



AID WORKER SECURITY DATABASE

3 NOVEMBER 2021

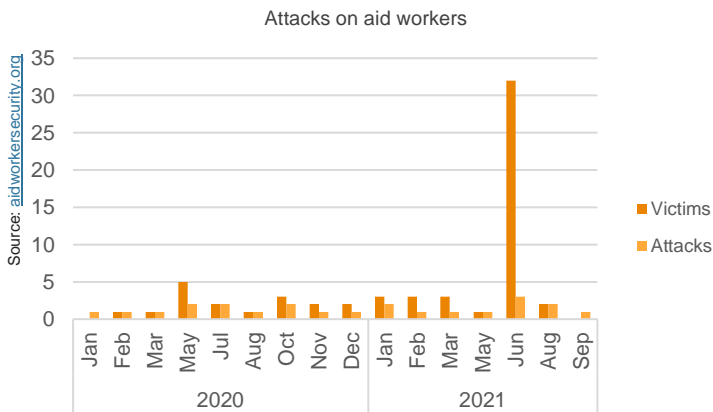
SIGNAL ALERT

Shifting security conditions in Afghanistan

A smaller aid presence contends with severe needs and potential new threats

Brief surge in violence

After a relative dip in 2020, the number of aid workers affected by major violence in Afghanistan spiked in June 2021, when US troop withdrawals met with a major military push by the Taliban to seize control of the country.



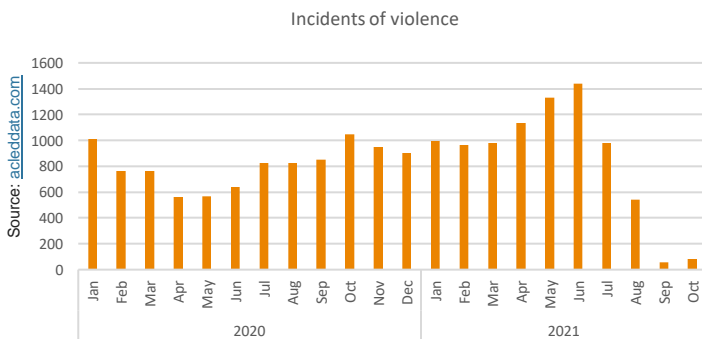
Threats on the horizon: Criminality and collapse

It is questionable whether the Taliban, never a monolithic entity, can retain centralised control and prevent civil unrest without the billions in international support that flowed to the previous government to fund the civil service and security sectors. Even greatly increased UN and NGO funding could not deliver on the full range and level of services needed. At this writing, fragmentation and complete economic implosion are seen as real possibilities.

Social breakdown breeds criminality, and Afghanistan has both a history of organised crime and ready availability of weapons. Aid organisations, seen as both rich and soft targets, would face a new set of risks in this scenario, including that political armed groups could capitalise on the chaos. ISIS, for example, has a potential pool of recruits in disaffected Taliban members as well as former police and soldiers who were never formally demobilised.

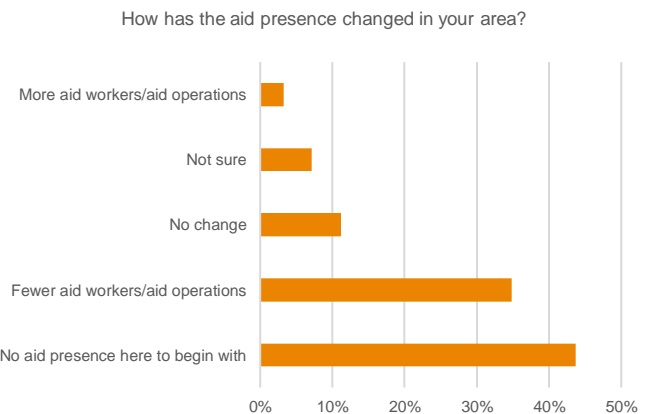
The startling rapidity of the overthrow brought most aid operations to a halt, as organisations pulled out staff or went into hibernation. In the initial weeks of the transition, an already diminished humanitarian presence shrank radically further.

Despite some violence during evacuations, however, the takeover meant an end to the armed insurgency, which had been the greatest source of threat to aid workers. This dramatically altered the security environment, and to date, incidence of major violence is generally down.



A chance to expand humanitarian access?

The current operational presence is hard to gauge, but aid workers estimate that less than a quarter of prior programming has so far resumed. Afghans surveyed in October 2021 confirmed that aid has declined further.



Current obstacles: Cash crisis, role of women

Aid groups report varying degrees of difficulty dealing with the new government. Some NGOs have had their offices occupied and assets seized. The general banking and cash crisis has prevented payments to staff and vendors, which, apart from affecting operations, could quickly become a security risk. For some agencies, problems communicating with government (or even identifying the correct interlocutors) has slowed agreements to resume programming, especially on the fraught subject of employing female staff. Organisations have had to agree to curtail the scope of work for their female employees and make new arrangements to segregate the sexes in the workplace. Meanwhile, the fear and psychological strain on Afghan women working in the humanitarian sector is significant.

But the current, in some ways more permissive, security environment may see aid groups begin to expand their footprint, no longer forced to use the low-profile and highly localised approaches as when they had to fear attacks by armed opposition groups.

For the moment, at least, the Taliban seem keen to deal with INGOs—one of their only points of engagement with the international community—and have a strong incentive to arrange basic services for the population they must now govern. Said one INGO country director, ‘They used to ask us, “Why are you here? Are you spying?” Now, it’s “Why can’t you do more?”’

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Signal Alert is an occasional publication of the Aid Worker Security Database to inform the humanitarian sector of a statistically significant trend, change, or outlier detected in the security environment for aid operations.

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