Forum: **Fourth Committee**
Question of: **Strengthening the safety measures of NGOs in conflict zones**
Student Officer: **Michaela Yahaya**
Position: **Main Chair**
Contact: **michaela.yahaya@gym-meiendorf.de**

I. Description of the Issue

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in armed conflicts and humanitarian emergencies. They deliver food, medicine, shelter, psychosocial support, education, legal aid, and protection services to civilians affected by violence. In many conflict zones, NGOs are among the few actors still capable of reaching communities that are cut off from state institutions or international diplomacy. They support internally displaced persons, refugees, wounded civilians, survivors of sexual violence, separated children, and populations at risk of famine, disease, and abuse.

However, NGO operations in conflict zones have become increasingly dangerous. Humanitarian workers and civil society staff face shelling, airstrikes, kidnapping, detention, intimidation, looting, sexual violence, road ambushes, surveillance, and bureaucratic obstruction. Offices, warehouses, clinics, and aid convoys may be attacked or destroyed. Access routes may be blocked by state authorities, non-state armed groups, criminal networks, or active hostilities. In many conflicts, humanitarian personnel are not merely caught in the crossfire but deliberately targeted, despite the protections granted to civilians and humanitarian actors under international humanitarian law.

The issue has become more urgent in recent years because attacks on aid workers have risen dramatically. UN officials warned the Security Council in 2025 that **2024 had been the deadliest year on record for humanitarian personnel**, with 377 fatalities across 20 countries, reflecting a broader erosion of respect for humanitarian norms. Subsequent reporting based on UN and Aid Worker Security Database figures placed the total even

higher, at **383 aid workers killed in 2024**, with major spikes in Gaza, Sudan, and other conflict zones.

For the Third Committee, this topic is highly relevant because the safety of NGOs is directly connected to human rights, civilian protection, humanitarian access, gender-based violence response, children's welfare, food security, and public health. When NGO staff cannot work safely, civilians lose access to lifesaving assistance and independent protection monitoring. Strengthening safety measures therefore does not only protect organizations themselves; it helps preserve the humanitarian space necessary for civilians to survive armed conflict.

At the same time, the issue is complex. NGO safety cannot be reduced to physical security measures alone. It also involves legal protections, accountability for attacks, access negotiations, digital security, community acceptance, staff training, mental health support, coordination with UN agencies, and the difficult balance between humanitarian neutrality and security cooperation with armed actors. The challenge for delegates is to identify how the UN and Member States can better protect NGOs and humanitarian personnel while respecting humanitarian principles and the realities of modern conflict.

II. Definition of Key Terms

Non-governmental organization (NGO)
An NGO is an independent, non-profit organization that operates outside direct government control. In conflict zones, NGOs may provide humanitarian relief, healthcare, legal assistance, protection services, education, advocacy, or development support.

Humanitarian personnel
Humanitarian personnel are workers engaged in activities intended to save lives, alleviate suffering, and preserve human dignity during emergencies. They may work for NGOs, UN agencies, the Red Cross / Red Crescent Movement, or local civil society organizations.

Conflict zone

A conflict zone is an area affected by armed conflict, whether international or non-international, in which hostilities create serious risks for civilians and humanitarian operations.

International humanitarian law (IHL)

IHL is the body of law regulating the conduct of armed conflict. It aims to protect civilians and persons no longer participating in hostilities and to limit the means and methods of warfare. It includes the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols.

Humanitarian access

"Humanitarian access" refers to the ability of humanitarian actors to reach populations in need and deliver assistance safely, rapidly, and impartially.

Deconfliction

Deconfliction generally refers to the exchange of information and coordination intended to reduce the risk that humanitarian sites, convoys, or personnel will be struck during military operations. It may include the sharing of locations, routes, or schedules, although practices vary.

Impunity

"Impunity" refers to the failure to investigate, prosecute, or otherwise hold perpetrators accountable for crimes or serious violations.

Protection of civilians

"Protection of civilians" refers to measures designed to ensure the safety, dignity, and rights of civilians in armed conflict. Safe humanitarian action is closely tied to civilian protection because aid delivery often depends on secure access.

Local or national staff

Local or national staff are personnel hired from the country in which the NGO operates. They often form the majority of humanitarian workers and may face especially high levels of risk because they remain in-country even when international staff are evacuated.

III. Background information

Why NGOs are central in conflict settings

In many armed conflicts, state institutions collapse, public services are destroyed, and civilian populations are displaced on a large scale. NGOs often fill the resulting gaps by:

- distributing food and water,
- running clinics or mobile health teams,
- providing shelter materials,
- supporting survivors of sexual and gender-based violence,
- monitoring child protection concerns,
- offering legal aid and documentation support,
- and coordinating education or psychosocial programs.

NGOs may also function as implementing partners for UN agencies or as independent organizations responding where state or intergovernmental actors have limited access. Local NGOs are especially important because they often have stronger community ties, local language capacity, and a sustained presence even when international staff must leave.

Why NGO safety has deteriorated

The worsening safety environment for NGOs reflects several broader trends in modern conflict.

Urban warfare and the erosion of civilian protection

Contemporary armed conflicts increasingly take place in densely populated areas. Airstrikes, artillery fire, siege tactics, and explosive weapons in urban settings make it far more difficult to separate military and civilian spaces. Hospitals, schools, warehouses, shelters, and humanitarian offices may all be damaged or destroyed.

Deliberate targeting and politicization of aid

In some conflicts, humanitarian organizations are viewed with suspicion, accused of supporting an opposing side, or deliberately targeted to pressure civilian populations. Aid delivery may become politicized, militarized, or manipulated as a tool of war.

Fragmentation of armed actors

Where multiple state forces, militias, armed groups, foreign actors, and criminal networks operate simultaneously, the risks to NGO staff multiply. Negotiating safe passage becomes more difficult, and command structures may be unclear.

Weak accountability

When attacks on aid workers are not investigated or punished, a climate of impunity develops. This lowers the cost of attacking or obstructing humanitarian personnel.

Restrictive bureaucratic environments

Even where organizations are not directly attacked, they may face visa restrictions, permit denials, censorship, banking barriers, surveillance, office closures, or criminalization under counterterrorism frameworks. Such measures can make humanitarian operations unsafe or impossible.

The legal framework protecting humanitarian personnel

The safety of NGOs in conflict zones is rooted in **international humanitarian law**. Civilians must not be targeted unless, and for such time as, they directly participate in hostilities. Humanitarian relief personnel and medical personnel benefit from special protections under IHL when they carry out exclusively humanitarian functions. Parties to conflict must also

allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded humanitarian relief for civilians in need, subject to certain conditions under the law.

Beyond IHL, human rights law remains relevant, especially regarding arbitrary detention, freedom of association, due process, privacy, and protection from torture or discrimination. Domestic criminal law and international criminal law may also apply where attacks amount to war crimes or other serious international crimes.

Security Council attention to humanitarian personnel

The UN Security Council has repeatedly addressed the protection of humanitarian and UN personnel. One of the key texts is **Security Council Resolution 2175 (2014)**, which condemns attacks and threats against humanitarian personnel and calls on parties to armed conflict to comply with international law and ensure safe humanitarian access. More recently, **Resolution 2730 (2024)** reinforced the call to uphold the safety and security of UN and humanitarian personnel and to improve accountability for attacks, a concern emphasized again in Security Council discussions in 2025.

The scale of the current crisis

Recent years have seen a dramatic rise in attacks on humanitarian personnel. In April 2025, senior UN officials told the Security Council that 2024 was the deadliest year on record for aid workers, with 377 fatalities across 20 countries. Later reporting citing UN and Aid Worker Security Database data put the number at **383 aid workers killed in 2024**, nearly half of them in Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories, with Sudan also among the deadliest contexts.

These figures are significant for several reasons:

- they indicate not isolated incidents but a broader deterioration of humanitarian protection.
- they show that humanitarian workers are being killed at unprecedented rates;

- they highlight that local staff make up the majority of casualties;
- and they suggest that existing protection mechanisms are not keeping pace with the realities of contemporary warfare.

Types of threats faced by NGOs

The safety risks faced by NGOs are multidimensional and include:

1. Direct physical attacks

- shelling, airstrikes and gunfire
- attacks on convoys or clearly marked vehicles
- raids on offices, clinics and warehouses
- kidnapping and hostage-taking
- targeted assassinations

2. Access-related threats

- checkpoints and movement restrictions
- siege tactics and encirclement
- denial of permits
- confiscation of aid
- forced closure of offices

3. Criminal and opportunistic violence

- Looting
- Extortion
- Robbery
- attacks by gangs or opportunistic armed actors

4. Legal and political threats

- criminalization under counterterrorism laws
- accusations of political bias or espionage
- arbitrary arrest or detention
- surveillance and harassment

5. Digital and informational threats

- interception of communications
- Cyberattacks
- exposure of staff data
- disinformation campaigns that endanger staff or delegitimize aid organizations

6. Psychosocial harm

Repeated exposure to mass casualties, displacement, and insecurity can cause severe stress, burnout, moral injury, and long-term mental health consequences for staff.

The special vulnerability of local NGOs and national staff

A major weakness in global humanitarian protection is the unequal visibility of local and national staff. Local workers are often:

- the first responders,
- the last to leave,
- more exposed to retaliation within their own communities,
- and less likely to benefit from evacuation options, diplomatic protection, or international media attention.

They may also face underfunding, weaker insurance coverage, limited access to security equipment, and exclusion from high-level coordination spaces. Any meaningful resolution on NGO safety should therefore address not only international organizations but also local civil society actors and national staff.

Deconfliction and its limitations

Deconfliction systems, through which humanitarian actors share locations or movement plans with military actors, are intended to reduce accidental attacks. In some contexts they have helped lower risks. However, they are not a guaranteed safeguard. Humanitarian actors may worry that sharing sensitive information could compromise neutrality or expose them to surveillance if the information is misused. In other cases, deconfliction mechanisms have existed but failed to prevent attacks. This makes them important but insufficient on their own.

(Historical background)

IV. Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Major Countries / Conflict Contexts

This topic is not confined to one region. Delegates may wish to study current and recent conflict contexts where humanitarian access and NGO safety have been severely affected, including:

- Gaza / the Occupied Palestinian Territory
- Sudan
- Syria
- Yemen
- the Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Ukraine
- Afghanistan
- Myanmar
- Somalia
- and the Sahel

Each context differs in terms of conflict actors, access restrictions, legal environment, and the role of local NGOs. Delegates should avoid assuming that one security model can be applied identically everywhere.

Major Organizations

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)
OCHA coordinates humanitarian response, supports access negotiations, and provides reporting on humanitarian needs and operational constraints.

United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS)
UNDSS supports security risk management for UN personnel and plays an important role in broader UN security coordination.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

The ICRC is central to the protection of civilians and humanitarian law in conflict. It engages with parties to conflict on access, detention, medical care, and protection obligations.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
UNHCR is relevant where conflict leads to displacement and refugee emergencies requiring humanitarian access and NGO cooperation.

World Food Programme (WFP), UNICEF, WHO, and other humanitarian agencies
These agencies often work closely with NGOs and depend on safe operating environments to deliver assistance.

Local and international NGOs
Organizations such as medical NGOs, protection NGOs, child-focused organizations, local women-led organizations, and emergency relief groups are directly affected by this issue and should be considered key stakeholders, even when not formally represented in intergovernmental negotiations.

V. Timeline of events

1949: Adoption of the Geneva Conventions, establishing foundational protections for civilians and humanitarian action in armed conflict.
1977: Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions further develop protections for civilians and humanitarian relief in international and non-international armed conflicts.
2003: Bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad highlights the vulnerability of humanitarian and UN personnel in conflict zones.
2014: UN Security Council Resolution 2175 on the protection of humanitarian personnel and UN and associated personnel in armed conflict is adopted.
2023: Humanitarian worker deaths rise sharply worldwide, already marking an alarming escalation.
2024: The Security Council adopts Resolution 2730 (2024) addressing the safety and security of humanitarian and UN personnel; 2024 becomes the deadliest year on record for aid workers, according to UN-linked reporting.
2025: Senior UN officials tell the Security Council that attacks on aid workers must end and stress the urgent need for accountability and stronger protection measures.

VI. Previous attempts to solve the issue

International humanitarian law

The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols remain the core legal framework for protecting civilians and humanitarian personnel. These rules are foundational, but their effectiveness depends on compliance by parties to conflict and meaningful enforcement.

Security Council resolutions

The Security Council has repeatedly condemned attacks on humanitarian personnel. **Resolution 2175 (2014)** was a major step in explicitly addressing the issue and calling for compliance with IHL and safe humanitarian access. **Resolution 2730 (2024)** further strengthened the Council's attention to the safety of humanitarian and UN personnel and the need for accountability.

NGO and UN security protocols

Humanitarian actors have developed a range of operational safety tools, including:

- security risk assessments,
- incident reporting systems,
- acceptance strategies with communities,
- movement tracking,
- staff training,
- hibernation and evacuation plans,
- and inter-agency security coordination.

These measures are necessary, but they remain unevenly funded and are often much harder for local NGOs to implement.

Humanitarian deconfliction mechanisms

In several conflicts, humanitarian actors and military actors have used deconfliction arrangements to reduce accidental strikes on hospitals, aid convoys, or humanitarian compounds. However, the success of these systems has varied widely, and they have not prevented all attacks.

Advocacy and data initiatives

UN agencies, NGOs, and independent monitoring groups have increasingly documented attacks on aid workers and called for stronger accountability. Better data has helped demonstrate the scale of the problem, but documentation alone has not yet reversed the trend of increasing violence.

VII. Possible solutions

Strengthening the safety of NGOs in conflict zones requires both preventive and accountability-based measures. A strong resolution could include the following:

Reaffirming and operationalizing international humanitarian law

Member States should clearly reaffirm that:

- humanitarian and medical personnel must be respected and protected.
- attacks on humanitarian workers are unacceptable.
- and parties to conflict must facilitate rapid and unimpeded humanitarian relief for civilians in need.

The resolution could request stronger reporting on compliance and encourage dissemination of IHL obligations to armed forces and non-state armed groups where possible.

Improving accountability for attacks

Delegates could propose:

- independent and timely investigations into attacks on NGO and humanitarian personnel,
- stronger domestic prosecution of perpetrators,
- international evidence-preservation mechanisms where national systems fail,
- and regular UN reporting on attacks, investigations, and prosecutions.

Without accountability, security measures remain reactive and incomplete.

Funding security capacity for NGOs, especially local NGOs

Many NGOs lack the resources to implement even basic safety systems. States and donors could support:

- security trainings
- protective infrastructure for offices and warehouses,
- communications equipment,
- secure transports

- first-aid and trauma kits,
- evacuation planning,
- insurance coverage,
- and staff well-being services.

Dedicated funding windows for local and national NGOs would be particularly important.

Strengthening access negotiations and humanitarian coordination

The UN and member states could support the following:

- more systematic humanitarian access negotiations,
- better coordination between OCHA, UN agencies and NGOs,
- context-specific safe passage arrangements,
- and emergency communication channels for movement clearance and incident response.

Developing safer deconfliction and notification mechanisms

Where appropriate and acceptable to humanitarian actors, states could support deconfliction systems that:

- protect sensitive information,
- are limited to genuine humanitarian protection purposes,
- include clear procedures for incident follow-up,
- and do not compromise NGO neutrality or independence.

Protecting local staff and community-based organizations

A resolution should explicitly recognize that local staff often bear the greatest risks and should promote the following:

- equitable access to security funding,
- relocation or emergency leave options where feasible,
- legal support,
- psychosocial care,

- and inclusion of local NGOs in coordination and decision-making.

Addressing legal and bureaucratic obstacles

States should avoid unnecessarily criminalizing humanitarian engagement and should consider:

- humanitarian exemptions in sanctions and counterterrorism frameworks,
- expedited visas and permits for humanitarian personnel,
- simplified customs procedures for aid supplies,
- and protections against arbitrary detention or harassment of NGO workers.

Strengthening digital security and information protection

Because conflict actors increasingly use surveillance and cyber tactics, NGO safety should also include:

- secure communications,
- staff training on digital hygiene,
- protection of beneficiary data,
- and support against cyberattacks or disinformation campaigns.

Supporting staff mental health and recovery

Post-incident care, trauma counselling, peer support systems and structured rest policies should be treated as part of humanitarian security, not as optional extras.

VIII. How to prepare as a delegate

Delegates should begin by researching how their country relates to the issue. Useful questions include:

- Is my country a donor to humanitarian operations?
- Is my country directly involved in a current conflict where NGO access is contested?

- Does my country emphasize state sovereignty, humanitarian access, counterterrorism, civilian protection, or accountability?
- Does my country host major humanitarian operations or fund local NGOs?
- What is my country's record regarding implementation of international humanitarian law?

Delegates should also study at least one concrete conflict context

such as Gaza, Sudan, Syria, or Ukraine, to understand how attacks on humanitarian workers actually occur in practice. They should be able to distinguish between the following:

- direct attacks,
- collateral harm in active hostilities,
- bureaucratic obstruction,
- detention and criminalization,
- and failures of deconfliction or coordination.

In drafting resolutions, delegates should avoid vague language such as "ensure safety" and instead propose specific mechanisms:

- reporting mandates,
- funding structures,
- training programs,
- access coordination platforms,
- investigation procedures,
- and targeted support for local NGOs.

As with all committee topics, delegates should prepare their position papers and draft resolutions on time and ensure that their proposals are realistic within the powers of the United Nations.

All delegates are obligated to write at least one draft resolution and a minimum of two, preferably three, position papers so that all topics of the forum are fully covered. This requirement also needs to be included in your research report. Furthermore, remind your delegates that **the deadline to send in the documents is 27.08.26**. And that after the deadline, documents will not be corrected by you as student officers. By then all delegates should have sent in their documents. Documents turned in later than that should not be included in decision-making when it comes to **awards (as** for that, it is important to see how much work the individual delegates put into preparation).

IX. UN resolutions

Delegates may find the following particularly useful:

UN Security Council Resolution 2175 (2014) – Protection of humanitarian personnel and UN and associated personnel in armed conflict.
Resolution 2175 (2014) - Protection of humanitarian personnel and UN and associated personnel in armed conflict | UNSCR
UN Security Council Resolution 2730 (2024) – Reinforces the safety and security of humanitarian and UN personnel and emphasizes accountability, referenced in UN Security Council discussions in 2025.
'Attacks on aid workers must end,' Security Council told | UN News
Geneva Conventions (1949) and **Additional Protocols (1977)**
Relevant annual Security Council debates on the **Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict**
OCHA and UN reporting on attacks against humanitarian personnel and access constraints

X. Useful links

UN Office at Geneva: "Attacks on aid workers must end," Security Council told
UNSCR Resolution 2175 (2014) text and summary
OCHA website
ICRC website on international humanitarian law

UNHCR website

XI. Sources

https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2025/04/104999/attacks-aid-workers-must-end-security-council-told
https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/killing-aid-workers-surges-record-high-during-gaza-war-un-says-2025-08-19/
https://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2175/
https://www.unocha.org/
https://www.icrc.org/en/war-and-law
https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/
https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/protection-civilians-armed-conflict
https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2024-08-19/secretary-generals-message-world-humanitarian-day-scroll-down-for-french-version
https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2025-enarfres
https://www.unhcr.org/