the link below to view the latest information:
http://www.fo.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pageName=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029390590&a=KCountryAdvice&aid=1013618385513

Publications and courses on security:

Operational Security Management in Violent Environments by Koenraad Van Brabant
This book offers a systematic approach to security management, covering, for example, context analysis, threat and risk assessment, security strategies and security planning. It considers possible measures to prevent, manage and survive critical incidents, including being caught up in hostilities, attacks on vehicles, office or residential premises, sexual assault or abduction. It also stresses the importance of incident analysis and of exchange of security information between agencies. Finally, a number of cross-cutting themes are explored. Among these are personal and team competence, policy in relation to national staff, communications, briefing and training. The annexes provide additional information on the legal protection of aid workers, the use of private security companies, the UN security-management system and insurance cover. The arguments are illustrated with case material drawn from global experience. Highly recommended. Link to order a copy is http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/hpngpr.html

Staying Alive - ICRC booklet. Available through their website www.icrc.org/eng/publications

BAAG Briefing Pack - available to all members of BAAG by contacting baag@RefugeeCouncil.org.uk Currently being updated.

RedR organises periodic courses in Afghanistan on NGO Security. These have been very well received. In addition, it runs three day courses in the UK on “Personal Security in Emergencies”. These include individual and team risk management, the development of security plans and procedures and responses to incidents when they occur. Further details available from www.redr.org

Centurion Risk Assessment Services Ltd runs five-day courses in the UK and USA on “Hostile Environments and Emergency First Aid”. These courses focus on the assessment of risk, with the aim of minimising exposure, and are aimed at journalists, emergency and humanitarian aid workers and business people working in hazardous environments. Further information available from www.centurion-riskservices.co.uk