

GENEVA

Aid agencies have a blind spot when it comes to their own security.

Recent events in Mozambique and Central African Republic have put mercenaries back in the spotlight, as the blurring of roles between regular armed forces and military contractors adds to the risks for civilians.

A less dramatic but also growing phenomenon is the use of private security companies by aid agencies. The companies that provide night guards and X-ray scanners may not seem as problematic as military-style operators such as Blackwater or Wagner, but they present a package of human rights and reputational risks that is all too often underestimated.

In the not-so-distant past, international aid agencies used to manage their security much more through dialogue, negotiated access, and trust-building with the communities, local authorities, and armed actors in the areas where they were operating.

But UN and NGO clients alike now pay security companies millions, and it can make up a fair percentage of their overall spending in some of the most dangerous countries.

Between 2015 and 2019, based on UN procurement reports, over \$186 million was spent by UN agencies on security in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and South Sudan combined – and \$71 million of that in South Sudan alone.

While the majority of the security providers used are local companies, those on the books of UN agencies include some of the largest in the world – the G4S franchise, for instance, is contracted in over 26 countries.

Aid agencies rely on security companies for a range of services, and many are not just “security” in the classic sense. Armed and unarmed security guards are generally hired to protect agency staff, property, and convoys. Companies have also been contracted to manage security at migration centres, medical facilities, and refugee camps.

On site, security guards are responsible for managing entry to premises, monitoring CCTV, registering and escorting visitors, scanning and supervising vehicles, and for assisting during emergencies and evacuations. Some aid agencies even require security contractors to handle telephone enquiries and to switch off lights and air conditioners outside normal working hours.

Contracted security staff are often the first point of contact with visitors and the local community. Understandably then, many contracts for security services include dress code and uniform requirements, and even detail the acceptable length of moustaches, beards, and sideburns.

It is more than just an image issue, however.

Wrongdoing by security guards can hurt aid agencies' relationships with local communities, break down trust and acceptance, and make the provision of aid more difficult. Agencies also run the risk of being liable for any human rights abuses committed by their guards.

Lack of oversight

Despite numerous and growing risks, the aid sector is still lagging behind in terms of due diligence and oversight, relegating security to a mundane administrative and procurement task.

Surprisingly little thought seems to be given to what could happen if one hires the wrong security company, or if contract requirements actually encourage sub-standard industry practices and corruption.

Paying lip service to human rights isn't enough. It's easy for the security companies to say they'll uphold codes of conduct – covering everything from modern slavery to human trafficking, from fraud to sexual exploitation and abuse. But verification that they are actually applying – let alone committed to – these policies is strikingly absent. At the most, they may have to tick a box and send in copies of company policies.

As part of our work, we seek to raise standards within the security industry to ensure companies operating in complex humanitarian and hostile contexts respect human rights and humanitarian law, as included in the International Code of Conduct for Providers of Private Security Services.

Many security companies welcome the chance to shed any hint of shadiness by upping their standards. But progress will be limited unless clients, including aid agencies, set higher standards when they hire them. Frequently, cost is the supreme – often the only – deciding factor in their decision-making.

In places affected by conflict, security personnel are often former members of the armed forces, rebels, or militias, or politically connected. There are few rigorous background checks on the records of security personnel or on company ownership.

And the risks aren't only for the local communities and the aid agencies.

Too often forgotten are the rights and treatment of the guards themselves. How many times have we heard accusations of “lazy” guards, sleeping on the job? How often do we have to witness staff and visitors speak to security guards in a dismissive and disrespectful tone?

Unscrupulous security companies can offer lower prices. But the knock-on effects are that their guards will be paid very low wages while having to pay for their own uniforms, or that they'll be poorly equipped and have received little training.

The working conditions of local security guards frequently fall well below those of the staff of the hiring aid agencies and may fail to meet recommended international

labour standards. Aid agencies will argue that they prescribe a maximum of eight-hour shifts. But the reality is that security guards are regularly on duty for 12 hours, which excludes travel time from their homes, working six days a week.

Unless security is treated as the deadly serious business it is, it's only a matter of time before the careless use of private providers has serious consequences on the work and reputation of aid agencies and the people they aim to help. What scale of disaster are they willing to wait for before they professionalise their hiring and their protocols?