Aid Worker Security Report 2025

Defenceless: Aid worker security amid the humanitarian funding collapse

Humanitarian Outcomes

Summary of key findings

- 2024 was another record-setting year for aid worker fatalities, with 383 humanitarians killed in violent incidents.
- In addition, 308 aid workers sustained serious injuries, 125 were kidnapped, and at least 45 were arrested or detained.
- The first half of 2025 saw the surge in violence continue unabated, with the number of incidents and fatalities already more than double the annual totals seen in most years before 2021.
- Most fatalities occurred in Gaza, followed by Sudan, Lebanon, Ethiopia, and Syria. Other high-incident contexts included South Sudan, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Ukraine, Myanmar, Yemen, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Cameroon.
- The numbers reflect not only the intensity of violence occurring in armed conflicts, but also a marked retreat by states from norms of international humanitarian law, and a souring of public and government attitudes towards humanitarian action.
- In January 2025, the US government – formerly the world's largest aid donor – abruptly froze and then slashed its humanitarian contributions, removing roughly a third of global resources for the sector.
- As aid organisations cut programmes and staff, they face heightened security risks with decreasing funds and capacities to mitigate them, putting humanitarian staff in even greater danger.
- Anecdotal reports from multiple contexts link programme closures and downsizing directly to security incidents, including attacks by disgruntled former staff, community protests over lost services, and exploitation of local grievances by armed actors.
- Good-quality data for security analysis is now itself at risk, as USAID played an outsized role in funding data and analytics support across the sector.
- Cuts to staff positions and technical support functions, and other adaptations organisations are making – such as pooling resources and adopting informal security coordination measures – reflect a pattern of de-professionalisation of humanitarian action, as brain drain accelerates and hard-won advancements over the past decade are lost.
- Recent diplomatic momentum, including the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2730 (2024), offers some encouragement, signalling renewed political attention to the scale of violence against humanitarians and recognition that respect for international humanitarian law is under severe strain.

The Aid Worker Security Database records major security incidents affecting humanitarian personnel. These include:

- killings
- kidnappings (lasting over 24 hours)
- serious injuries
- rape and sexual assault
- new category: arrests and detentions (lasting over 24 hours).

This report is based on verified incident statistics from the Aid Worker Security Database and key informant interviews with 24 humanitarian practitioner experts.

For more information and to read previous reports, visit: https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/reports

Introduction

Table 1: Major attacks on aid workers: summary statistics, 2015–2024

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of incidents	157	166	162	233	279	287	277	248	420	599
Total aid worker victims	297	298	322	413	484	489	482	460	617	861
Total killed	111	109	140	131	125	117	141	118	293	383
Total injured	110	99	103	147	234	242	203	146	210	308
Total kidnapped*	71	89	73	132	123	128	127	195	95	125
Totai arrested/detained**	5	1	6	3	2	2	11	1	19	45
International victims	30	43	28	29	27	25	23	24	27	27
National victims	267	255	294	384	457	464	459	436	590	834
UN staff	45	71	48	70	37	58	55	76	241	210
International NGO staff	173	161	115	188	261	229	211	178	198	247
National NGO staff	43	43	85	130	156	172	195	184	123	298
Red Cross/Crescent Movement***	33	21	74	25	16	28	11	9	51	100

Aid Worker Security Database, aidworkersecurity.org

* Survivors, or status unknown

** New category, past years' data incomplete

*** Includes personnel of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and national societies

This year's Aid Worker Security Report comes at a major inflection point for international humanitarian assistance and during an alarming new peak of violence against humanitarians. The 2025 edition – our 15th since data tracking began – was almost not produced after the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD), lost its US government funding when the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was dismantled. The funding crisis now rocking the sector comes on top of escalating conflicts and a steep erosion of respect for humanitarian norms and the laws of war by state actors – amplified in some places by public smear campaigns against aid organisations.

The conflicts in Gaza and Sudan continue to drive the greatest numbers of aid worker casualties, but incidents were on the rise in other contexts as well, with historically high numbers seen in Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Lebanon, Nigeria, Somalia, Ukraine, and Yemen.

The loss of funding, security risk management capacities, and in some places public acceptance, have put humanitarians at increased risk. Anecdotal accounts and some formal reporting indicate direct links between programme cuts and violent incidents. At the same time, incident monitoring has become more difficult as data and analytics providers face severe funding reductions. Aid organisations report having to cut security positions, communications capacity, and other critical supports, forcing difficult choices between accepting increased risk exposure and abandoning communities.

Amid the bad news of rising violence and decreasing support for humanitarian action, an encouraging development has been a spate of diplomatic initiatives to protect aid workers. UN Security Council Resolution 2730 (2024), for the first time, not only condemns attacks on humanitarians but also calls for accountability and judicial redress – offering a glimmer of hope in an otherwise dark time for humanitarian action.

1 Aid worker attacks: Latest statistics

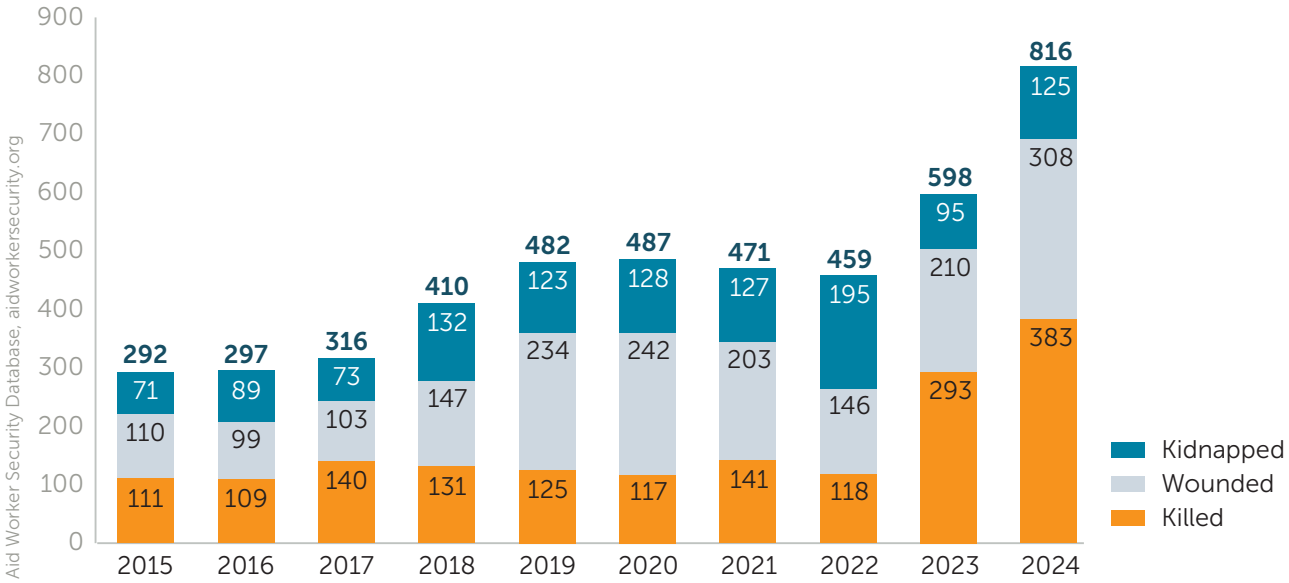
1.1 A continuing surge in violence

Attacks against aid workers continued to climb steeply in 2024 (and in the first half of 2025), along with the number of victims and deaths.

The AWSD recorded an all-time high of 568 major violent incidents against aid workers (killings, kidnappings, and woundings) in 2024 – a 36% increase over 2023. It was the second consecutive year to set records for both the number of victims and fatalities, which rose by 37% and 31% respectively.

Major violent incidents occurred in 40 countries in 2024, an increase from 33 in 2023. When arrests and detentions by state authorities are included, the number of countries rises to 42, underscoring both the geographic spread of insecurity and the growing role of state actors in obstructing humanitarian operations. (See Section 1.3 for more on arrests and detentions – a new tracking category in AWSD).

Figure 1: Aid worker victims of major violence, 2015–2024



The violence showed no signs of letting up in the first half of 2025. As at 30 June, the provisional data suggests the numbers are on track to break records again, barring dramatic shifts in the course of conflicts or conduct of state actors. The roughly 230 aid workers killed in the first 6 months of 2025 is already a higher toll than seen in all recorded years prior to 2023. Seven contexts (Central African Republic (CAR), DRC, Haiti, Iran, Mali, South Sudan, and Yemen) have experienced more fatalities so far this year than recorded in 2024.

1.2 The most insecure contexts for humanitarian action

Gaza remains the deadliest operational context for both the recipients and providers of aid. In all, 181 aid workers were killed in Gaza in 2024, bringing the total aid worker death toll since the war began to 357 by the end of 2024, and to over 500 by the end of June 2025. The number of victims from aerial bombardment and shelling remained consistent over the first 14 months of the conflict, but the number of gunfire victims increased four times between the end of 2023 and the end of 2024.

Expansion of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict caused 20 fatalities in Lebanon from aerial bombardment, artillery, and crossfire as the conflict escalated throughout the region last year.

The Sudan civil war continued in 2024, perpetuating the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with an estimated 30 million people affected. Sudan saw the second highest number of aid worker victims, 60 of whom were killed – a higher number than any other context, apart from Gaza, in any year ever recorded. Sudan saw 89 victims of violence in 2024, but incidents are likely to be underreported and, due to the intensity of the conflict and reliance on local actors, the true injury and kidnapping totals are likely much higher. Targeting of local volunteers in emergency response rooms and community kitchens has persisted, with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) viewing these aid workers as political opponents and subjecting them to harassment and detention. In areas under Rapid Support Forces (RSF) control, the absence of law and order has led to arbitrary violence by armed individuals, according to a Sudanese NGO, creating severe risks for humanitarians travelling to unfamiliar locations, where controlling forces often presume hostile intent.

Since the first full year of its existence in 2012, South Sudan has consistently ranked among the top 5 most dangerous places for aid workers, with 870 victims over the last 13 years – the highest total of any context recorded. Despite a drop in the number of victims between 2023 and 2024, persistent armed robberies and ambushes on aid convoys kept South Sudan as the third highest victim context in 2024, with a decrease in the number of aid worker deaths but a rise in kidnappings and organised crime.

Nigeria saw a significant increase in all victim types (killed, injured, kidnapped) from 2023 to 2024, with fatalities up to 12 from just 2 the previous year. Ongoing insurgency and criminal activity made road ambushes the most common attack location, with small arms fire and assaults both rising as types of violence. More kidnappings and violent robberies occurred at personal residences across several regions than in previous years, highlighting the increasing risks of targeted attacks.

In Ethiopia, aid worker attacks during road travel increased, mostly in the Amhara region, resulting in increased kidnappings and casualties from small arms fire. Most ambushes occurred on marked humanitarian vehicles and convoys, as armed actor targeting of transportation routes expanded to more areas of the country than in previous years.

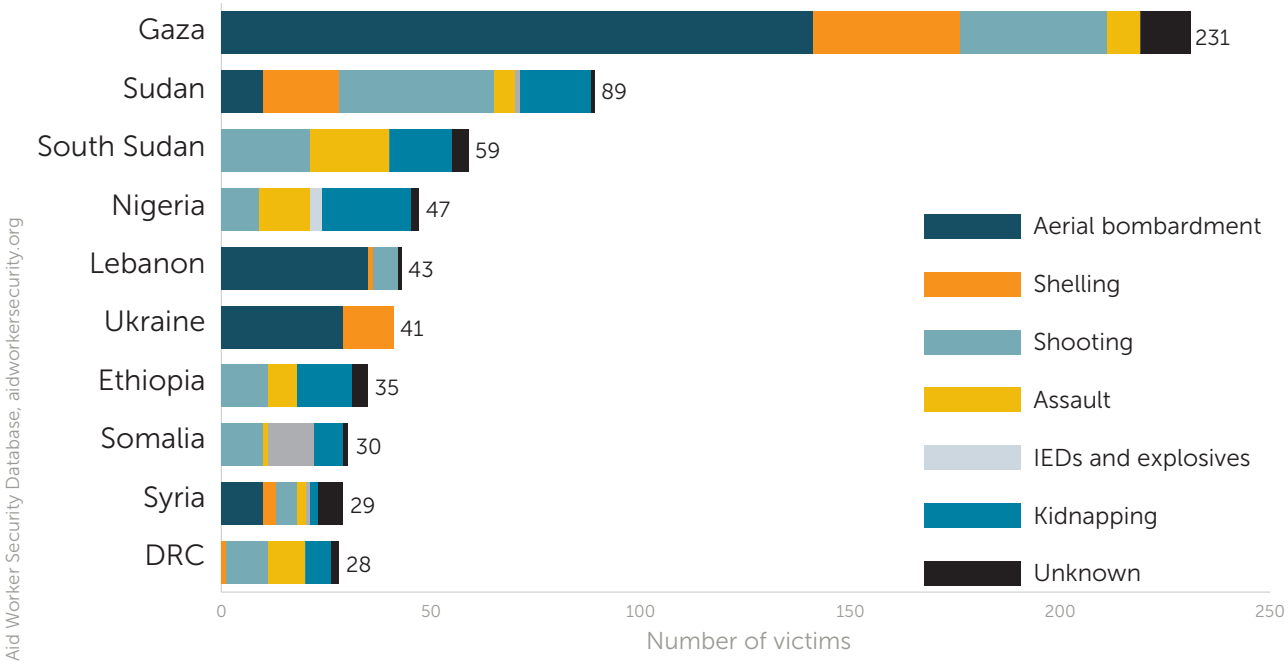
In DRC, the number of individual violent attacks tripled in North Kivu in 2024 and remained consistently high in South Kivu and Ituri, with targeted shooting and assaults increasing at private residences and public spaces. The March 23 Movement (M23) was responsible for most of the security incidents affecting aid workers in 2024, but state authorities also complicated aid operations with the detention of at least 6 aid workers.

Somalia experienced the most individual incidents in the last 10 years in 2024, with 9 killed, 14 wounded, and 7 kidnapped. Small arms fire, roadside IEDs, and kidnappings were the most common means, with the number of attacks attributed to Al-Shabaab up 18% from 2023.

Following two years of reduction in the number of aid worker victims in Syria, numbers increased again in 2024 as the fall of the Assad regime and ongoing hostilities in contested areas led to more intense conflict affecting humanitarian operations in the north and central parts of the country.

The number of aerial attacks on populated areas and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine increased in 2024 injuring and killing more aid workers than in 2023. Russian aerial attacks on aid distribution sites increased dramatically, demonstrating the repeated and rising violations of international humanitarian law in the conflict.

Figure 2: The top 10 highest casualty countries, with means of attack



1.3 Trends in tactics

Airstrikes remained the main cause of aid worker fatalities, killing 163 aid workers, mostly in Gaza, Lebanon, and Ukraine. However, small arms fire also claimed a great many lives (103), and was the most common means of violence seen in DRC, South Sudan, and Sudan.

The number of aid worker kidnappings increased again in 2024, having declined in the previous year. The AWSD records 125 aid workers kidnapped across 16 countries. The countries of the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin dominate this list (Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon), reflecting familiar patterns of non-state armed groups using kidnapping for leverage or extortion. Sudan, South Sudan, and Ethiopia also saw increased kidnapping incidents in contested or transitional areas.

New AWSD category: Arrests and detentions

The rising number of aid worker arrests and detentions by state and local authorities prompted the AWSD to begin tracking these incidents as a distinct category in 2025. Often used as a tool of harassment and control, such detentions can involve physical violence and can be as psychologically damaging as criminal kidnappings. Several humanitarian organisations noted that detentions now affect greater numbers of their staff – and consume more of their security risk management efforts – than kidnappings have in recent years. For example, the consolidation of power by the de facto Houthi authorities in Yemen prompted an unprecedented number of humanitarian staff detentions across the country in 2024. In the majority of detentions recorded by the AWSD last year, staff were taken from organisation offices or project sites, evidencing an alarming concerted effort by state authorities to specifically target and harass aid workers.

1.4 Increasing 'localisation' of insecurity

Nearly all (97%) of the aid workers killed in 2024 were nationals of the crisis-affected country where they worked – a pattern consistent with the fact that national staff have always made up the vast majority of humanitarian personnel, and therefore of victims. What is new, however, is the breakdown by employer. Over the past three years, alongside the steep rise in violence, there has been a marked shift in affiliation profile: aid workers most affected are now those employed by national NGOs, while the share of victims from international organisations, in particular international NGOs, has dropped significantly. The main exception was Gaza, where the UN agency UNRWA, as the de facto primary responder, employed the largest proportion of humanitarian staff.

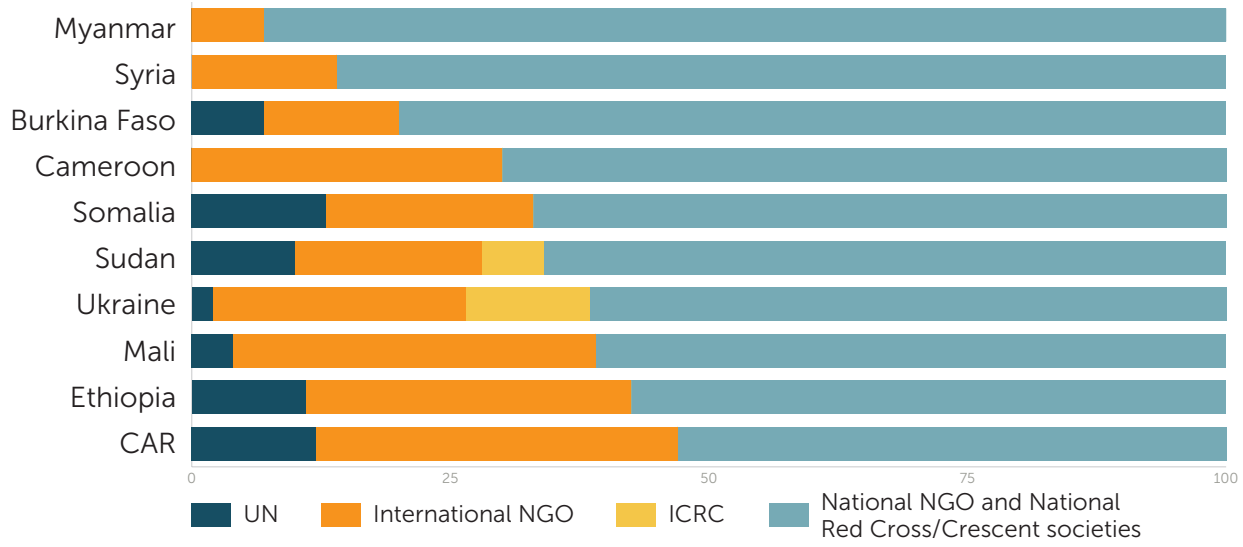
The transfer of risk and casualty burden from international to local aid organisations was seen most starkly in contexts where international presence was severely limited due to one or more of the following conditions:

- host state hostility and bureaucratic obstacles to aid (Ethiopia, Burkina Faso)
- deteriorating public sentiment and decreasing acceptance of international aid organisations (Cameroon, Mali)
- large areas where government authorities have barred humanitarian organisations from working or where heavy fighting and extreme insecurity keeps them at a distance (Myanmar, Sudan, Ukraine)
- lack of funding and chronic insecurity resulting in the complete withdrawal or remote operations of international organisations (Syria, Somalia, CAR).

This reduced international humanitarian presence has also made the humanitarian actors who remain even more vulnerable to targeted misinformation and disinformation campaigns, which can inflame community mistrust and heighten security risks.

New social media research in the Sahel exposes growing negative sentiments that are "accusatory" and "anti-aid" since the closure of USAID.[1] The hostility towards the aid sector visible online translates into reality for the many international organisations that have recently had their operations suspended in Burkina Faso, Niger, and elsewhere in the Sahel. The widespread suspension of international actors leaves local organisations as the only resource for vulnerable communities, which previous research shows often do not have the resources for the security functions they need.[2]

Figure 3: Affiliation of victims in the most localised insecurity contexts, 2024



Aid Worker Security Database, aidworkersecurity.org

[1] Insecurity Insight. (2025, 16 July). *Tracking aid narratives on social media: Emerging trends in the Sahel.* https://insecurityinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/15.-Tracking-Aid-Narratives-on-Social-Media_-Emerging-Trends-in-the-Sahel-1.pdf

[2] Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF) and Humanitarian Outcomes. (2024). *State of practice: The evolution of security risk management in the humanitarian space.* https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/security_risk_mgmt_humanitarian_space_2024

Localisation of humanitarian action – and supporting local capacities for independent humanitarian response – has long been the stated goal of the international aid sector. However, rising insecurity and falling funding have conspired to create a localisation-by-default, materially shifting risk exposure toward national organisations, which have traditionally received the fewest resources to keep their staff safe.

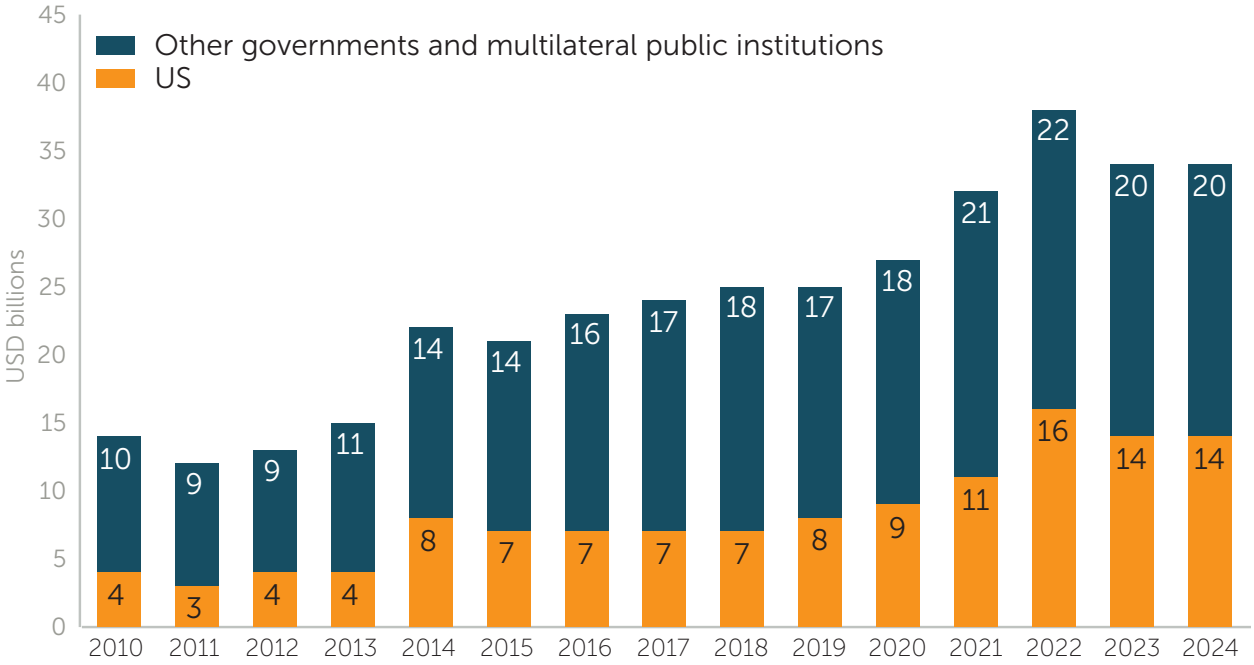
A security risk manager from an international NGO said his organisation was considering a range of options in response to the defunding crisis, which included spinning off country offices and/or a large portion of their programmes to local partners. They made clear, however, that this carried additional risk for the local organisations. "If we go the full localisation route, we will see a massive increase in incidents because they still have fewer resources – so if we don't find a way of supporting them, we will see more deaths."

2 The humanitarian defunding crisis of 2025

On 20 January 2025, the incoming US President Donald Trump issued an executive order to freeze almost all US foreign relief and development funding. The unexpected move upended the aid sector, as organisations and programmes funded through USAID abruptly ceased operations, affecting millions of aid recipients around the world. Over the ensuing months, the administration cancelled over 80% of USAID-funded aid projects, as the 63-year-old institution was effectively dissolved and its staff dismissed, with the small remainder absorbed into the US State Department.

By far the largest humanitarian donor, representing over a third of all humanitarian contributions in most years, the US historically served as the backbone of the international humanitarian aid system. The slashing of this mainstay funding, followed by cuts from other large humanitarian donors such as Germany, the UK, France and the Netherlands, has begun to unravel global response capacity, and will leave millions without life-saving assistance. It also disproportionately affects the support scaffolding of humanitarian assistance, as USAID was a major underwriter of things like logistics and transport, including the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS), coordination services such as those provided by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and data assets and analysis, including needs assessments and security data.

Figure 4: US share of total public donor humanitarian contributions, 2010–2024



Data from fts.unocha.org (retrieved 1 August 2025)

Along with the support scaffolding, the sector risks losing hard-gained operational standards, technical expertise, and professional training capacities, all of which undermines operational security at a time when aid work has never been more dangerous.

2.1 Organisational impacts: Downsizing and programme closures

While reserves allowed some large international agencies to defer immediate cuts, the sector has taken a massive hit. The full impact will emerge in 2025–2026 as organisations exhaust contingency measures. UN humanitarian agencies and several large international NGOs have already announced major staffing reductions (tens of thousands of professionals laid off across the sector), country programme closures, and the removal of entire functional areas from programming portfolios.[3]

USAID was the majority donor to a great many aid NGOs – accounting for more than half of budgets for many US-based organisations. Others, even some not directly funded by the US, are nevertheless affected as former USAID partners turn to the same limited donor pool to make up the gap. Competition for reduced resources has become intense, according to senior staff interviewed for this report, with one observing that, "No organisation is truly stable" in the current environment.

National and local organisations and community-led networks have absorbed the greatest impact of the sector-wide cuts. With resources concentrated at the top of the international humanitarian system, funding shortfalls naturally cut first and deepest at the community level. An informal survey of 284 national NGOs, distributed by the Global Database of Humanitarian Organisations (GDHO) in February 2025, found that 79% reported programme closures due to USAID defunding in 41 different countries.[4] This global departure from vulnerable communities overnight has put local actors in a position where they will continue to face increasing risks and threats.

[3] See: Loy, I. (2025, 6 March). Why are NGOs cutting staff faster than the UN? The New Humanitarian. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/newsletter/2025/03/06/inklings-why-are-ngos-cutting-staff-faster-un; and International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). (2025). The impacts of the US funding suspension. ICVA survey findings. https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2025/02/Impact-of-US-Funding-Suspension-Survey-Results-ICVA.pdf

[4] Humanitarian Outcomes (n.d.) *Global database of humanitarian organisations.* Retrieved 8 August 2025 from https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/gdho

2.2 Impacts on security risk management

Security risk management for humanitarian operations has evolved over the past two decades into a specialised technical function, critical to enabling humanitarian access in the most severe and insecure crises. It is also costly – reliant on skilled personnel (hence training) and equipment for secure communications, facilities, and transport. Loss of funding, competition for remaining limited resources, and a significant brain drain of humanitarian security professionals now threaten to erode much of the progress made in this area, risking a return to a time when security was treated as an afterthought or a discretionary add-on.

Organisations rely on flexible funding to maintain these cross-cutting functions, which are often paid for by overheads as well as direct budget lines for security. USAID had developed an advanced approach to partner security support and was notable for generous indirect cost recovery rates (overheads) that allowed for the development of strong security risk management capacities by its funded partners. As one international NGO interviewee explained it: "USAID was 40% of our budget, but losing it impacted 75% of our organisation because of the flexibility of their funding."

The loss of liquidity meant big cuts had to be made rapidly to the cross-cutting activities. Every organisation interviewed reported cutting security positions, and at least one lost the entire regional layer of its global security risk management team through the closure of the regional offices that formerly provided technical support, analysis, and security surge capacity to the country offices.

Humanitarian organisations have reduced their operational presence in multiple contexts, undermining both humanitarian access and community security. International organisations are concentrating on preserving their security resources in the most severe insecurity contexts where they continue to work, such as Gaza, Sudan, Haiti, and Myanmar, and cutting them elsewhere. The Latin America region has been particularly hard hit for many international aid organisations because of the historically prominent US funding role for aid projects there. Interviewees cited having to cut security positions throughout the region, often leaving several country offices with only remote security risk management support.

Many national and local NGOs already lacked full-time dedicated security staff positions due to the inflexibility of funding and low overheads they typically receive from international funding partners, and the steep funding cuts to the sector have put this capacity even further out of reach. As one national NGO staff member noted: "Previously, joint field visits were conducted with other organisations … This no longer happens because either the organisations are no longer present in the territory or because it has become too expensive."

Loss of logistical support and training

Cuts to shared services have further undermined safe movement, most notably the reduction in UNHAS flights, forcing greater reliance on road travel and the heightened security risks that come with it. Reduced international flight routes provide even broader obstacles to humanitarian operational presence. In Yemen, for example, direct flights between Aden and Amman dropped from 14 per month in December last year to 6, while the Aden–Addis Ababa route was reduced from 28 flights to none as of July 2025, severing a major link for East African staff.

Protection programming for vulnerable groups in crisis contexts – already chronically underfunded – has been among the first casualties of recent cuts. In Sudan, the network of emergency response rooms, which had protection teams in each state and a dedicated women's protection team for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, saw its funding from USAID and other donors disappear. Many interviewees cited protection, along with in-person specialised training and stress counsellors, as "first on the chopping block". As one said, "I'm worried about the psychological effects, staff wellness

in the future, and that there could be less staff resilience to stress that can lead to mistakes." Stress, burnout, and trauma – common in humanitarian response work – is well known to have an effect on staff security as well as their general wellbeing.[5]

Training is vital to security risk management, and while many organisations have significantly increased the use of remote video modules, in-person training by a qualified instructor remains preferable. In organisations where most staff have already received security training, the impact is currently less noticeable, but will increase as time goes on and as training becomes less available to staff. Participation in essential courses, such as the UN Safe and Secure Approaches in Field Environments (UN SSAFE), has dropped sharply and the trained cadre is shrinking as staff leave and are not replaced.

Loss of analytical capacity

While some larger organisations have in-house capacity to monitor local security incident trends for risk analysis, many others rely on external support services for this capacity, such as the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO), Geneva Call, and the USAID Partner Liaison Security Offices (PLSOs). Since the USAID defunding, the PLSO network has lost roughly 80% of its capacity, with most officers reduced to closeout duties and only 4 countries continuing to provide full security services and reporting, with no assurance this will continue. INSO has also had to close some field offices and reduce services, most notably training, which is being keenly felt by NGOs in many contexts.[6] Geneva Call has been forced to scale back operations, reducing activities and field presence in several contexts where it had been engaging armed groups on humanitarian norms.

A UN staffer in Colombia noted that: "Fewer security staff means a reduced ability to carry out detailed analysis of [sub-national] regions." The staff member emphasised that their kind of in-depth local knowledge – built through sustained contact with communities, armed forces, and other actors – is vital. The greatest impact of the funding cuts, they said, may lie in this erosion of granular, area-specific understanding, which is crucial for both effective security and meaningful access and acceptance.

Access effects

In many contexts, according to interviewees, international humanitarian actors are no longer pursuing access strategies that actively seek to expand reach to areas that have the most acute needs. Instead, they have shifted toward prioritising areas of less operational difficulty and where agencies are already established. This is likely to become the norm for international organisations, as security risk management capacities and personnel are shed in cost reduction measures.

Local organisations, long the primary responders in the hardest-to-access areas, will increasingly operate alone, shouldering the greatest exposure to security risks – a pattern already reflected in the security incident data for 2024.

[5] Chapter 5.4, Staff care. (2025). In Fairbanks, A. and Stoddard, A. (Eds.), Humanitarian security risk management, *Good Practice Review No. 8* (third edition), .pp. 291–314. Humanitarian Practice Network (Overseas Development Institute). https://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/GPR8_web_June2025.pdf

[6] International NGO Safety Organisation. (2025, 10 February). *Impact of the suspension of USAID funding.* https://ngosafety.org/latest/impact-of-the-suspension-of-usaid-funding/

3 New security threats and a crisis of acceptance in the wake of defunding

The steep reductions in humanitarian programming following the defunding have altered the security landscape for aid agencies, exposing new vulnerabilities and amplifying existing ones. In many contexts, the abrupt withdrawal of services has created resentment among affected people, while downsizing has increased exposure for the organisations and individuals that remain. These dynamics are compounded by the erosion of acceptance – driven in part by harmful narratives, misinformation, and disinformation – that is increasingly shaping threat perceptions and behaviours towards aid actors.

3.1 Rising tensions following abrupt closures and loss of vital services

Provisional data for 2025 includes a small number of major security incidents with evidence of a direct link to defunding-related programme closures or downsizing. The true number is likely higher; many local organisations are unwilling to report such incidents, and others fall outside AWSD's inclusion criteria because no aid worker was killed, seriously injured, or abducted/detained for more than 24 hours. Other data gatherers and interviewees spoke of assaults, vehicle robberies, break-ins, protests, and other acts often attributed to disgruntled former employees or aggrieved community members – only some of which were formally reported.

Interviewees described a range of flashpoints: terminated staff staging protests or office confrontations, alleged break-ins by former employees, vendors demanding payment at gunpoint, and desperate HIV patients protesting after their health services ceased. In rural areas, confusion and misinformation about funding cuts have fuelled community suspicions that aid agencies are "wasting" or stealing money. Armed groups have exploited these grievances – particularly in the far northwest and northeast of Sudan – to block access and consolidate control. National NGOs stressed that the loss of presence erodes the "mutual protection" that comes from sustained engagement, leaving both communities and humanitarians more exposed.

The effects extend beyond direct security incidents. In some contexts, the abrupt halt of projects – such as protection services, accompaniment and community outreach – has removed vital stabilising factors. The closure of remote aid distribution sites in Nigeria has prompted increased displacement as people travel for services, which non-state armed groups have taken as an opportunity to expand the territories they control. In parts of the Sahel and CAR, governments have fed anti-international NGO narratives into pre-existing mistrust, and in eastern DRC, some organisations have taken on higher operational risks to secure scarce funding, pushing beyond their usual risk thresholds under donor pressure to "do more with less".

3.2 Loss of acceptance, amplified by misinformation

The funding crisis has not only diminished operational capacity, it has also fuelled a crisis of acceptance in many contexts. Longstanding harmful narratives – depicting aid agencies as foreign-controlled, politically motivated, or even aligned with belligerents – have been reinforced and, in some cases, deliberately weaponised.[7] Social media sentiment analysis by Insecurity Insight in the Sahel and DRC found that the crisis has been used to bolster existing claims that humanitarian assistance is a tool of Western control or "colonialism", and to perpetuate accusations that agencies support terrorist

[7] Insecurity Insight. (2025, 9 April). *"All the NGOs are there to supply terrorists": Hijacking of an INGO truck sparks controversy. Tracking aid narratives on social media: Emerging trends in the Sahel.* https://insecurityinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/5.-Tracking-Aid-Narratives-on-Social-Media_-Emerging-Trends-in-the-Sahel-.pdf

organisations.[8] According to Insecurity Insight, these narratives often circulate in politically charged environments, making it difficult to distinguish between organically held beliefs and manufactured content amplified by influencers or political actors.

Disparaging statements by members of the US government have been exploited by local authorities and other groups suspicious of or hostile to international aid and repeated in incidents of harassment described by interviewees. According to a former USAID official, a hostile government official reportedly remarked to an aid representative, "If your president says you're a criminal, why shouldn't I arrest you right now?"

In Sudan, Yemen, and parts of the Sahel, misinformation at the community level has led to hostility and access denial. Residents, unaware of the external funding context, sometimes assume that aid workers are misusing or withholding resources. Armed groups have exploited these perceptions to obstruct operations and consolidate control, particularly in contested rural areas.

Social media has become a key vector for mis-and disinformation involving humanitarian actors. In one DRC incident documented by Insecurity Insight, a stolen x-ray machine appeared online alongside false claims that the agency had supplied it to an armed group. Although causality is hard to prove, the aid worker later killed in the region was described in online comments as having "deserved it". Similar online attacks have included negative campaigning against specific agencies and ridicule of dismissed aid workers as engaged in "woke" or non-essential activities.

Faced with these pressures, many agencies opt not to respond publicly, fearing further exposure. However, as Insecurity Insight notes, this silence can cede ground to hostile narratives and make it harder to reclaim humanitarian space once lost. Compounding the problem, public communications often default to overly diplomatic or vague language, which audiences may perceive as evasive. Interviewees stressed that clearer, more precise messaging – paired with direct community engagement – is essential to counter misinformation and sustain acceptance in an increasingly contested operational environment.[9]

3.3 Data loss and 'de-professionalisation'

For years, USAID has been one of the largest single investors in humanitarian data, funding a wide range of systems that underpin crisis response – from famine early warning and public health surveillance to displacement tracking, needs assessments, and operational security analysis. These systems have become increasingly interdependent, designed to share information and avoid duplication. As a result, the sudden withdrawal of USAID funding in early 2025 has not only jeopardised individual data streams but also exposed the sector's vulnerability to cascading collapse, where the loss of one stream degrades the effectiveness of others in guiding decisions, allocating resources, and forecasting risks.[10]

In terms of aid worker security, prior to January 2025, every major collector of security incident data worldwide received some form of funding or technical assistance from USAID. The extent of the effects of defunding on this data remains to be seen, but defunding has begun to shutter organisations that have served for years as primary sources of incident reporting in insecure contexts. Third-party humanitarian data organisations that produce analysis to inform decision makers face the greatest risk of closure as other donors scramble to decide what can be saved.[11] While some initially defunded

[8] See: Insecurity Insight. (2025, 16 July). *"Good riddance": Renewed anti-USAID sentiment in Mali following closure announcements. Tracking aid narratives on social media: Emerging trends in the Sahel.* https://insecurityinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/15.-Tracking-Aid-Narratives-on-Social-Media_-Emerging-Trends-in-the-Sahel-1.pdf; and Insecurity Insight. (2025, 9 July). *"Very very good decision by the government": NGO suspensions spark growing online support in Burkina Faso. Tracking aid narratives on social media: Emerging trends in the Sahel.* https://insecurityinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/14.-Tracking-Aid-Narratives-on-Social-Media_-Emerging-Trends-in-the-Sahel-.pdf

[9] See: Chapter 6.2, Security in a digital world (2025). In Fairbanks, A. and Stoddard, A. (Eds.), Humanitarian security risk management, *Good Practice Review No. 8* (third edition), .pp. 358–382. Humanitarian Practice Network (Overseas Development Institute). https://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/GPR8_web_June2025.pdf

[10] Stoddard, A., Waldman, R., Nissen, L.P. and Spiegel, P.B. (2025, 10 March). *The data streams that underpin humanitarian response are about to collapse.* The New Humanitarian. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2025/03/10/data-streams-underpin-humanitarian-response-are-about-collapse

[11] Breckenridge, M.-J. (forthcoming). Data in the humanitarian space. In Plowright, W. and Dube, N. (Eds.). *The companion to humanitarian action, 2nd edition.* Routledge, New York.

programmes, such as FEWS NET, have secured alternative support, the scale of USAID's prior role makes it unlikely that all the security data streams will survive.

De-professionalisation

The contraction of the sector has given rise to trends of de-professionalisation across numerous areas, including security risk management. As support service providers such as INSO reduce their operations, and as organisations lose internal security training capacity, coordination forums in some countries are starting to pool resources and run their own ad hoc security functions. While this demonstrates initiative and a sense of solidarity, it also signals a return to fragmented, inconsistent practices and risks the loss of institutional knowledge that has accumulated over many years.

Organisations have prioritised maintaining field presence by cutting HQ and regional posts first, but this has still resulted in the loss of in-country security positions, including trainers and 'training-of-trainers' roles. An NGO senior staffer noted that staff movement – ideally a healthy exchange between organisations – has shifted toward a one-way flow out of the NGOs, with experienced practitioners leaving for better-resourced UN agencies or, increasingly, the private sector. Several interviewees cited the departure of top security specialists to banking and other corporate roles, motivated by the need for career stability. This brain drain, alongside the loss of security positions, not only erodes operational security but also reverses more than a decade of gains in professionalising humanitarian security.

4 Adaptations and promising new diplomatic activity

Amid the funding cuts, humanitarian organisations have pursued a range of adaptations to sustain operations and manage security risks with fewer resources. Some changes were already under consideration before the funding crisis, but the urgency of the current environment has accelerated their adoption.

The merging of security and access departments – previously viewed as distinct functions – is becoming more common, with security specialists now expected to engage directly in negotiations and outreach. Interviewees noted that security risk management has always involved elements of access facilitation, but the current shift offers an opportunity to operationalise the access role and better integrate it with day-to-day security functions.

Resource pooling and co-location are emerging as practical cost-saving measures. In Burkina Faso, an organisation that could no longer maintain its offices offered space to others, resulting in several organisations now sharing the same building. Similar arrangements are taking place at both capital and local office levels, with organisations sharing floors, pooling administrative functions, and collaborating on security analysis. In contexts where organisations have lost security staff positions, mutual support arrangements enable the continued production of joint risk assessments and recommendations, even without dedicated funding. These measures are not without strain – staff reductions mean fewer people must manage the same workload – but interviewees note that they have fostered a sense of humanitarian solidarity in several settings.

In another response to the defunding crisis, some organisations are seeking technological solutions to augment and make the most of limited human resources. As one source explained, "Although we started doing this before the funding crisis hit, it provided more impetus for the digitisation in security – to make processes more efficient." Measures include integrating AI tools for quality control, such as incident verification, as well generating pre-drafted reports, thereby freeing managers to focus on higher-priority tasks. While AI may play an important role in maintaining effectiveness with fewer resources, some security managers are also worried that it could also accelerate de-skilling and lead to further staff reductions.

The defunding crisis has also highlighted the need for a more strategic approach to the online information environment. For years aid agencies have treated social media primarily as a fundraising and public relations tool, not as a contested space essential to defending humanitarian principles and acceptance. As one interviewee observed, "We did not see the monster coming" in the form of hostile narratives and disinformation campaigns. Social media monitoring and proactive, principled engagement – framed as a collective responsibility rather than a competitive pursuit – are now increasingly recognised as essential to protecting the humanitarian space.

At the same time, new diplomatic engagement and initiatives on aid worker protection were advancing in 2024. A small but active group of UN Member States is moving beyond expressions of concern to press for concrete accountability measures. Security Council Resolution 2730 (2024) urges Member States to conduct independent, prompt, and effective investigations into violations against humanitarian and UN personnel, prosecute those responsible, and cooperate with relevant courts and tribunals, with the aim of reinforcing prevention, ensuring accountability, and addressing victims' grievances. Additionally, Australia is preparing a Joint Ministerial Declaration to consolidate political will and coordinate action among like-minded governments, signalling a willingness to act collectively in defence of humanitarian norms.[12] While such initiatives cannot by themselves reverse the current trajectory, they offer a potential platform for sustained political pressure, and for translating rhetorical support into tangible protections.

[12] Australia, Jordan, Switzerland, Indonesia, Sierra Leone, the United Kingdom, Japan, Brazil, and Colombia. (2024, 23 September). *Joint statement: Towards a new declaration for the protection of humanitarian personnel.* Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100729453.pdf

Conclusion: The stakes ahead

Humanitarian access, operational security, and resourcing are all inseparably linked. For that reason, the record-setting levels of violence against aid workers in 2024, followed by the unprecedented US funding freeze in 2025, have created overlapping crises: loss of critical services for communities, heightened risks for aid workers, and erosion of the professional and data capacities that underpin safe and principled operations.

The evidence gathered shows that the security risks emerging from programme cuts are not confined to high-profile conflict zones. They span contexts from Gaza to Colombia, with incidents ranging from community protests to targeted attacks on staff. In several cases, downsizing has left national aid actors exposed to disproportionate risk, while misinformation and weaponised narratives have further undermined acceptance.

Without decisive action by donors and diplomatic actors, the current patterns point to a future where humanitarian aid operations are scarcer, more dangerous and less effective – precisely when global needs and security risks are rising. Preserving international humanitarian law and norms of principled response to crises will require coordinated political will, sustained financial commitment, and a conscious effort to reverse the drift toward de-professionalisation. Part of this could include concentrating the remaining humanitarian resources among the local actors who face the most danger in the world's worst crises.

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State actor-perpetrated incidents against aid workers, 2024

18 countries, **347** victims, **220** incidents

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