Aid Worker Security Report 2026

When the threat is the state: Detentions of humanitarian workers

Humanitarian Outcomes

Summary of key findings

- Aid worker killings totalled 350 in 2025, down from 2024 yet still the second-highest toll ever recorded.
- Other casualties reached historic highs last year, including 235 aid workers kidnapped and 322 wounded.
- Three quarters of the fatalities occurred in just two contexts: Gaza (186) and Sudan (71).
- The top five countries with the most aid workers affected by security incidents were Gaza, Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Yemen.
- Reports of arrests and the detention of aid workers by state actors totalled 280 in 2025. This type of security incident has emerged as a serious threat in several contexts and globally has exceeded kidnapping as an operational risk for humanitarian work.
- State actors, particularly authoritarian and military governments, have used detention to intimidate and control humanitarian actors and effectively silence and suppress civil society.
- In contending with this threat, aid organisations face unique operational challenges requiring new legal guidance, insurance instruments, advocacy strategies, training and staff support.
- Addressing the detention phenomenon demands action beyond individual organisations. It requires other states to engage in robust humanitarian diplomacy to challenge detentions of aid workers as a violation of international humanitarian law.

The Aid Worker Security Database records major security incidents affecting humanitarian personnel. These include:

- killings
- kidnappings (lasting over 24 hours)
- serious injuries
- rape and sexual assault
- arrests and detentions (lasting over 24 hours).

This report is based on verified incident statistics from the Aid Worker Security Database and key informant interviews with 29 humanitarian practitioner-experts.

For more information and to read previous reports, visit: https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/reports

Introduction

Table 1: Major security incidents affecting aid workers: Summary statistics, 2016–2025

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Number of incidents	179	180	244	289	303	339	300	471	634	712
Total aid workers affected	320	387	488	507	524	652	554	710	936	1,187
Total killed	113	141	131	126	117	141	119	297	387	350
Total injured	99	103	147	234	243	207	146	213	308	322
Total kidnapped*	97	95	182	135	136	133	215	108	138	235
Total arrested/detained	11	48	28	12	28	171	74	92	103	280
Internationals affected	45	40	44	27	26	33	30	28	29	43
Nationals affected	275	347	444	480	498	619	524	682	907	1,144
UN staff	74	55	71	40	66	76	85	245	216	364
International NGO staff	167	154	256	272	229	225	195	224	259	320
National NGO staff	52	99	133	165	199	326	251	176	342	396
Red Cross/Crescent Movement**	25	79	28	16	28	15	10	61	112	78

Aid Worker Security Database, aidworkersecurity.org

* Survivors or status unknown.

** Includes personnel of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and national societies.

This year's Aid Worker Security Report presents the latest verified statistics on violence and other major security incidents affecting aid workers worldwide, with data drawn from the Humanitarian Outcomes Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD).

In addition to the global update on data trends, this edition focuses on the growing phenomenon of aid worker detentions by state actors, informed by 29 key informant interviews and numerous other consultations with humanitarian practitioners and security experts over the past year.

This report, and the ongoing maintenance of the AWSD as a free public resource to support the humanitarian sector, were made possible by donations from the governments of Australia, the Netherlands and Canada.

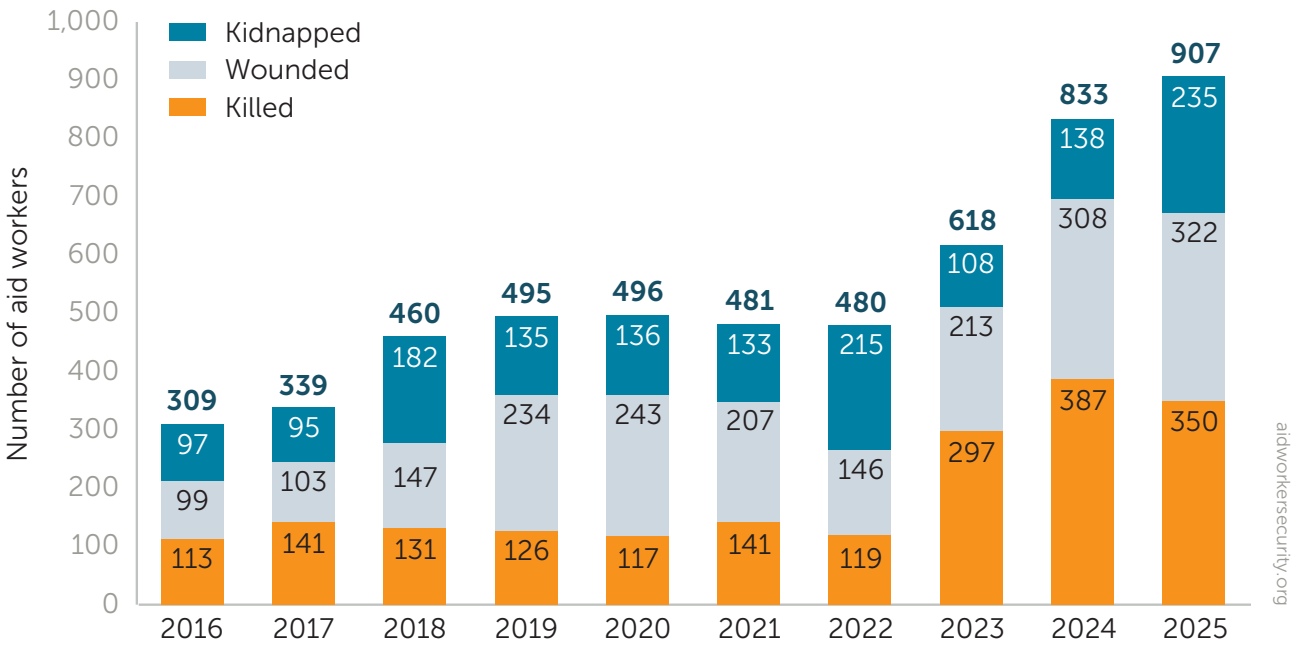
1 Aid worker attacks: Latest statistics

1.1 Continued high casualty numbers and steeply rising rates

Violence against aid workers rose again in 2025, driven by record numbers of kidnappings and serious injuries. Fatalities dropped slightly from 2024 but remained historically high with 350 humanitarians killed last year. New tracking by the AWSD of detentions and arrests recorded 280 staff held by state authorities.[1]

Thirty-four countries experienced a serious incident against a humanitarian aid worker, and 20 of these contexts saw staff detained by the state or de facto authorities.[2] The number of humanitarian response contexts experiencing serious security incidents remains roughly consistent year after year, underscoring the challenges humanitarians continue to face in contexts around the world.

Figure 1: Aid workers killed, wounded and kidnapped in attacks, 2016–2025



Changes to the humanitarian system as a result of defunding were profound in 2025, and it is likely the full impact will not be understood for at least a few more years. Preliminary 2025 data suggests the humanitarian workforce has contracted sharply, with international organisations (NGOs and UN agencies) losing an estimated 20% of staff, and national NGOs losing up to 40%.[3]

[1] The AWSD detention category includes both arbitrary detentions and legitimate arrests. For clarity, this report uses the term 'detention' to encompass both. The AWSD includes only those incidents where the aid worker is held for over 24 hours.

[2] While 'kidnappings' refers to incidents perpetrated by non-state actors (including opposition forces), 'detentions' in the AWSD refers to incidents perpetrated by state actors, including local authorities, whether legitimate, internationally recognised governments or de facto authorities such as the Houthis in Yemen and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

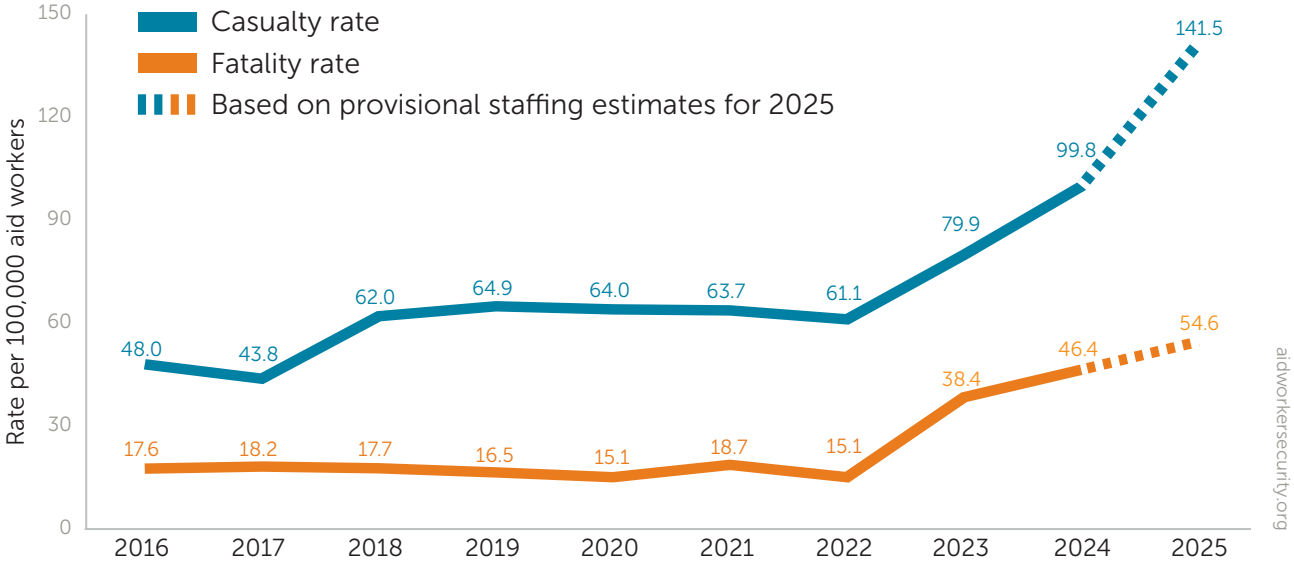
[3] These estimates were derived from data in the Humanitarian Outcomes Global Database for Humanitarian Organisations (GDHO) and are also presented in the forthcoming State of the Humanitarian System 2026 report, published by ALNAP.

Despite the estimated reductions in global humanitarian staff, victim numbers remained consistently high, with 1,187 total humanitarians affected by a major security incident in 2025. In other words, for the humanitarians remaining in the workforce, the operating environment is becoming increasingly dangerous. This threat is not borne equally however.

In 2025 there was a 30% decrease in the number of international staff affected by a violent incident. One international staff member was killed – the lowest number ever recorded for international fatalities. This is consistent with organisations reducing budgets and limiting the role of international staff when possible, which increasingly pushes the burden of delivery and risk onto national counterparts.

The war in Gaza, beginning late in 2023, dramatically impacted fatality and casualty rates for aid workers, doubling the global number of fatalities seen in most years prior to the conflict. Other contexts like Sudan, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ukraine and Ethiopia also contributed to a steady rise in casualties relative to staff on the ground, reflected in the uptick of rates after 2022. Even excluding Gaza, fatality and overall casualty rates have increased over the last two years, demonstrating that the violence against humanitarians continues to grow faster than the number of staff.

Figure 2: Global aid worker fatality and overall casualty rates, 2016–2025[4]



Although violence against humanitarian workers is concentrated in a small number of conflict-affected contexts, the remarkably high global fatality rates put humanitarian work among the deadliest professions, even excluding aid worker deaths caused by accident and illness. As seen in Figure 2, the 2024 fatality rate for humanitarians was 46.4 per 100,000 workers. By way of comparison, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics reported an average work-related fatality rate of 3.3 per 100,000 US workers in 2024, while the four deadliest occupations ranged from structural iron and steel work (37.8) to logging (110.4).[5]

Despite their protected status under international law as unarmed civilians providing assistance to other civilians, aid workers have faced higher rates of violent death than some armed personnel mandated to use force. This includes uniformed UN peacekeepers, whose hostile death rate ranged from 6.7 to 63.5 per 100,000 between 2015 and 2024, and stood at 6.7 in 2024.[6]

[4] Casualty figures include aid workers killed, injured or kidnapped – they do not include detentions.

[5] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2026). *Rate and number of fatal work injuries in selected occupations, 2024* [Data chart]. Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries. Retrieved 7 August 2026 from https://www.bls.gov/charts/census-of-fatal-occupational-injuries/rate-and-number-of-fatal-work-injuries-in-selected-occupations.htm

[6] Uniformed malicious-act deaths per 100,000 uniformed personnel (to 31 March 2026). UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO). (n.d.). *Peacekeeping fact sheet.* Retrieved 7 August 2026 from https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/peacekeeping-factsheet

1.2 The most insecure contexts for humanitarian action

Gaza remained the most dangerous context for aid workers for the third year in a row, with 186 aid workers killed and 76 seriously injured – more than in 2024, despite the fragile ceasefire agreed in October 2025. Sixty-one percent of these casualties were attributed to aerial bombardment and 11% to small arms fire. Including the West Bank, 23 humanitarians were detained by Israeli forces last year. From the October 2025 ceasefire to July 2026, the AWSD continues to record aid worker deaths (18) and injuries (6) from the Gaza conflict.

The civil war in Sudan continued in 2025, with 71 aid workers killed, marking a new record for the third consecutive year. Kidnappings by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) were the most common means of violence but small arms fire accounted for the most fatalities. Unlike global patterns, where the road is the most common point of attack (ambushes and checkpoint stops), project sites remain the highest attacked location in Sudan, indicating the intentional targeting of aid infrastructure and operations. Incidents affecting aid workers in this context are likely also underreported, as much of the aid delivery has been left to informal community groups or small national NGOs outside of the humanitarian coordination bodies and security reporting mechanisms. Some reports estimate massacres by the RSF and ongoing military operations have killed over 100,000 civilians, creating an unprecedented humanitarian crisis where access remains severely constrained and insecure.[7]

Decades of conflict in eastern DRC have made it a consistently dangerous context for aid workers. However, escalated fighting between the Rwandan-backed M23 militias and the Congolese government forces tripled aid worker casualties compared to the previous year,[8] reaching the country's highest levels on record: 16 killed, 27 injured and 66 kidnapped. Thirty-seven percent of these violent incidents were politically motivated but increasing actions by criminal groups and economically motivated attacks also increased, indicating the general instability and desperate economic situation affecting aid operations and civilians generally. As in Sudan, it is likely that many incidents of violence affecting aid workers have gone unreported.

After a temporary decline in 2024, attacks on aid workers in South Sudan surged again in 2025, with 66 recorded violent incidents – the second-highest annual total since the country's independence in 2011 – and a 53% increase in the number of victims. Kidnappings in the country almost doubled in 2025, serious injuries increased significantly, and 42 detentions by state authorities were recorded. The collapse of the peace deal and the continued deterioration of the state's control contributed to the high number of kidnappings and detentions, where non-state and state actors are acting for financial motives and not necessarily to specifically target aid operations. While aerial bombardment is not completely new to the conflict, during the recent escalation it has been used at a scale not previously seen, and 2025 marked the first time aid workers were affected, with five injuries and three fatalities.

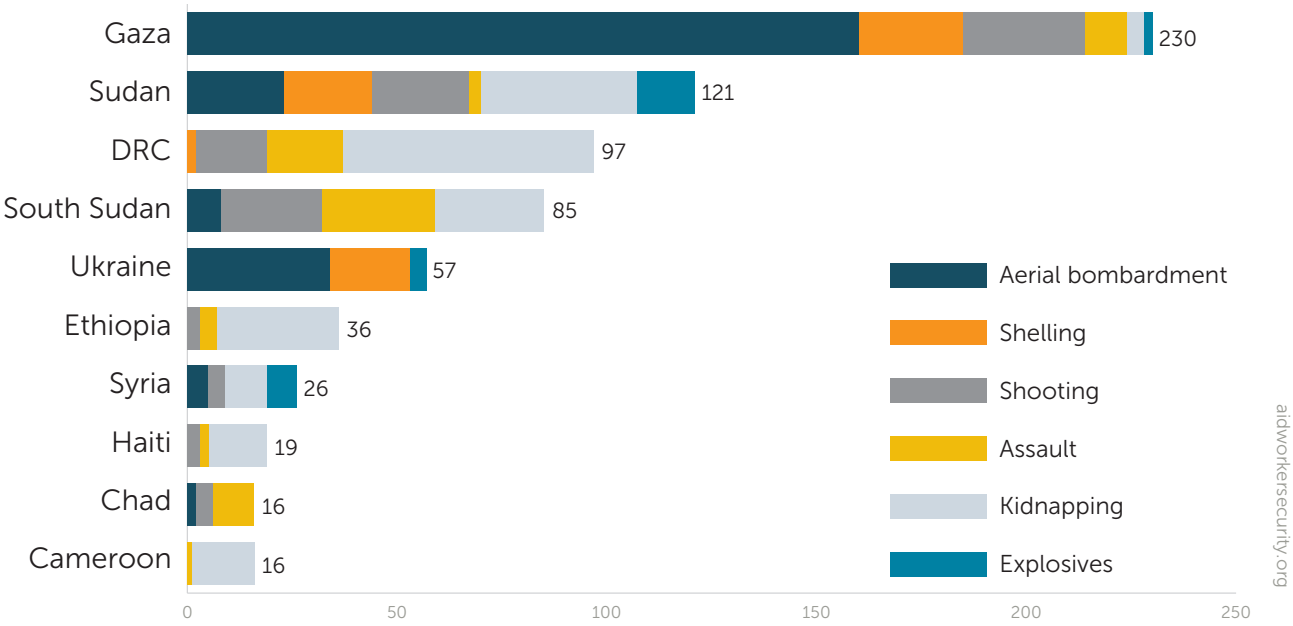
Intensifying drone warfare, airstrikes on residential areas and artillery shelling on the front lines have created a more dangerous setting for civilians and aid operations in Ukraine over the last year. There was a 55% increase in violent incidents between 2024 and 2025.

The number of humanitarian victims of violence remained fairly constant in Ethiopia, Cameroon and Syria in 2025, while increases in Haiti and Chad brought these countries into the most violent contexts for the first time in recent years.

[7] Nzuki, C. et al (2026, 17 April). *The Sudan war in 10 charts.* Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). https://www.csis.org/analysis/sudan-war-10-charts

[8] United Nations Security Council. (2026), *Final report of the group of experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo,* S/2026/466. https://undocs.org/en/S/2026/466

Figure 3: Victims by known means of attack, most violent contexts, 2025*

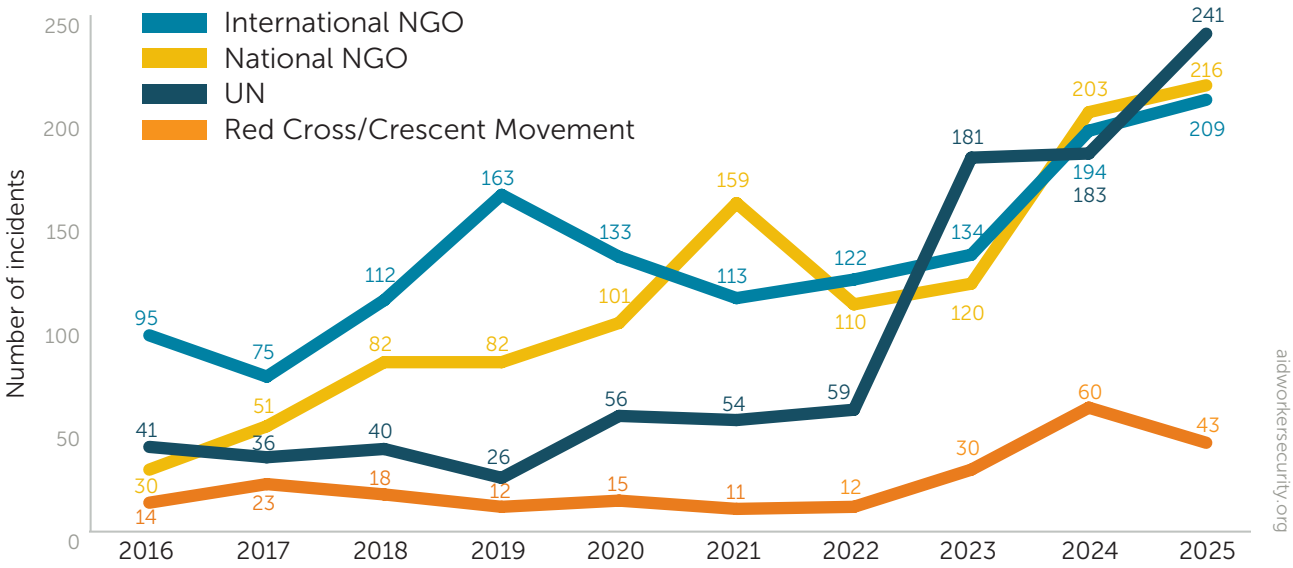


* Does not include detentions

1.3 Profiles of aid workers affected

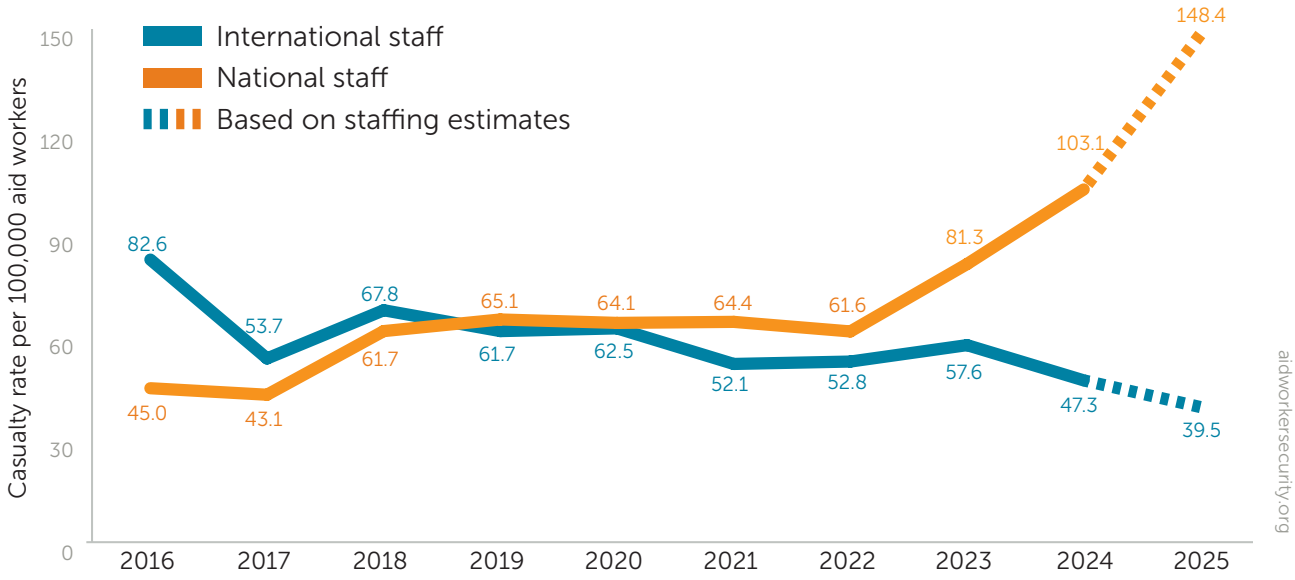
The large number of Palestinians employed by the UN in Gaza, in addition to the numerous UN agency staff detentions in Yemen, resulted in the UN experiencing the most serious incidents last year. Local and national NGOs experienced the second highest number of security incidents, consistent with the steady rise seen over the last three years.

Figure 4: Number of incidents by organisation type, 2016–2025



After remaining relatively consistent between 2018 and 2022, casualty rates for national staff skyrocketed in 2023 due to the intense conflict in Gaza where over 97% of those injured or killed were national staff. Although the AWSD includes attacks on contracted staff (such as drivers and security guards) when the information is available, most organisations do not systematically record or report these incidents the same way as those affecting full-time staff, making the true disparity between international and national staff rates likely more pronounced.

Figure 5: Casualty rates for national and international staff, 2016–2025



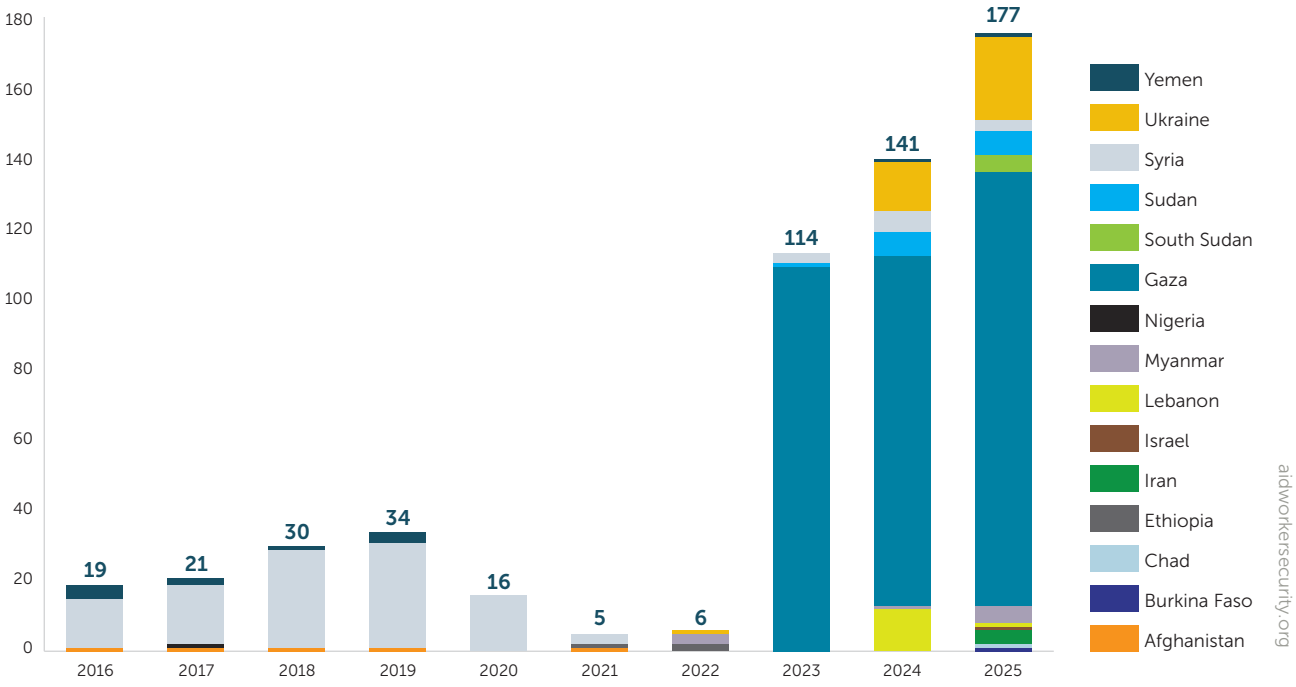
It is not possible to accurately track comparative casualty rates of male and female staff. Despite vast improvements in the quality, granularity and comprehensiveness of security incident reporting over the past two decades, gender remains unspecified in many reports. Moreover, the majority of organisations do not disaggregate their staffing numbers by gender, preventing the calculation of gender-specific incident rates.

1.4 Trends in tactics and perpetrators

Aerial bombardment across 13 different countries accounted for the most incidents and fatalities affecting aid workers in 2025. Before 2023, aerial bombardment incidents were confined to three or four different contexts per year. The new norm of increased state involvement and expanding drone warfare in a growing number of contexts is changing the dynamic aid workers are forced to operate in, raising questions about risk transfer to national NGOs and the ability to protect staff against these indiscriminate threats. Historically the preserve of state militaries, the rise of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs, such as drones) makes aerial warfare more widely accessible. Trends suggest more non-state actors will soon have access to UAVs and humanitarians will be forced to work in this new threat landscape.[9]

[9] As of 2026, AWSD data on aerial bombardment will disaggregate between bombardment from manned and unmanned aerial vehicles, allowing for more granular analysis.

Figure 6: Number of incidents of aerial bombardment by country, 2016–2025



Kidnappings increased for the second year in a row in 2025, accounting for almost the same number of humanitarian worker incidents as small arms fire. In instances where the motive for kidnapping is known, 48% were motivated by economic factors, demonstrating the persistent threat of criminal and non-state armed groups targeting aid operations for financial gain.

Roads continue to be the site of most violent incidents involving aid workers, accounting for 41% of incidents with a known location. Organisational offices and project sites were the second highest attack location, raising the same serious questions about deconfliction and violations of international humanitarian law that have become a constant theme in security incident analysis.

280 aid workers were detained last year in 20 different countries; the highest number of detentions were in Yemen, South Sudan, DRC, Myanmar and Palestine. Global sentiment towards international aid continues to shift. States are increasingly waging systemic campaigns of arrest and detention, questioning humanitarians' motives and deliberately obstructing their programmes – evidenced by state actors now being the predominant perpetrators of violence against aid workers.

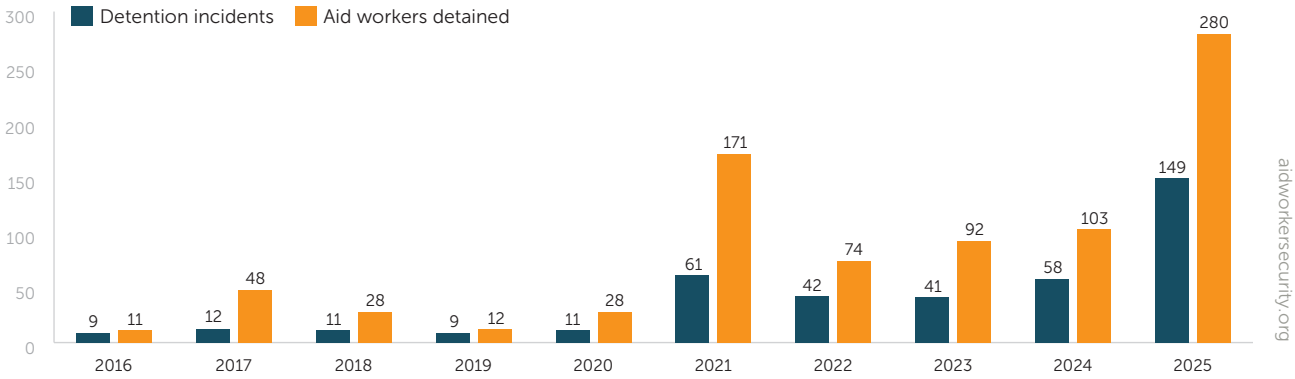
2 Detention of aid workers

The AWSD defines a detention incident as one where a staff member of a humanitarian organisation is taken by state authorities (military, police, or other officials) and held for longer than 24 hours. Often referred to in international human rights terminology as 'arbitrary' arrests and detentions, these incidents differ from lawful arrests by including "elements of inappropriateness, injustice, lack of predictability and due process of law."[10]

Although the AWSD tracks detentions and arrests regardless of whether lawful charges are brought, the majority of incidents included in the database and in this analysis were deemed arbitrary or with clearly politically motivated charges.

While details may be unclear, especially at the beginning, the overall inappropriateness or unfairness of the seizure, and the opacity of the detention process, creates a security situation for humanitarian organisations that more closely resembles a kidnapping than a standard arrest.

Figure 7: Detention incidents and affected staff, 2016–2025



2.1 A significant uptick

A marked rise in detention occurrences affecting humanitarian organisations, observed in security reporting and raised by humanitarian security staff over the past few years, led the AWSD to create a new category of major security incidents to track, along with killing, wounding, sexual assault and kidnapping (defined as abductions by non-state actors). Beginning in 2025, the AWSD team began systematically recording detention incidents and conducted a retrospective data search to identify incidents.

Historical data is less complete for earlier years, and detentions are generally underreported compared to other major incidents (see Section 3). Despite these caveats, the upward trajectory of detention incidents is unmistakable and aligns with the documented experience of many humanitarian organisations.

[10] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (n.d.). *About arbitrary detention.* https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-arbitrary-detention

2.2 Trends and patterns

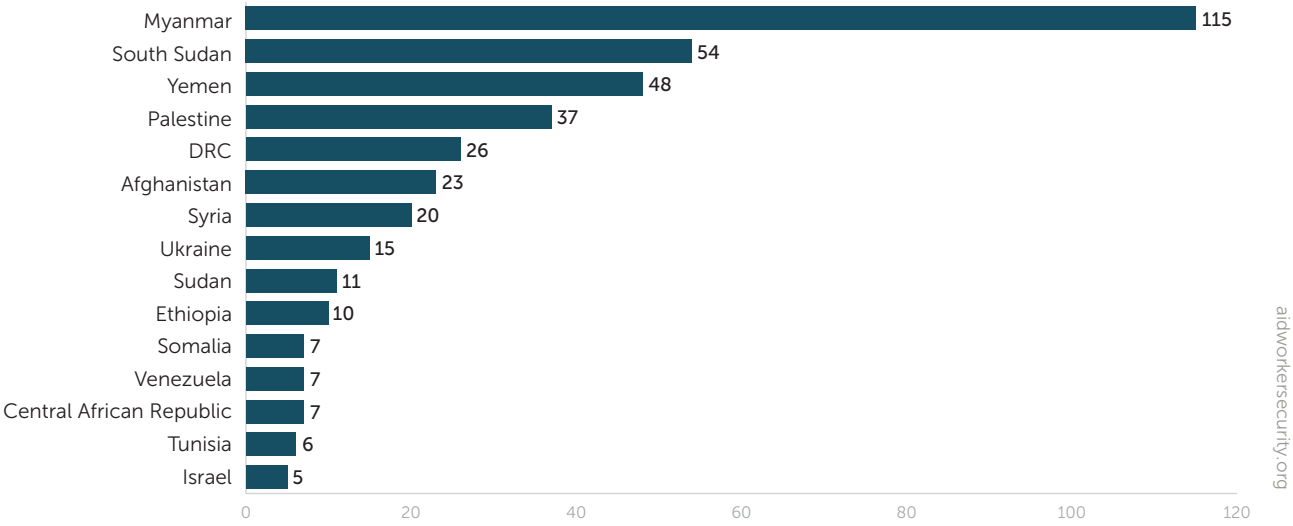
Apart from the underlying inappropriateness and opacity, detention incidents have no singular pattern and can range widely – from sudden, unexplained disappearances to highly visible raids and seizure operations, to legitimate arrests for traffic violations.

Although the location of where aid workers are seized is unknown or unspecified in many incident reports (36% of total incidents), most took place at the workplace (34%), split roughly equally between offices and project sites. The next most common location (27%) was on the road, where staff were stopped at formal or informal checkpoints. Detained staff were taken from their homes in 23% of known-location incidents and from public places in 13% of cases. That most detentions took place while aid workers were on the job supports the widespread contention of aid organisations that certain state authorities are targeting the organisation and/or the humanitarian work itself, using detentions as a means of control and intimidation.

Contexts and state motivations

This belief is arguably supported by the fact that governments in the highest-detention contexts are mainly either authoritarian, military, or unrecognised/de facto authorities. The 10 contexts with the highest number of recorded detention incidents for all years (1997–2025) are: Myanmar (115), South Sudan (54), Yemen (48), Palestine (Gaza and West Bank) (37), DRC (26), Afghanistan (23), Syria (20), Ukraine (15), Sudan (11) and Ethiopia (10).

Figure 8: Detention incidents by country, 1997–2025



The very high number of detentions in Myanmar reflects the military government's efforts to criminalise independent humanitarian action by imposing sweeping registration requirements, travel authorisations, banking restrictions and criminal penalties on organisations and individuals delivering aid in any areas outside junta control. It has enforced these controls with aid worker detentions resulting from wholesale sweeps of NGOs in certain areas, targeted raids leading to mass arrests of staff members, and opportunistic road stops. Similar tactics have been used in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, Assad-era Syria, and Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover. Like Myanmar's junta, these de facto authorities and 'pariah states' – isolated from or unrecognised by most of the international community – face little or no diplomatic cost from detaining aid workers.

In South Sudan, the detention dynamics appear to be driven more by a fragmented military, staffed by underpaid or unpaid soldiers fighting a protracted civil conflict and using aid workers as leverage to extort payments. Many other detentions by South Sudanese police or soldiers were reportedly

motivated by personal or other reasons unrelated to humanitarian work, pointing more to weak governance and absent rule of law than to authoritarian control. Detentions in DRC (primarily in the conflict-affected provinces of North and South Kivu) arise in a similarly weakly-governed, civil conflict environment, but show a strong counter-insurgency element, with state military actors detaining aid workers suspected of colluding with the M23 rebel group.

In Palestine, detentions reflect the dynamics of occupation, with nearly all incidents perpetrated by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), split between Gaza and the West Bank, and rising sharply after October 2023. The mainly Palestinian national staff detainees were taken at checkpoints, border crossings or in raids, often on allegations of being linked to Hamas, which the employing organisations dispute. In Afghanistan, detentions of aid workers appear largely predicated on suspicion of spying and spreading Western values to local communities. Interviewees working in the context attributed this to genuine paranoia on the part of the Taliban, as well as the desire for control. Similarly, the Houthis in North Yemen have detained large numbers of aid workers on suspicion of colluding with the Saudis and the southern government, and authorities in Myanmar typically arrest aid workers for providing aid to protestors and perceived 'enemies' of the ruling junta.

Ukraine resists categorisation with the other nine contexts, since aid worker detentions there were principally male staff being forcibly conscripted by the Ukrainian military. In Ethiopia, there was a spate of politically motivated detentions during the 2021 Tigray conflict, resembling the counter-insurgency motives seen in DRC and Myanmar, with staff accused or suspected of collusion. The remaining incidents in Ethiopia are scattered across regions and years, suggesting routine friction with a strong, authoritarian state.

Finally, of the 65% of detention incidents where motive was documented, roughly half were recorded as politically motivated – that is, related to the detainees' affiliation with the humanitarian response. While practitioners interviewed agree that state actors increasingly use detention as a tool of control or punishment, one observer noted that these incidents may not always reflect deliberate targeting but rather a widespread declining tolerance and respect for aid actors. Globally, NGOs are no longer assumed to be benign, they said, but are increasingly viewed as "potentially hostile agents."

Duration and outcomes

Between 1997 and the end of 2025, the AWSD recorded 438 incidents in which aid workers were detained for over 24 hours. (Brief detentions – lasting less than 24 hours – are common but below the threshold for inclusion as a 'serious security incident' and hence not included in the database or this analysis.) The detentions affected 930 staff members: 848 national and 82 international staff members. In general, international staff face longer detention times than national staff.

The duration of detention was determined for 33% of incidents involving national staff and 54% of those involving international staff. In both groups the distribution is highly skewed: a small number of multi-year detentions pulls the average up to 127 days for national staff and 310 days for international staff – but typical durations are far shorter. Where duration was recorded, 75% of national staff were released within one week, and more than half of international staff within three months.

Gender was reported for only 380 of the 930 aid workers detained, and 91% of those were male. This aligns with qualitative findings, as interviewees reported unanimously that virtually all detentions they have experienced involve male staff.

In 40% of all detention incidents recorded in the AWSD, the detainee was reported released; in the remainder, the outcome is unknown or the detention was ongoing. Where a detainee was reported injured or killed during a detention or in the custody of state authorities (regardless of the duration of confinement), the incident is recorded under the injured or killed outcome category. From 1997 through 2025, at least 64 aid workers sustained serious injuries while being held, and 28 lost their lives at the hands of state authorities.

3 Operational responses and duty of care in detentions

3.1 Impact on staff and operations

For the detained aid worker and their family, a detention can be as traumatic and life-altering as a kidnapping, particularly when there is no communication with the detainee or visibility into the process for long periods. Similarly, for colleagues and the organisation, the disruption and demoralising effect of detentions, as well as the time and financial costs of addressing them, can rival kidnappings in impact.

Detention conditions can vary significantly. In some cases, such as Afghanistan, many NGO detainees (especially international staff) have reportedly been treated relatively well: held in apartments, hotels or offices. Yet in other contexts, such as Syria during the civil war, there have been reports of harsh conditions, mistreatment and torture.

Operational responses also vary by context and will depend on the perceived motives and objectives of the authorities, and how these are linked to the organisation. This is challenging when the reason for detention is not made clear, which is common. As an interviewee in Afghanistan said, "Most often we're not told why it happens, so how do we take corrective measures?" In some contexts, NGOs that have experienced staff detentions with no clear resolution or reliable way to prevent recurrence have suspended activities, relocated programmes or withdrawn from the context entirely.

Humanitarians have begun to adapt security risk management systems and resources to the particular challenges posed by detentions, but for the most part security training remains generalised. Most international humanitarian organisations require staff to complete a standard security course covering multiple incident types without focusing on detention specifically. Hostile environment and awareness training (HEAT), however, can provide relevant skills for dealing with stressful situations. One interviewee recounted how a staff member detained in South Sudan for days in poor conditions explicitly credited HEAT training with helping them react appropriately and cope psychologically.

3.2 Legal issues and strategic approaches

The specific circumstances and context of a detention will drive the organisational response. A fundamental first step, explained by one interviewee, is assessing the legal standing of the detaining authorities and whether the incident constitutes a lawful or unlawful detention. An organisation's duty of care is deemed greater where the detention arises from the individual's employment or status as an aid worker, as opposed to from criminal conduct or personal circumstances. In many cases, especially at the beginning, this distinction may be unclear. Equally important is determining the organisation's legal obligations. Securing legal representation as soon as possible is a priority, though this is not always feasible. As one interviewee noted, in some contexts (such as Yemen) lawyers have refused cases out of fear of threats from authorities.

Strategies vis-à-vis the authorities are also not one-size-fits-all. Some legal and humanitarian security experts advocate for early, high-level escalation, arguing that organisations and families should speak out loudly and engage foreign diplomatic contacts rather than remaining silent out of fear of antagonising authorities against the detainee or their family members. As one expert advisor said, "You need to make focused noise at the highest level possible: head of police, the head of the civil service running the NGO networks, the friendly ambassadors …" Others caution that this approach, while often effective, may backfire in certain contexts depending on leverage and the attitudes of the authorities involved.

Reasons for detention are wide-ranging and can reflect deeper state concerns about aid agencies. These can include suspicion of foreign interference or espionage, reinterpretation of routine aid activities (such as data collection) as intelligence gathering, or state resentment of humanitarian principles perceived as incompatible with nationalist or anti-colonial agendas. In geopolitically sensitive contexts, such as the Sahel and Myanmar for example, shrinking civic space and the criminalisation of opposition actors mean that humanitarian contacts with marginalised groups can render staff vulnerable to arrest.

Legal representation and organisational capacity for managing detention vary dramatically. Large international NGOs typically maintain vetted legal teams in each country, often with primary and backup firms handling different types of cases. Some organisations operate dedicated legal units at headquarters with regional specialists who coordinate support when staff are detained. Most humanitarian organisations, particularly smaller, local ones, lack anything close to this infrastructure. Resources such as Protect Aid Workers (PAW) and Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) provide critical support, offering legal advice, representation and financial assistance. LAW additionally conducts closed-door advocacy on behalf of detainees and assists organisations in challenging insurance companies to cover detention claims.

A significant gap remains in how organisations handle detention cases and share learning. Many fail to provide legal follow-up support after securing staff release, leaving no course to pursue justice for unlawful detention or mistreatment.

A reluctance to discuss detention incidents with peer organisations means opportunities are missed for coordinated legal strategies that might, at a minimum, prevent all agencies from engaging the same ineffective or corrupt lawyers. As one legal expert interviewed observed, poor legal counsel can be more damaging than no counsel at all, yet organisations often lack the knowledge to vet lawyers effectively.

3.3 Insurance

It should be noted that insurance cover is generally only available to international organisations; local and national NGOs typically lack such cover, making mechanisms like PAW especially important. For international organisations providing humanitarian assistance in volatile or hostile environments, insurance is a non-negotiable component of duty of care – unless they have resources to self-insure. Detentions can be costly, requiring insurance to cover legal fees, additional organisational expenses, continuing salary support for detainees' families, material support while imprisoned (if allowed) and post-incident care.

Detention risk sits awkwardly inside crisis response products, most of which were originally designed for kidnapping events. Most kidnap, ransom and extortion (KRE) policies provide some coverage for detentions and may include crisis response advisors. However, interviewees noted a prevailing uncertainty regarding insurance, since the fact of a legal charge, however spurious, can allow insurers to deny claims. And there are two other principal challenges to insurance cover when it comes to detentions. The first involves timing; insurers may treat the moment of capture as the trigger event, which sits badly with detentions that go on for months, running out the benefits while costs are still being incurred. The other is sufficiency of cover for nationals. Those who are not on full employment, such as daily or subcontracted workers, may sit outside the organisation's legal duty of care and insurance cover. Even when cover applies, many policies reportedly do not cover family support, and organisations are left to decide whether and how much of the detainee's salary can continue to go to family members and for how long.

Larger organisations with well-developed risk management capacity can negotiate more affordable cover since the level of need is lower, while less resourced organisations struggle to afford premiums. Some interviewees noted efforts to develop pooled insurance entities that might support local NGOs and other organisations priced out of the commercial market, though these remain nascent.

Where insurance was seen to work well, interviewees valued the extra capacity it provided rather than reimbursement alone: dedicated crisis consultants, family liaison officers (for organisations lacking

know-how or staff capacity to designate internal family liaison officers), and relationships with specialised crisis teams. The extent to which these outside specialists play a leading or supporting role depends on the wishes and capacities of the organisation, and even the most experienced among them emphasises that the challenge of detention is relatively new, and the sector is still in the early stages of growing into this space.

3.4 Supporting detainees, families and staff

Humanitarian organisations with experience working in high-risk settings have developed protocols and good practice for dealing with staff abductions, many of which are applicable in detention events. These are outlined in resources like the Global Interagency Security Forum Abduction and Kidnap Risk Management Guide and Humanitarian Practice Network's Good Practice Review 8: Humanitarian Security Risk Management.[11] This includes, for example, maintaining personnel files that contain important information on each staff member in case of their disappearance, such as:

- proof of life information
- emergency contact(s) (which may be different for different circumstances)
- medical information
- social media information
- additional details that may be relevant when liaising with family or providing emergency support to the staff member.

As an initial step, organisations are advised to try to ascertain the wellbeing of the detainee and to advocate with the authorities for adequate conditions and care, including sharing any medical and other needs the detained individual may have.

As part of the response, interviewees noted that the family support and liaison responsibilities should be assigned to a specific individual or team. The organisation should be transparent with the family about what they can and will provide, including ongoing salary payments for the detained staff member. Once the detainee has been released, especially if it has been a long detention, they may need medical and psychological evaluation, immediate care, support for returning to work, and possibly longer-term care and psychosocial support.

During detention, psychosocial support depends on the organisation's level of access to the detained individual, which is often restricted, but experts note that family members and colleagues of the detainee may also require (linguistically and culturally appropriate) psychosocial support.[12]

Ideally, the organisation will have insurance or other provision for adequate after-care to affected individuals. In reality, especially with current budget cuts, even some larger organisations are finding they simply cannot provide this level of care. Moreover, affected staff members often cannot afford to give up their jobs. This leads to situations like the one described by one of the interviewees for this report – a country director of an international NGO that had local staff detained in late 2025:

> "We have so many issues to deal with, one after the other, in this country that every day is a time to survive…We really wanted to follow up to ensure that he received psychological support, had a debriefing, but in the end we just gave him, I think, two weeks off, and then back to work as normal."

[11] European Interagency Security Forum (EISF). (2017). *Abduction and kidnap risk management.* https://gisf.ngo/resource/abduction-and-kidnap-risk-management-guide/; Fairbanks, A. and Stoddard, A. (eds.). (2025). *Good practice review 8: Humanitarian security risk management* (Revised edition). Humanitarian Practice Network, Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI Global. https://odihpn.org/en/publication/humanitarian-security-risk-management/

[12] For more good practice guidance on staff care during and after serious incidents such as detentions see Fairbanks and Stoddard (2025), Chapter 5.4, 'Staff care' (pp. 290–314).

3.5 Coordination challenges

Successful coordination around detention incidents depends fundamentally on the strength of overall access and advocacy coordination in the context, which is becoming rarer, particularly with the international humanitarian system coming under financial strain with the 2025 funding cuts. The noted increased competitiveness between organisations in the wake of defunding undermines collective response, which is already weak for detentions, as organisations are reluctant to share information, especially while incidents are ongoing. UN-led coordination structures and occasionally NGO forums may establish working groups dedicated to detentions, but collective advocacy with authorities on behalf of detained individuals and affected organisations remains uncommon. The result is a fragmented response where organisations manage crises in isolation, missing opportunities for coordinated legal strategies, shared intelligence on effective lawyers and approaches, and collective pressure on authorities.

Interviewees describe a pronounced chilling effect on interagency coordination and information-sharing around detentions. In Houthi-controlled Yemen, where aid workers from several organisations have been detained for long periods, NGOs established confidential channels outside the country simply to exchange information with each other on the issue. National organisations, and national staff generally in many contexts, fear that, by sharing information, they will be targeted further by authorities. In Burkina Faso, where arrest can result in conscription to the frontlines, some security meetings, even internal ones, have been discontinued entirely to avoid attracting government suspicion or retribution. As one interviewee observed, "I don't know if it's a deliberate tool or strategy of governments, but it is clear that it is effective at making NGOs go quiet and be very careful."

4 Emerging learning and resources

As the detention threat has grown more prevalent, humanitarians have begun developing practical guidance and support mechanisms to assist organisations in managing such incidents. While the development of good practice is still in its early stages, the below summarises some of the key learning and resources currently available.

Planning and preparation

Recently, international humanitarian organisations and interagency groups have developed practical guidance and support mechanisms to assist organisations in managing staff detentions. GISF has compiled a good practice guide based on a specific set of real-world detention cases.[13]

The guide emphasises that effective response begins with immediate documentation and reporting, capturing details of the seizure, location, timing and detainee health status to inform family and legal efforts. Organisations must then develop a detailed detention plan clarifying their own responsibilities, support thresholds, and duration of assistance. This should account for both immediate crisis response and protracted scenarios lasting months or years. It is critical to be transparent with staff about the organisation's capacity and limitations in the event of detentions, particularly regarding salary continuation and other support costs in extended cases. The guide also underscores the importance of planning for both successful and unsuccessful outcomes. Post-release support should include medical care, psychological assistance, potential relocation, and information on legal redress options.

[13] Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF). (2026). *Staff detentions – guidance note* [Unpublished].

It is clear that international organisations need to carefully review their insurance policies and discuss them with their providers to ensure cover for detentions and a common understanding of what is covered under what circumstances. International organisations need to endeavour to extend support to local NGO partners regarding insurance solutions and help connect them with external resources. Salaries for dependents need to be paid without delay.

Contextual awareness and legal monitoring

Practitioners emphasise the importance of understanding local legal environments. Good practice includes maintaining on-call local lawyers (or security/access staff with legal backgrounds) who can provide rapid support, and ensuring teams regularly monitor the legal landscape for shifts in regulations or administrative requirements that could affect staff and operations.[14]

Detentions are not always illegitimate; occasionally a staff member will commit a crime, and sometimes organisations and their workers are unaware of or misinterpret local laws. Maintaining awareness of applicable local law is essential. Appropriate risk assessment is also critical. For instance, there are cases where organisations deploy international staff on tourist visas in contexts where a detention then results in legitimate questions about organisational registration and legal standing. Having ready-to-go legal templates and processes can be effective practice.

Finally, maintaining sensitivity to local political dynamics and regular communication with those in authority can help organisations navigate complex relationships and anticipate risks. Several interviewees noted that while deterring detentions can be challenging, ensuring transparency, operating according to principles and values, and engaging in active acceptance efforts (such as establishing relationships and regular communication with authorities), are important measures.

One interviewee noted that it is important to be aware that detentions are one of the more serious forms of aid obstruction. If a state is resorting to detentions over less serious bureaucratic impediments to disrupt aid operations, organisations should be asking themselves why.

Resources

- **Protect Aid Workers (PAW):** Provides financial assistance (grants up to €10,000 per staff member) for aid workers arrested or detained due to their humanitarian work. https://protectaidworkers.org/
- **Legal Action Worldwide (LAW):** Offers legal advice, representation and coordination with experienced lawyers and civil society organisations working on detention cases. https://legalactionworldwide.org/
- **Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF):** Develops and disseminates security risk management guidance and best practice resources for NGOs, and provides coordination support. https://gisf.ngo/
- **Hostage International:** Provides expert guidance and support for families whose loved ones are kidnapped or arbitrarily detained outside their home country, and for returnees after their release. https://www.hostageinternational.org/

[14] For more good practice relating to detentions, see Fairbanks and Stoddard (2025), Chapter 7.8, 'Detention and arrest' (pp. 477–484).

Conclusion

Trends indicate that state actors are increasingly weaponising their ability to seize and detain humanitarian workers under the cover of sovereignty and legal authority. This tactic, favoured by authoritarian governments and 'pariah states', has proliferated in recent years, encouraged by eroding normative and diplomatic constraints. Funding cuts and fraying coordination among humanitarians in these contexts weaken their ability to manage this growing risk. The impact falls hardest on national NGOs and other local civil society actors, who lack the visibility and diplomatic recourse (albeit limited) available to international organisations.

As humanitarian actors scramble to fill the gaps in their security risk management systems to meet this growing challenge, new mechanisms have emerged, including the EU-funded PAW programme and entities like LAW. These initiatives are valuable but insufficient by themselves. Likewise, individual advocacy efforts by NGOs and humanitarian coordination efforts around secure access have little hope for success without broader, concerted diplomatic action. Addressing the challenge of detentions requires international humanitarian diplomacy and coordinated pushback against arbitrary detention, with member states insisting on accountability and respect for international legal norms.

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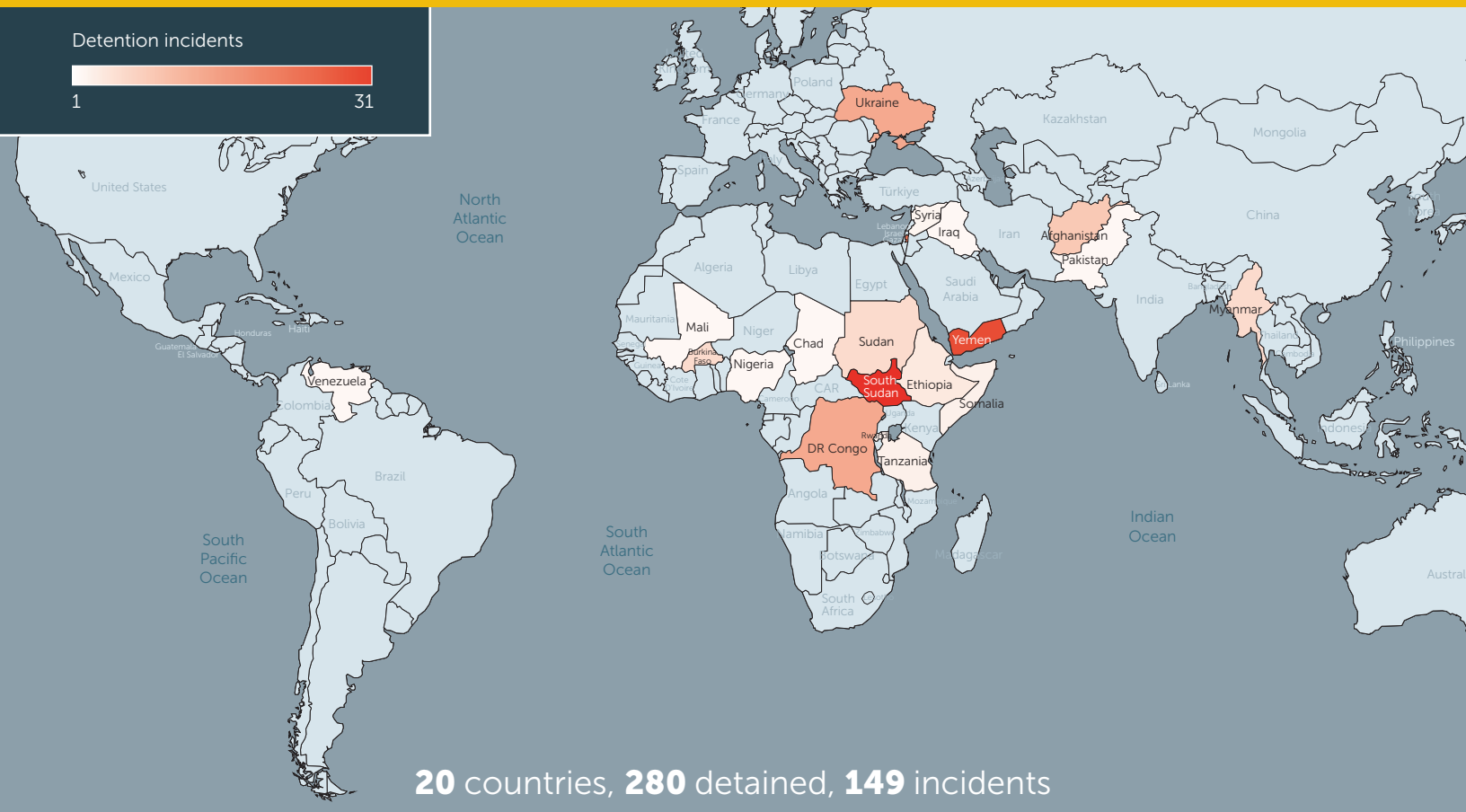
Number of detention incidents by country, 2025



20 countries, **280** detained, **149** incidents

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Humanitarian Outcomes

www.humanitarianoutcomes.org

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