

Accountability Pathways for Attacks on Aid Workers

Contextual background

Attacks against aid workers have quadrupled over the past decade, reaching a shocking all-time high of 390 aid workers killed in 2024 and 350 in 2025. In the same year, 280 aid workers were arrested or detained, a 271% increase from 2024. These violations continue despite the protections afforded to humanitarian personnel under international law, UN Security Council Resolution 2730, and the 2025 Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel, with near-total impunity.

Legal Action Worldwide (LAW), with support from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, examined the accountability options available to victims and survivors of attacks against aid workers and how they have been used in practice. We mapped global accountability pathways across three categories:

- Criminal accountability, through domestic and international courts and tribunals.
- Establishment of facts and attribution of responsibility, through UN human rights mechanisms, investigations, and other fact-finding bodies.
- Condemnation, reparations, and guarantees of non-recurrence, through legal, diplomatic, and political processes.

The limited available caselaw reveals a significant accountability gap. These attacks are rarely prosecuted and, charges often fail to reflect the specific legal protections afforded to aid workers. This limits the development of jurisprudence, weakens enforcement of existing protections, and contributes to an environment in which violations continue with little expectation of accountability.

Key findings

1. Major attacks against aid workers are documented; other attacks and threats are not.

High-profile incidents, such as airstrikes on hospitals and attacks on humanitarian convoys are often documented and reported. However, kidnappings, detentions, threats, harassment, and administrative restrictions, particularly affecting national staff, remain underreported and rarely addressed through accountability or diplomatic channels.

2. Attacks against aid workers are rarely prosecuted. When they are, they are not prosecuted under specific provisions criminalising attacks on humanitarian operations.

At both national and international levels, prosecutions remain scarce. LAW's research found very limited caselaw and little evidence that existing proceedings have effectively held perpetrators, including States, accountable.

Even where attacks on aid workers are prosecuted, charges rarely reflect the specific offence of attacking

humanitarian personnel, despite its recognition under international law and many domestic legal systems. Cases are instead commonly prosecuted as attacks against civilians or ordinary domestic offences such as homicide or assault. As a result, the protected status of humanitarian personnel often disappears from the legal characterisation, limiting the development of prosecutorial practice and jurisprudence, and weakening international law.

3. Attacks against aid workers are not systematically condemned or addressed.

States frequently condemn serious attacks and occasionally impose sanctions on those obstructing humanitarian operations. However, responses are inconsistent and rarely followed by concrete measures to establish responsibility, prevent future violations, or impose consequences. National staff, who account for the majority of aid worker casualties, also receive significantly less political, diplomatic, and media attention than international personnel.



Key recommendations

1. Ensure appropriate legal framework and jurisdiction.

States should incorporate relevant war crimes relating to attacks against aid workers into domestic law and ensure they are subject to prosecution for acts committed outside of their own territory. Where evidence permits, prosecutors should bring charges that recognise the protected status of humanitarian personnel rather than relying solely on other war crimes or ordinary criminal offences.

2. Increase capacity of aid workers, organisations, investigators and prosecutors.

States should train judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement officials on the legal protections afforded to aid workers and support similar efforts internationally, and support deployable independent investigators capable of gathering evidence and assisting authorities to identify and prosecute crimes against aid workers.

Aid workers should receive training on incident reporting and documentation and be informed of their legal rights and available remedies. Organisations should ensure staff affected by attacks have access to timely and independent legal advice and assistance.

3. Propose a consistent multilateral response to all attacks.

Diplomatic responses should extend beyond statements of condemnation and include sustained engagement. States should consider the full range of lawful measures available, including sanctions, visa restrictions, and the suspension or review of cooperation. Collective action should be pursued through regional bodies and initiatives such as the Group of Friends of the Declaration on the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel.

States should also consider creating a dedicated focal point on attacks against humanitarian personnel, such as a UN Special Rapporteur, Working Group, or Special Representative of the Secretary-General. Existing investigative mechanisms, including the International Humanitarian Fact-Finding Commission (IHFFC) and UN commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions, should be strengthened and supported. Humanitarian organisations should engage effectively with these mechanisms within their mandates.

Conclusion

Protection depends on closing the gap between legal obligations and enforcement. Every serious attack on an aid worker, whether national or international, should trigger a consistent response: condemnation, preservation of evidence, access to legal support, representation for survivors and victims' families, and a credible, well-resourced pathway to investigation and accountability.



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