



BRIEFING NOTE | AUGUST 2026

Aid under arrest

The trends underlying the arrest, detention and confinement of humanitarian personnel.

At a glance

1 a day on average, almost one aid worker has been arrested every day since January 2020	959 incidents of arrest, detention or other custodial confinement by State actors recorded between 1 January 2020 and 30 June 2026	1,700+ humanitarian personnel affected across INSO's countries of operation
48% of all serious incidents affecting aid workers in this period were confinements	88% of all affected personnel were locally recruited staff (1,504 people)	1 in 3 incidents were triggered by factors directly related to the affected staff member's humanitarian activities

Source: INSO Conflict and Humanitarian Data Centre, 1 January 2020 to 30 June 2026.

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Humanitarian organisations operate within regulatory systems that govern presence, movement and access.

Detention represents the sharp end of this continuum, where administrative, legal or political constraints become custodial confinement.

Introduction

Since January 2020, on average almost one aid worker has been arrested each day.¹ Between 1 January 2020 and 30 June 2026, INSO's Conflict and Humanitarian Data Centre (CHDC)² recorded 959 incidents of arrest, detention and other forms of custodial confinement by State actors, affecting at least 1,700 humanitarian personnel across INSO's countries of operation.

Confinement³ represents a significant and constant risk to aid workers. During this period, confinements accounted for 48% of all serious incidents impacting aid workers.⁴ While kidnapping and abduction by Organised Armed Groups have long been recognised as a threat to humanitarian personnel, detention by State actors has received comparatively less focused attention, despite posing a different and increasingly consequential form of risk.

Detention by States often operates through formal authority, administrative systems, law enforcement, security agencies and regulatory controls. As a result, the risk of detention by State actors is often embedded in the everyday environment through which humanitarian organisations secure permissions to operate, move, collect information, engage communities and deliver assistance. The same systems that regulate humanitarian presence can also become the channels through which aid workers are confined, deported, prosecuted or accused of unlawful activity.

The reasons underlying the arrest and detention of aid workers by States are diverse. While some incidents recorded are linked to alleged criminal conduct of the aid worker in question, as analysed below, many incidents were associated with the enforcement of administrative measures, disputes related to programme implementation, identity-based profiling and the criminalisation of humanitarian action itself.

This briefing does not treat all detention of aid workers as criminalisation of humanitarian action. Some incidents relate to ordinary law enforcement, alleged misconduct, administrative non-compliance or personal disputes. By contrast, criminalisation refers to cases where the reported basis for detention is linked to the prohibition, punishment, deterrence or delegitimation of activities connected to principled humanitarian action. By analysing the narratives of verified individual incidents recorded in CHDC, this briefing seeks to identify the reported drivers of State-initiated detention of aid workers, identify incidents of criminalisation of humanitarian action, and inform recommendations for both policy-makers and humanitarian practitioners.

A note on data and methodology

This briefing draws on data from INSO's Conflict and Humanitarian Data Centre and examines all recorded incidents of arrest, detention and custodial confinement involving State actors between 1 January 2020 and 30 June 2026.

CHDC records incidents affecting humanitarian personnel across INSO countries of operation and applies a multi-source verification process before incidents are included in the database. The 959 incidents analysed reflect only the cases that meet INSO's verification threshold and fell within INSO's geographical scope at the time the incident took place. This approach strengthens reliability and granularity but excludes a number of incidents that could not be sufficiently verified, were excluded from INSO's dataset at partners' request, or that occurred beyond INSO's geographical coverage. As such, the findings presented should be understood as a minimum baseline and indicative of wider trends.

For this analysis, all incidents involving arrest, detention or custodial confinement by State actors were reviewed individually. Each CHDC incident record contains a narrative description detailing the circumstances surrounding the event. These narratives were analysed and categorised according to the primary factor that appeared to contribute to the detention. Where multiple factors were present, incidents were assigned to the category assessed to be the primary reported driver of detention based on the narrative available.

The analysis reflects the circumstances and allegations recorded within incident narratives. Importantly, it does not seek to independently verify the validity of accusations made against affected humanitarian personnel but rather reflects the reported basis for detention. In addition, several key informant interviews were conducted with INSO Country Office staff to add additional contextual information to the findings.

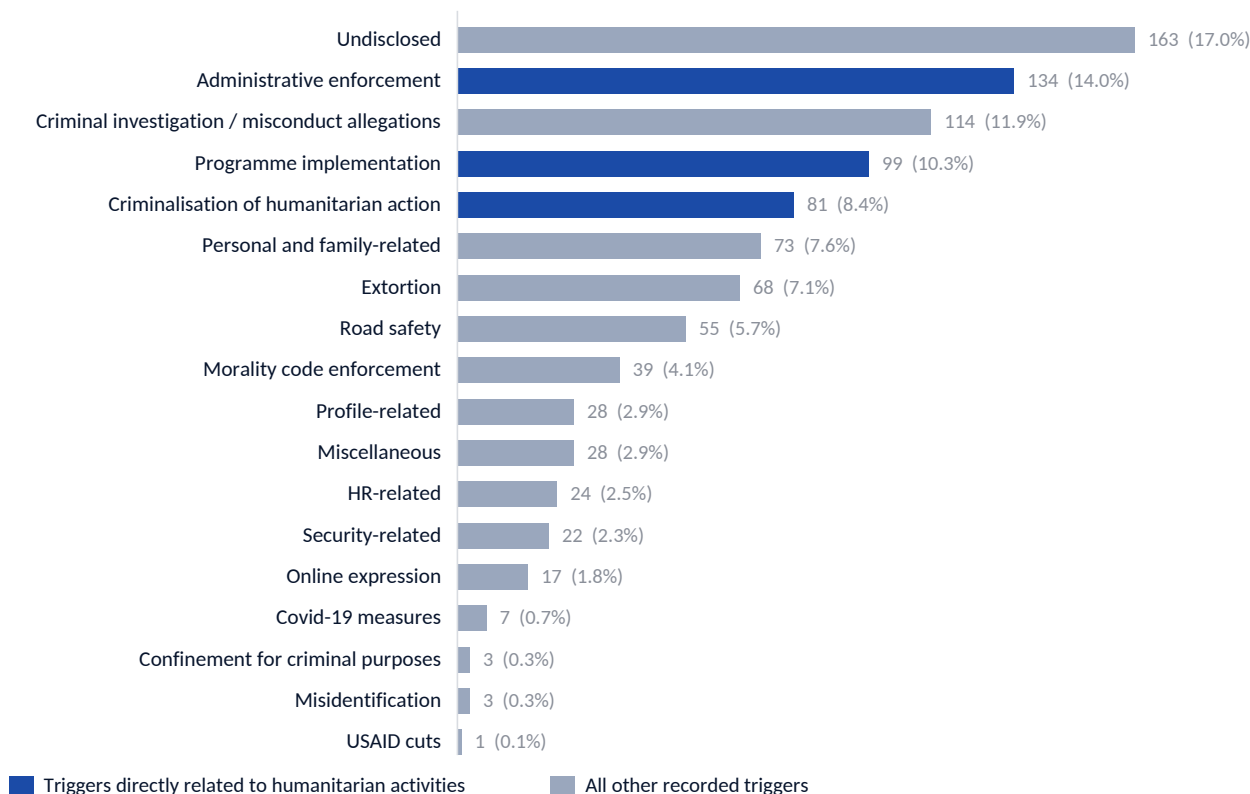
What triggers arrest and detention?

As stated above, the underlying reasons for the arrest or detention of an aid worker are diverse. Based on the primary factor within the recorded narrative of each individual incident analysed as part of this briefing, INSO identified 18 distinct categories of detention.



Figure 1: Typology of detention of aid workers by State authorities (1 January 2020 to 30 June 2026)

Source: INSO Conflict and Humanitarian Data Centre



Some, for example confinement for criminal purposes,⁵ represented a very small and distinct set of incidents (3 identified incidents). Similarly, detentions specifically related to the enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions (7 recorded incidents) and the one incident related to the loss of USAID funding represent very specific time-bound triggers. Others, for

instance morality code enforcement, are sizeable but highly context dependent categories. The vast majority of the 39 incidents identified as related to morality code enforcement took place in Afghanistan, with a small number of related detention incidents occurring in Yemen and South Sudan. A significant number of detention incidents (19) categorised as profile-related⁶ were linked to conscription of male aid workers in Ukraine, also reflecting this context-specific dynamic.

While INSO was able to categorise 80% of the incidents analysed, in 163 (17%) cases the reason for arrest was undisclosed and in a further 28 cases (3%), a clear categorisation was not possible, and the reasons for arrest were categorised as miscellaneous. What emerges, however, from this analysis is a number of significant triggers for the arrest and detention of aid workers listed below.

The principal triggers

Administrative enforcement

Detentions related to the enforcement of the regulatory environment in which aid organisations operate accounted for the largest number of recorded cases, with 134 identified incidents (representing 14%). In these cases, detention often resulted from the alleged lack of necessary permissions, paperwork, visas, residency and work permits or programme agreements, such as memoranda of understanding with local authorities. As explained below, arrest and detention often represents the sharp end of increasing bureaucratic and administrative impediments (BAI), whereby increased BAI create conditions that enable arrests, and detention is used as a coercive tool to enforce such administrative controls.

Criminal investigations or misconduct allegations

Aid workers are bound by national laws. Detentions related to the investigation of criminal or other alleged misconduct accounted for 114 recorded incidents (representing 12%). These detention cases largely reflected law enforcement actions where humanitarian personnel were investigated and detained in relation to alleged theft, fraud, corruption, violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and other criminal charges.⁷ These cases should be clearly distinguished from incidents of criminalisation of aid, where humanitarian action itself, or activities linked to principled humanitarian engagement, are framed as suspicious or unlawful.

Programme implementation

Programme implementation issues also accounted for a sizeable proportion of detention incidents. 99 incidents of arrest and detention (representing 10%) were linked with programme implementation including site selection disputes, beneficiary selection, and humanitarian data collection. Similar to administrative enforcement, such incidents demonstrate how detention can be used as a means to enforce controls over the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Alleged aid diversion, reported programme quality issues and community complaints also triggered several of these arrests. While the majority of identified detention incidents within this category related to general programme implementation, aid workers engaged in health programming, particularly sexual and reproductive health, or cash interventions were occasionally targeted for arrest and detention.

Criminalisation of humanitarian action

Criminalisation of humanitarian action is also a key driver of arrest and detention. Actions linked to the criminalisation of humanitarian action such as accusations of espionage, alleged affiliation with a party to the conflict, accusations of supporting the 'opposition', and public denunciation of protection violations were identified as the primary factor in 81 arrest and detention incidents (representing 8%). While not the largest identified category, the number of cases remains significant as it demonstrates how arrest and detention is used to undermine legitimate humanitarian action including principled engagement with all parties to the conflict and bearing witness to protection violations.

Personal and family-related

Not all incidents of arrest and detention of aid workers are directly related to their humanitarian identity or activity. As outlined above, a significant proportion of arrest and detention of aid workers were related to criminal investigations. In other cases, where the threshold for criminal investigation was not met, the primary factor identified was related to the personal lives of individual aid workers, most often family disputes. 73 arrest and detention incidents were categorised as personal (representing 8%).

Extortion

Financial motivations or extortion, often imposed in the form of fines, were identified as the primary factor in 68 incidents of the arrest and detention of an aid worker (representing 7%). Such detentions often occurred in transit, that is, at Vehicle Check Points, on the Road or in Airports. This maps to broader evidence of financial incentives linked to access impediments⁸ as well as corroborating the physical risk that is often implicit in such interactions.

Profile-related

Incidents identified as related to the profile of aid workers also point to risks linked less directly to the delivery of humanitarian assistance and services, and more related to the identity of the aid worker, including nationality, ethnic background, family affiliations and sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). As outlined above, in the case of the targeted conscription of men in Ukraine, such factors can be highly context-specific. 28 arrest and detention incidents were categorised as profile-related (representing 3%).

Morality code enforcement

As already outlined above, morality code enforcement was the primary factor identified in 39 incidents involving the arrest and detention of an aid worker (representing 4%). In addition to being highly context-specific, detention related to morality code enforcement also demonstrated a distinct gendered pattern. Among the 26 affected staff for whom their gender was recorded in this category, 25 were female.

HR-related incidents

Related to administrative enforcement, issues linked to organisations' management of human resources (HR), for example recruitment, salary payments or alleged breaches of contract, were identified as the primary factor in several arrests and detentions (24 identified incidents, representing 2%). This also demonstrates how arrest and detention in humanitarian contexts can be used as a coercive tool to address both political and administrative objectives, in relation to administrative-linked detentions, and personal grievances⁹ in relation to HR-related incidents.

Other triggers included arrest and detention due to personal expression of opinions online (17 identified incidents, representing 2%), security-related incidents often related to photographing military installations or brief detentions during active security operations (22 identified incidents, representing 2%), and road safety incidents (55 identified incidents, representing 6%).

Overall the data indicates that the triggers behind the arrest and detention of aid workers are diverse, reflecting a mix of day-to-day law enforcement, alongside risks more specifically linked to humanitarian action, individual identity and perceived affiliation. However, in almost 1 in 3 cases,¹⁰ the primary trigger for the arrest and detention of aid workers were directly related to their humanitarian activities.

Table 1: Reported detention triggers (1 January 2020 to 30 June 2026)Source: INSO Conflict and Humanitarian Data Centre. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.¹¹

Primary trigger category	Number of identified incidents	Percentage of total
Administrative enforcement	134	14.0%
Criminal investigation or misconduct allegations	114	11.9%
Programme implementation	99	10.3%
Criminalisation of humanitarian action	81	8.4%
Personal and family-related	73	7.6%
Extortion	68	7.1%
Road safety	55	5.7%
Morality code enforcement	39	4.1%
Profile-related	28	2.9%
HR-related	24	2.5%
Security-related	22	2.3%
Online expression	17	1.8%
Covid-19 measures	7	0.7%
Confinement for criminal purposes (e.g. forced labour)	3	0.3%
Misidentification	3	0.3%
USAID cuts	1	0.1%
Undisclosed	163	17.0%
Miscellaneous	28	2.9%
Total	959	100%

The undercurrents driving detentions

Arrest and detentions represent only the most visible part of a much wider set of pressures that can restrict humanitarian action. Across contexts, humanitarian organisations face visa denials, permit refusals, delayed registrations, threats of closure, informal interrogations, movement restrictions and targeted disinformation campaigns. While these measures do not always result in arrest or detention, they often restrict humanitarian operations, increase legal uncertainty and erode trust, thereby weakening organisations' resilience against such risks. As such, detention represents the sharp end of this continuum, where administrative, legal or political constraints become custodial confinement.

Criminalisation of humanitarian action

As stated above, 81 of the 959 incidents of arrest and detention of humanitarian personnel were directly related to the criminalisation of humanitarian action. These incidents were recorded across nine contexts, indicating that criminalisation-related detention is geographically diverse rather than confined to a single operating environment. While the annual number of recorded cases has remained relatively stable, the nature of the allegations involved points to a persistent concern for principled humanitarian action.

While there has been increasing recognition of the issue,¹² there is not yet a universally agreed definition for the criminalisation of humanitarian action. For this briefing paper INSO has defined criminalisation of humanitarian action as:

The use, threat of use, or misuse of criminal, quasi-criminal, administrative or regulatory measures to prohibit, punish, deter or delegitimise fundamental aspects of principled humanitarian activity that exposes humanitarian actors to criminal liabilities or other sanctions including harassment, prosecutions, detentions, deportations.

Applying this definition, INSO categorised incidents involving allegations of espionage, terrorism, political affiliation, affiliation with a party to conflict, support to the “opposition”, or public denunciation of protection violations as criminalisation-related where the reported basis for detention was linked to humanitarian action itself. Specific activities that often underpin humanitarian action, including data collection, needs assessments, information sharing, principled engagement, and advocacy, were seen to be particularly susceptible to such criminalisation.

For analytical purposes, INSO applied a narrow interpretation of this definition. The 81 recorded incidents should therefore be understood as a conservative subset. Other incidents categorised primarily as administrative enforcement, programme implementation or security-related may also involve elements of criminalisation.

Criminalisation of humanitarian action is a persistent, geographically diverse and likely under-captured driver of detention risk to aid workers, with wide-reaching impacts. In these cases, detention should be viewed as only the most visible manifestation of a wider form of pressure. The mere existence of a regulatory or legal environment that seeks to prohibit, deter or delegitimise fundamental aspects of principled humanitarian action can often shape operational decisions, encourage self-censorship, limit contact or engagement with necessary duty-bearers and affected communities, and inadvertently align assistance with political objectives. Similarly, accusations of espionage, terrorism, political affiliation or support to parties to a conflict can create a wider environment in which humanitarian engagement, information management, advocacy, or contact with affected populations become grounds for suspicion. The demonstrably real risk of detention that such accusations pose can contribute to a 'chilling effect' across the wider humanitarian community.

Administrative enforcement and bureaucratic impediments

Incidents of the arrest and detention of aid workers related primarily to administrative issues were the single largest category identified in the dataset, demonstrating how the risk of detention interacts with increasing bureaucratic and administrative impediments. Across many contexts, visa denials, delays in work permits, registration refusals, restrictions on movement, interference in beneficiary selection, financial controls, and import restrictions can create legal uncertainty and expose humanitarian personnel to intimidation, detention, expulsion, or institutional closure.

A study conducted by INSO in Iraq in 2025¹³ found that bureaucratic access impediments (BAI) were a more significant driver of operational disruption than direct security incidents. While only 15 security incidents affecting NGOs were recorded in 2024 to 2025, none led to major operational changes; by contrast, 11 out of 21 surveyed NGOs reported reducing activities or withdrawing due to BAI. 61% of respondents reported that BAI created legal vulnerability, reduced acceptance, or direct security risks, including heightened exposure to harassment and possible detention when travelling

without required access authorisations. As outlined above, several studies¹⁴ have demonstrated that the uncertainty created by BAI, multilayered approval processes and the implicit threat of detention can also provide opportunities for extortion.

Although distinct from arrests and detentions, deportations, visa denials and expulsions can also be seen as a different but correlated tool of administrative enforcement that can significantly disrupt humanitarian operations. In Palestine, restrictive visa and registration policies have increasingly affected the ability of internationally recruited humanitarian personnel to maintain a sustained presence. Long-term work visas for NGO staff have been systematically delayed or denied, forcing internationally recruited personnel to operate on short-term visas or leave altogether, disrupting programme continuity and institutional memory.

During the Tigray crisis at least nine UN staff members and more than 70 contracted truck drivers were detained without official explanation in Ethiopia, while seven UN staff were expelled in 2021.¹⁵ In Libya, 10 international humanitarian organisations were suspended in April 2025, disrupting critical support for nearly 787,000 migrants and refugees.¹⁶ Across all contexts INSO monitors, between 2022 and 2024 INSO recorded an average of 50 NGO bans or serious restrictions per year, versus 16 during the previous three years, representing a nearly threefold increase.

As such, detention, deportation and suspension are used alongside administrative restrictions to exert control over humanitarian operations and personnel.

Counterterrorism legislation and sanctions regimes

Many of the incidents analysed occurred against the backdrop of counterterrorism legislation (CTL) and sanctions regimes. In contexts where populations in need live under the control of proscribed or sanctioned groups, humanitarian engagement, access negotiations, and the delivery of assistance can become subject to scrutiny under counterterrorism legislation and sanctions regimes. This creates a tension between the operational requirements of principled humanitarian action and legal or donor requirements designed to prevent support to proscribed actors.

The impact of donor government CTL and global sanctions on humanitarian action has been well documented¹⁷ and attempts have been made to carve out humanitarian exemptions. Security Council Resolution 2664¹⁸ introduced a standing humanitarian exemption to UN asset-freeze measures, permitting specified humanitarian actors to provide the funds, goods and services necessary for humanitarian assistance. However, the exemption does not automatically supersede domestic criminal counterterrorism laws or other sanctions regimes, leaving humanitarian organisations exposed to continuing legal and compliance uncertainty.¹⁹ In Afghanistan, humanitarian exemptions under UN Security Council Resolution 2615 (2021) have not eliminated operational constraints linked to sanctions, banking restrictions, concerns about sanctions exposure and donor compliance requirements continued to delay or block humanitarian operations. Similar dynamics are visible in other contexts where engagement with populations living under the control of proscribed groups is interpreted through security and counter-insurgency rather than humanitarian lenses, exposing humanitarian organisations to legal and security risks.

In Yemen, the 2025 US designation of Ansar Allah as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation compounded an already highly constrained operating environment. Subsequent assessments found that compliance concerns and heightened legal risks associated with the designation triggered funding suspensions and led several humanitarian organisations to reduce, suspend or cease operations. NGOs reported heightened concerns around banking access, compliance obligations, and interactions with institutions controlled by Ansar Allah. These pressures have narrowed the space for humanitarian engagement and increased the operational and legal exposure of organisations and staff working in areas under Ansar Allah control.²⁰

CTL and sanctions may also have a normative impact detrimental to the principled delivery of humanitarian assistance. While exemptions have attempted to reduce some of the direct operational and legal concerns, where delivery of assistance has been scrutinised under CTL in donor government, this can also be used as precedent by host governments in crisis contexts to further restrict and criminalise humanitarian action. Notably, during the dismantling of the United

States Agency for International Development in 2025, accusations that USAID funded aid was supporting terrorism or pushing political agendas were repeated by State authorities in several humanitarian contexts.²¹

Disinformation and hostile narratives

Detention of humanitarian personnel is often preceded or accompanied by targeted disinformation. Such disinformation often seeks to delegitimise or misrepresent humanitarian action and erodes trust and acceptance, creating an environment in which restrictions and detentions become easier to justify. In the Central African Republic, for example, sustained disinformation campaigns have targeted the UN and other international actors, while humanitarian workers have been portrayed as spies or as advancing foreign agendas, fuelling mistrust and suspicion toward humanitarian organisations.²²

As with other forms of criminalisation of humanitarian action, activities that underpin humanitarian action and safe humanitarian access are often particularly susceptible to political misrepresentation. Activities such as humanitarian safety data collection, needs assessments and context monitoring are critical operational tools for reducing risk and enabling access; when reframed as intelligence-gathering, they can become a basis for criminalisation. In Burkina Faso, several INSO staff were arrested in 2025 and accused of espionage in allegations INSO rejected as a misrepresentation of its humanitarian safety data collection activities.²³ In Palestine, humanitarian organisations, medical personnel, and civil society actors have increasingly been portrayed as linked to proscribed groups, particularly in Gaza, where humanitarian action itself has been heavily securitised. Such allegations have then been used to justify arbitrary detention of healthcare workers and humanitarian personnel, alongside systematic visa restrictions and tighter registration controls for internationally recruited staff. As of early 2025, human rights organisations estimated that at least 185 healthcare workers were detained.²⁴

Similar dynamics are not limited to conflict-affected or highly restrictive environments. In Europe, NGOs involved in Mediterranean search and rescue have also faced narratives portraying life-saving assistance as facilitating irregular migration or collusion with traffickers. While the forms and consequences differ, this illustrates how humanitarian activity can be reframed as suspicious or unlawful even in very different legal and political contexts.

Targeted disinformation therefore often forms part of the wider environment that enables the criminalisation of humanitarian action and the arrest and detention of aid workers. While dedicated capacity for rumour tracking and narrative monitoring exists, access to such resources is often unevenly distributed. Despite the link between disinformation, criminalisation, and detention, aid actors often lack the capacity or resources to identify, assess and respond to hostile narratives effectively,²⁵ increasing individual exposure to detention risks.

Individual, operational and strategic implications

Arrest and detention of aid workers represents the sharp end of broader administrative, legal, and political restrictions and hostile narratives. Detention is often the point at which these multiple constraints become a direct physical risk to humanitarian personnel and is used as a means of coercive control over humanitarian action.

However, restricted humanitarian space is often described through an organisational and operational lens, focused on access constraints, bureaucratic impediments and reduced operational presence. Using arrests and detentions as an entry point for analysis shows how these constraints can become physical security risks and how the risks borne by organisations translate into risks to individual staff, particularly locally recruited personnel.

88%

Locally recruited staff bear the greatest share of detention risk

Locally recruited staff account for 1,504 of the affected humanitarian personnel, representing 88% of all affected staff recorded between 1 January 2020 and 30 June 2026.

National staff are generally more exposed to administrative systems, local enforcement dynamics, political pressures and identity-based risks. For locally recruited staff, detention risk can also arise through factors such as family affiliation, ethnic identity, nationality, political profiling, forced conscription, morality code enforcement, and prolonged exposure to local power structures. Unlike internationally recruited personnel, locally recruited personnel may have fewer opportunities for relocation, evacuation or diplomatic support, increasing their vulnerability when risks escalate.

Behind each detention incident is an individual and family directly affected by the experience of confinement. Even relatively short periods of detention can have significant psychological effects on affected personnel. Families also often face prolonged uncertainty regarding the whereabouts, treatment and wellbeing of detained relatives, accompanied by anxiety, anguish and the challenges associated with maintaining family contact throughout periods of detention.²⁶ For national staff, detention by State authorities can exacerbate and prolong these pressures as they and their families often remain within the same social and political environment as the detaining authorities.

The operational and strategic implications of the arrest and detention of aid workers can also be far reaching. Arrests and prolonged detention can disrupt programme delivery, staff management, engagement with authorities, and organisational decision-making. In some cases, the arrest or prolonged detention of staff can lead organisations to suspend activities, relocate personnel, or reconsider their presence in a particular area. Related measures such as expulsion, visa restrictions, registration suspensions, and other administrative pressures can further constrain where and how humanitarian organisations are able to operate. Where detention, administrative restrictions, or criminalisation compels humanitarian actors to reduce operations or withdraw altogether, affected populations face immediate consequences, including reduced assistance, weaker monitoring of violations, and diminished accountability. In politically contested environments, the reduction in independent humanitarian presence can also weaken humanitarian negotiation capacity and this limits the ability to sustain principled access based on need.

Ultimately, where detention is used or threatened as a means of control, it can make humanitarian access conditional and increase pressure on organisations and staff to adapt their activities, engagements and presence. The consequences therefore extend beyond individual security incidents, and affect the space available for independent humanitarian action and the principled delivery of assistance to affected communities.

Recommendations

1

Member States, particularly signatories of the Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel, should operationalise commitments to prevent the criminalisation of humanitarian action.

This should include reviewing domestic counter-terrorism, sanctions, national security and other relevant legislation to ensure that principled humanitarian action cannot be treated as criminal conduct. States should also adopt clear humanitarian exemptions and safeguards, issuing prosecutorial and law enforcement guidance clarifying that principled humanitarian action should not give rise to criminal liability and work with humanitarian organisations to ensure that donor compliance does not create incentives for overcompliance, self-censorship or withdrawal from high-need areas.

2**Donor governments, IASC principals and Humanitarian Coordinators should reaffirm the humanitarian nature of information collection.**

Data collection often underpins humanitarian action, providing humanitarian organisations with critical information required to deliver assistance to those most in need safely. However, as demonstrated, such activities can be misrepresented, creating or increasing detention risks for staff and undermining humanitarian action. To reduce this risk, donor governments, Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) principals and Humanitarian Coordinators should publicly reaffirm the humanitarian nature, legitimacy and necessity of data collection activities and use their good offices and bilateral diplomacy to protect the ability of humanitarian organisations to collect and analyse information necessary for staff safety, access and programme delivery.

3**Host governments should reduce and streamline bureaucratic and administrative impediments.**

States should work to ensure that the systems governing NGO registration, visas, work permits, movement permissions, programme approvals and reporting requirements are transparent, predictable and do not unnecessarily impede humanitarian action. States should seek to prohibit informal fees, arbitrary fines, ad hoc demands and coercive use of administrative procedures and should establish joint mechanisms with humanitarian actors to resolve administrative disputes before they escalate into detention, deportation or suspension.

4**Humanitarian organisations, coordination bodies, donors and diplomatic actors should strengthen detention preparedness and response.**

Preparedness measures should include pre-identified legal counsel, emergency funding mechanisms, access to psychosocial support, family liaison, alongside investment in collective escalation channels through NGO forums, humanitarian leadership and diplomatic missions where engagement by individual organisations is insufficient or increases exposure.

5**Member States, donors, humanitarian organisations and coordination bodies should address the permissive environment for detention, including by confronting disinformation and hostile narratives.**

Hostile narratives and disinformation must be treated as part of the risk environment that enables detention and criminalisation. Donors and humanitarian leadership at both a global and country level should support narrative monitoring and strategic communication capacity while publicly and consistently reaffirming the neutral, impartial and independent character of humanitarian action.



Movement between field locations, Central African Republic. Detention risk is often embedded in the everyday systems through which humanitarian organisations secure permission to operate and move.

Notes and references

- 1 Between 1 January 2020 and 30 June 2026, INSO recorded that 1,700 aid workers were involved in confinement incidents perpetrated by States. As this only includes incidents in countries INSO monitors, the number is likely larger.
- 2 All data quoted, unless otherwise specified, is from INSO's Conflict and Humanitarian Data Centre. The CHDC contains all data INSO collects through its country programmes and currently covers 28 humanitarian contexts. The dataset's primary purpose is to support operational decision making and data is gathered from INSO's partners and field monitors and verified through our country offices. INSO only captures data in countries where we are present, which can vary depending on the opening and closure of offices. As such, data is intended to be indicative of trends and does not aim to contradict other publicly available global data sets.
- 3 INSO defines confinements as acts which have the effect of limiting the target's physical freedom of movement and may be both lawful and unlawful.
- 4 INSO defines a serious incident as any incident resulting in the death, injury or detention (whether by arrest or abduction) of an aid worker.
- 5 This category includes incidents of detention for forced labour.
- 6 A total of 28 incidents were categorised as profile-related.
- 7 As stated above, INSO does not independently verify the validity of accusations made against affected humanitarian personnel. The categorisation should therefore be understood as an analysis of the reported reasons and circumstances surrounding detention incidents rather than a determination of culpability.
- 8 See for example research by Centre on Armed Groups: Schouten, P., Gallien, M., Thakur, S., van den Boogaard, V. and Weigand, F. (2024) *The politics of passage: Roadblocks, taxation and control in conflict*. Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS).
- 9 As stated above, INSO does not independently verify the validity of accusations made against affected humanitarian personnel or the grievances that may lead to detention. The categorisation should therefore be understood as an analysis of the reported reasons and circumstances surrounding detention incidents rather than a determination of culpability.
- 10 Calculated by combining incidents categorised as administrative, programme implementation-related, and criminalisation of humanitarian action.
- 11 Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.
- 12 For instance, the Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel, Para 21.2.d, and UN General Assembly Resolution 80/112, Para 9.
- 13 INSO Global Analysis (2025) *Bureaucratic and Administrative Impediments in Federal Iraq* (distribution limited to INSO Partners).
- 14 See for instance ACAPS (2023) *Afghanistan: Working under the ITA's evolving NGO regulations*, Thematic Report; Transparency International / U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, *Corruption in humanitarian assistance in conflict settings*; and OCHA (2025) *South Sudan: Humanitarian Access Snapshot*, December 2025.
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- 20 ACAPS (2025) *Humanitarian Access Overview: Spotlight on bureaucratic and administrative impediments*, page 16.
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- 23 INSO (2025) *Statement on our activities in Burkina Faso*.
- 24 Human Rights Watch (2025) *Release the Doctors: NGOs Call for the Release of Unlawfully Detained Health Workers in Gaza and the West Bank*.
- 25 Jackson, A. et al. (2026) *A fracturing order: How global systemic change is reshaping armed conflict and the possibilities for engagement*, Centre on Armed Groups.
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About INSO

INSO is an independent international organisation supporting the safety of humanitarian operations. We provide free safety and security services to NGOs working in volatile environments, including real-time incident alerts, evidence-based analysis, coordination, training, crisis management support and safety policy reviews.

Our Conflict and Humanitarian Data Centre maintains a centralised record of security incidents affecting humanitarian personnel, gathered and verified through our country offices, to inform operational decision-making and policy.

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