UNIVERSITY
of York

LSI
LOCAL STAFF
INTERNATIONAL

GUIDELINES FOR THE RIGHTS & PROTECTION OF LOCAL STAFF IN INTERNATIONAL MISSIONS

Front cover: A Human Terrain Team consisting of U.S. soldiers and civilians, along with an Afghan interpreter, meets with local citizens in a village near Kandahar Air Base, Afghanistan, April 3. HTTs interact with local citizens to gain knowledge that can help coalition forces create a stable environment and learn on how to conduct future military and humanitarian operations. Photo by Staff Sgt. Stephen Schester

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sara de Jong

Professor of Politics, University of York | Co-Chair, LSI

Sara de Jong is Professor of Politics at the University of York (UK) and Co-Chair of Local Staff International. She is also a co-founder of Sulha Alliance, the only UK charity dedicated to supporting Afghan interpreters employed by the British Army. Her research focuses on claims to rights, protection, and recognition by locally employed civilians in conflict and post-conflict settings, including Iraqi and Afghan interpreters.

Since beginning this work in 2017, Sara identified a persistent gap in international coordination that resulted in unequal protection outcomes for local staff who performed comparable roles and faced similar risks across different national programmes. In response, she helped convene advocates and practitioners across the US, UK, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Canada, and Australia to share strategies, evidence, and best practices. Her research and advocacy have contributed to meaningful policy change in the UK and the Netherlands, and she remains committed to bridging academic research, lived experience, and practical policy reform in partnership with veterans, lawyers, policymakers, and humanitarian organisations.

Markus Kurczyk

Former Major General, German Air Force | Board Member, LSI

Markus Kurczyk is a former Major General in the German Air Force who served in senior leadership roles in Afghanistan for nearly three years. His experience working closely with Afghan local staff profoundly shaped his understanding of their indispensable role in mission success and personal safety—on more than one occasion, they directly saved his life. The rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and the scenes from Kabul airport marked a turning point, solidifying his commitment to advocating for local staff protection. Markus brings deep operational insight, moral clarity, and a strong sense of duty to Local Staff International, guided by the conviction that local staff are owed not only recognition, but lasting protection, solidarity, and loyalty.

Jon Feltham

Executive Director, Aman Lara | Board Member, LSI

Jon Feltham is a 25-year veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces and a leading advocate for the rights and protection of local staff affected by international missions. His work intensified following the 2021 collapse of the Afghan government, where—alongside Canadian and U.S. veterans—he played a key role in navigating complex evacuation and protection efforts amid Taliban resurgence and wider geopolitical instability. Through this work, Jon has helped support the evacuation and resettlement of more than 7,200 Afghan and Ukrainian former local staff and their families. He brings deep operational insight, principled leadership, and a strong humanitarian commitment to advancing durable protection pathways and accountability for local staff globally.

Julia Aitken

Program Director, Aman Lara | Board Member, LSI

Julia Aitken is a senior strategic leader with over 25 years of experience across program and project management, governance, research and evaluation, stakeholder engagement, strategic communications, and organisational development. She has led and supported complex initiatives across the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors, with a focus on workforce development, equity and inclusion, community services, public and mental health, and systems-level change. In addition to her program and governance expertise, Julia brings strong capabilities in communications, knowledge mobilisation, and visual storytelling, integrating strategy, evidence, and design to support clarity, credibility, and impact. Her work reflects a long-standing commitment to social justice, collaborative leadership, and strengthening accountability frameworks.

ABOUT LOCAL STAFF INTERNATIONAL

Empowering Local Staff, Advancing Global Commitment.

Local Staff International (LSI) was formed in response to a long–standing global gap: the absence of consistent, accountable protections for locally engaged staff who support international missions.

Its origins lie in cross-border advocacy and research efforts dating back to 2019, when international advocates and former Afghan local staff first came together in London to identify shared challenges and the need for coordinated action. These concerns intensified in 2021, as the withdrawal from Afghanistan exposed systemic failures to protect locally engaged civilians—despite years of warnings from advocacy organisations and experts. In the lead–up to the fall of Kabul, international coalitions called on allied governments to act, generating widespread media attention but limited durable solutions.

Recognising that these failures were not unique to Afghanistan, representatives from advocacy initiatives across Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States convened in Berlin in May 2023 to lay the groundwork for a permanent international entity. That work culminated in the formal founding of Local Staff International in November 2023.

What We Do

At Local Staff International (LSI), we embody a forward-looking, solution–oriented approach. We coordinate a global network of professionals dedicated to championing the rights, protection, and empowerment of local staff supporting military, humanitarian, development, and diplomatic missions.

Our diverse coalition works to safeguard not just the safety and dignity of these essential personnel — but also to fortify their legal rights. We stand committed to shaping a world where every local staff member's contributions are recognized, their rights protected, and their potential fully realized.

Our mission is to safeguard the rights and dignity of local staff worldwide, ensuring comprehensive support and advocacy for their essential roles in global missions. We achieve this by advocating for comprehensive support during and after their employment — including worst-case scenario planning, and access to legal, social, psychological, and medical care.

Our vision is a global landscape where local staff are valued, protected, and empowered — where their well–being is a shared responsibility, not an afterthought, and where their vital contributions and unique risks are met with dignity, protection, and accountability.

Today, LSI serves as an international platform bringing together evidence, expertise, and lived experience to strengthen duty of care, support responsible policymaking, and ensure that commitments to local staff are honoured (both in current contexts and future missions).

Learn more at: https://www.localstaffinternational.org/

These Guidelines provide a coherent policy framework for addressing long-standing gaps in the protection of local staff in international missions. By clarifying responsibility, duty of care, and minimum standards across all phases of engagement, they support more consistent, accountable, and operationally sound decision-making. Their adoption would strengthen preparedness, reduce ad hoc responses in crises, and improve policy coherence across states and organisations.

— **Emmanuel Jacob, President, European Organisation of Military Associations and Trade Unions (EUROMIL)**

Local staff are central to the success of international missions: policies and practices relating to them must reflect that reality. These guidelines, drawing on wide consultation and expertise, should become a widely-used resource and a clear basis for accountability and decision-making.

— **Nic Hailey CMG, Former UK Deputy Ambassador to Afghanistan**

As an immigration attorney, the support I can offer locally employed staff and other people facing security risks is necessarily reactive: visa programs and asylum claims are relevant only once a person is threatened or harmed. These Guidelines proactively prioritize protection of staff, from recruitment and continuing after contract termination. The Guidelines' vital contribution is to address the structural failures that have left interpreters and other support staff at risk and to instruct governments and businesses how to ensure protection and rights of their local employees.

— **Betsy Fisher, U.S. immigration Attorney and Advocate, Lecturer, University of Michigan Law School**
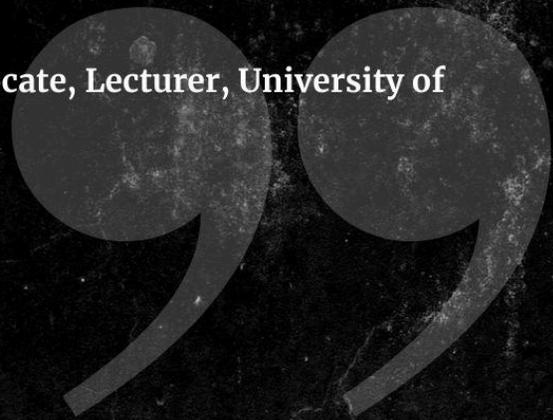
A man shows a certificate of appreciation from an American defense contractor while seeking help with his Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) application at Herat Kabul internet cafe on August 8, 2021, in Kabul, Afghanistan. Photo by Paula Bronstein.

INTRODUCTION

Local Staff International (LSI), in collaboration with various partner organisations, presents the *Guidelines for the Rights and Protection of Local Staff in International Missions.* These Guidelines respond to longstanding gaps in how local staff are engaged, protected, and supported across international operations.

Local staff are individuals who, in their home country, are employed by or on behalf of a foreign government or international actor to support a mission or programme, regardless of contractual form. This includes direct employees, all tiers of subcontracted personnel, and functional equivalents. Because local staff are often identifiable as supporting foreign actors, they may be exposed to specific and heightened security, legal, economic, and social risks linked directly to that association.

Developed through a consultative process involving practitioners, researchers, veterans, individuals with lived experience, and humanitarian organisations across multiple countries, these Guidelines set out a unified framework of guiding principles and binding minimum standards. Together, they integrate ethical commitments with operational requirements to guide how states, organisations, and partners engage with, protect, and support local staff throughout all phases of service[1].

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[1] While these Guidelines are developed specifically for Local Staff, we recognise that some elements may also be of relevance for similar actors, including fixers, journalists, human rights defenders.

A Special thank you to the following individuals for their contributions:

Bashir Ahmad
Resettlement Case Coordinator, Right to Learn Afghanistan, Canada

Dr Catherine Baker
Academic expert in interpreters/translators in UN and NATO peace operations in former Yugoslavia, Reader in 20th century History, University of Hull, United Kingdom

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Former Chair, General Federation of Military Personnel (AFMP), the Netherlands

WHY THESE GUIDELINES ARE NEEDED

Few military, humanitarian, development, or diplomatic missions take place without the support of local staff. In the absence of common international standards, local staff, exposed due to their association with international missions and the fragile settings in which they operate, have faced recurring and well-documented challenges, including inconsistent hiring and firing practices, inadequate risk mitigation, compromised access to injury compensation, loss or destruction of employment records, exclusion based on contract type, delayed or politicised evacuation decisions, and limited access to post-employment protection. These gaps have repeatedly resulted in preventable harm, undermining trust, compromising safety, and weakening the legitimacy and integrity of past and future international operations.

While data on local staff remains fragmented, available evidence from military, humanitarian, development, and diplomatic operations indicates that millions of individuals worldwide support international missions as local staff. The absence of harmonised definitions, reporting frameworks, and accountability standards has limited effective protection for this workforce, constraining policy development, preparedness, and the realisation of rights in practice.

These Guidelines respond to that gap. They serve as a shared foundation for accountability and collective responsibility, ensuring that duty of care is upheld not as a discretionary policy choice, but as a professional and moral obligation that applies consistently across missions, employers, and delivery models.

Across all work packages, these Guidelines reflect a central lesson from past missions: where responsibility is not clearly defined, resourced, and confirmed at the outset, it is most likely to collapse under political, administrative, or operational pressure at moments of crisis.

Accountability, Responsibility and Implementation

States, organisations, and private contractors may hold primary, derived (indirect), and/or shared responsibilities in relation to the protection, rights, and duty of care owed to local staff, depending on the nature of the relationship and the risks created. While responsibility may be distributed among multiple actors, it must never be eliminated, diluted, or obscured through contracting, partnership, or mission structures.

Effective implementation depends on early political commitment and clear mandate alignment. Participating states should embed these principles into mission mandates, coalition frameworks, and national authorisation decisions, ensuring that duty-of-care obligations for local staff are explicitly recognised, adequately resourced, and confirmed prior to deployment, rather than deferred or renegotiated during periods of crisis.

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

The Guidelines are organised into four Work Packages, reflecting key phases in the engagement and protection of local staff. Within each Work Package, the content is structured into two parts:

Guiding Principles | These articulate the *core commitments and ethical foundations* that underpin responsible engagement with local staff. They express the values and intent behind each area of practice and establish the normative expectations for all missions and partners.

Standards | These translate each principle into *concrete, actionable requirements*. Written in directive, outcome-oriented language, the standards define the minimum measures that must be implemented and continuously monitored to ensure compliance with each principle. Each set of standards is presented in bullet-point format for ease of reference and for later adaptation into checklists, monitoring tools, or training materials.

Following the Work Packages, the Guidelines conclude with a set of Overarching Principles and Minimum Standards that apply across all phases of engagement, reinforcing coherence, accountability, and consistency throughout the document.

This structure is designed to support both high-level endorsement and practical implementation across diverse operational contexts.

REAL LIFE SCENARIO PLANNING

Case Studies and Vignettes (pages 28-50), drawn from research and practitioners' input, ground these Guidelines in real-world experience. They illustrate recurring failure points and risk scenarios arising from the absence of clear standards, alongside examples of effective mitigation and responsible practice.

These include, but are not limited to, informal or layered subcontracting, inadequate documentation and record-keeping, lack of preparation for injury, illness and death, gaps in post-mission support, and delayed or inconsistent evacuation decisions.

DEFINITIONS

The following definitions are used in these Guidelines and are intended to promote clarity, consistency, and shared understanding across diverse missions, sectors, and legal contexts:

Diversity and Inclusion | Diversity refers to the presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within an individual, group or organisation. Diversity reflects, among many things, age, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender identity, gender expression, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. Inclusion is the practice of creating an environment where everyone, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, feel valued and empowered, and has equal access to opportunities and resources. While diversity is about the "who," inclusion is about "how" to ensure that diverse talent can thrive and contribute to mission success.

Duty of Care | The ongoing ethical, legal, and operational responsibility of states, organisations, and employers to prevent, mitigate, and respond to foreseeable risks to local staff and their families that arise from their association with an international mission. Duty of care begins before recruitment, continues throughout employment, and extends beyond contract termination, particularly where risks persist as a result of that employment. Duty of care cannot be waived, delegated, or reduced through contracting or subcontracting arrangements.

Equality | Where everyone is treated the same regardless of individual diversity and needs.

Equity | A principle and process that promotes fair conditions for all persons to fully participate in society. It recognizes that while all people have the right to be treated equally, not all experience equal access to resources, opportunities, or benefits. Achieving equality does not necessarily mean treating individuals or groups in the same way, but may require the use of specific measures to ensure fairness.

Immediate Family Members | Generally include a spouse or partner, dependent children, and other dependents who rely primarily on the local staff member for financial or caregiving support. Eligibility criteria should be defined transparently and adapted, where appropriate, in consultation with staff to reflect local norms and dependency patterns.

International Mission | Any state-led, multilateral, or organisational operation conducted outside the employer's home country, including but not limited to defence, peacebuilding/keeping, humanitarian, development, aid, diplomatic, and civil society activities.

Local Staff (or: Locally Engaged Staff) | Individuals who, in their home country, are employed by or on behalf of a foreign government or international actor to support a mission or programme. This definition applies regardless of the contractual form and includes direct employees, all tiers of subcontracted personnel, and functional equivalents.[2] Local staff are often identifiable as supporting foreign actors, and as a result, may be exposed to specific and heightened security, legal and social risks.

Minors | Any individual under the age of 18, unless a higher age threshold applies under local or international law. Where national definitions differ, the higher protective standard should apply.

Protection Measures | Actions taken to reduce risk or harm to local staff and their families, including preventive, in-country, legal, psychosocial, financial, relocation, evacuation, and post-employment measures, applied proportionately and in line with context.

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[2] In many international missions, local staff are engaged through a combination of direct state employment and layered contracting arrangements. These guidelines therefore apply to local staff employed across all tiers subcontracting and clarify responsibilities in order to prevent protection gaps created through outsourcing.

A British commander talks via an interpreter to an Afghan civilian seen acting suspiciously at Lashkar Gah, Helmand, Afghanistan, 3 May 2006 © Crown copyright reproduced under delegated authority from The Keeper of Public Records. Image: IWM (HTF-2006-007-091)

Photo: Fletcher, Mike (Corporal), British Army official photographer

WORK PACKAGE 1

| PRE-MISSION ENGAGEMENT

The objective of this work package is to ensure pre-mission preparedness by establishing equitable, transparent, and harmonised recruitment and employment principles for the engagement of local staff (including personnel hired through contractors and subcontractors) across all participating partners in a mission.

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
1	**Take Responsibility from the Outset** States and organisations which recruit local staff must recognise that this creates a lasting moral, legal, and operational obligation that begins before recruitment and extends beyond employment. These responsibilities must be confirmed prior to deployment to ensure that political or administrative hesitation does not weaken protection at later stages or during crisis situations.	• Requiring commissioning states and organisations to record an explicit duty-of-care commitment for local staff within mission authorisation instruments (e.g., national approvals, mandate documents, coalition/UN/NATO frameworks), including minimum protection commitments and resourcing. • Integration of this commitment into mission planning documents and resourcing.
2	**Assess Demand and Anticipate Impact** Understanding workforce needs and potential community effects ensures recruitment is both efficient and ethical.	• Conducting a workforce analysis to identify mission skill needs and local labour availability. • Balancing operational demand with ethical recruitment principles, ensuring local hiring does not undermine local institutions or expose individuals to undue risk.
3	**Coordinate and Harmonise Employment Conditions** Effective coordination across all partners is essential to guarantee fair and consistent treatment of local staff throughout the mission.	• Early coordination between sending states, international organisations, and implementing partners to harmonise employment conditions for local staff i.e. salary scales, benefits, and duty-of-care standards. • Establishing a joint HR framework or MoU outlining shared expectations and oversight responsibilities.
4	**Clarify Employers' Duties and Accountability** Ambiguity in contractual responsibility leads to protection gaps; clarity prevents abdication of duty.	• Defining and documenting of contractual rights, duties and responsibilities for employers and local staff. • Establishing clear lines of authority, complaint-handling procedures, and escalation pathways, including clear documentation of the protection mechanisms, grievance channels, and escalation options available to local staff at different stages of engagement (during employment, post-engagement, and in crisis situations).

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
		• No responsibilities should be delegated without ensuring that the assignee has appropriate authority, resources, and support, and without clear lines of accountability. • Where contractors or subcontractors are used, requiring contractual flow-down clauses that bind all tiers to these minimum standards, with clear enforcement mechanisms and remedies for non-compliance. • Ensuring that delegated responsibilities are accompanied by mutually agreed performance expectations rather than one-sided control.
5	**Train International Staff Before Deployment** Cultural competence and responsible leadership are prerequisites for a safe and respectful work environment.	• Implementing mandatory pre-deployment training for all international staff that is context- and community-specific, covering cultural competence, inclusive leadership, duty of care, and responsible management of local staff. • Training must be updated for each locality/region and informed by local staff insights and lessons learned (avoid "one-size-fits-all" modules).
6	**Recruit and Vet Transparently** Fair, open, and documented recruitment builds trust and legitimacy while reducing exploitation.	• Enforcing open, merit-based recruitment. • Public advertisement of job offers including role, documentation of selection criteria, and maintenance of records. • Banning of informal hiring or nepotism. • Explicitly prohibit the recruitment or engagement of minors. Ensuring age verification procedures are in place prior to engagement, recognising that additional safeguards are required where staff are young, mobile, or newly independent. Where young workers (including those close to the age of majority) are employed, implementing enhanced safeguarding measures, including supervision protocols, reporting mechanisms, and protection against exploitation or coercion. • Ensuring gender-sensitive and non-discriminatory processes.
7	**Secure Informed Consent Before Engagement** Local staff must clearly understand the nature of their work, associated risks, and available protections before accepting employment. Informed consent must be based on genuine	• Providing all prospective local employees with written and verbal briefings outlining the nature of their work, associated risks, available rights and protections, and grievance mechanisms.

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
	comprehension and not merely the provision of information.	- Ensuring information is provided in a language and format fully understood by the applicant, using clear, culturally accessible explanations appropriate to the local context. - Where literacy or language barriers exist, provide verbal explanations in a language staff understand, allow questions, and confirm understanding before consent is recorded. - Ensure that subcontracted and casually employed workers receive the same core information on risks, rights, protections, and grievance mechanisms as directly employed staff. - Securing signed informed consent prior to engagement, following confirmation of understanding.
8	**Ensure Full Legal Compliance** Compliance with both local and recruiting-country law strengthens legitimacy and legal protection for all parties.	- Drafting employment contracts that comply with local labour laws (including clear termination procedures and dispute mechanisms), the employing country's legal obligations, and applicable international labour and human rights standards (including ILO Core Conventions and relevant international human rights instruments), applying whichever standard offers greater protection. - Where organizations do not possess state powers (e.g., issuing visas, determining immigration status), their obligations under these Guidelines apply within their legal mandate, and states retain primary responsibility for measures requiring sovereign authority
9	**Plan for Worst-Case Scenarios** Preparedness for sudden deterioration of security, mission drawdown, or collapse is a pre-engagement obligation, not a contingency luxury. This principle is operationalised through continuous risk monitoring and protective measures during engagement (WP2) and through crisis response and evacuation mechanisms (WP4).	- Integrating contingency and extraction planning for local staff into the mission's overall risk management framework. - Ensuring contingency and protection plans for local staff are explicitly recognised in mission mandates and operational authorisations, including pre-approved funding lines and decision thresholds that reduce politicised delay during crises. - Pre-defining protocols for compensation (injury/death), mission collapse, or rapid evacuation, including funding commitments.

WORK PACKAGE 2

| PROTECTION & SUPPORT DURING ENGAGEMENT

The objective of this work package is to uphold the duty of care and ensure the safety, dignity, and well-being of local staff throughout their employment, including physical security, psychosocial welfare, equitable treatment, and accountability for all duty-of-care obligations.

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
1	**Guarantee Equal Protection for All** Every member of a mission deserves equal protection, respect, and inclusion, regardless of role, gender, ethnicity, religion or contract type. Equality underpins both operational integrity and moral responsibility.	• Applying identical protection, safety, welfare, and workplace-safety measures to all staff. • Integrating non-discrimination clauses into all employment contracts and HR policies. • Conducting annual equity and inclusion reviews to monitor implementation and correct disparities. • Ensuring that these measures apply in practice to all categories of local staff, including subcontracted, casually employed, or day-labour workers, through accessible communication and implementation methods (e.g., verbal briefings, local languages, and culturally appropriate formats), in line with informed-consent requirements set out in WP1.
2	**Train Everyone to Protect Themselves and Others** Training saves lives. Everyone — local and international — must know how to recognise, respond to, and prevent risks.	• Delivering mandatory pre-deployment and refresher training on personal security, ethics, and cultural awareness for all staff. • Including modules on recognition of early warning signs, incident reporting, and inclusive team behaviour as well as role-appropriate familiarisation with applicable Rules of Engagement (ROE) and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for locally engaged staff. • Ensuring training is scenario-based, practical, and locally relevant, and includes continuous reinforcement through coaching, supervision, and leadership accountability (not solely one-time online courses). • Regularly evaluating training effectiveness regularly and updating materials based on lessons learned.
3	**Prioritise Safety First, Always** Safety is non-negotiable. Protecting local staff from physical harm and preventable risk is a shared, continuous obligation—embedded in every operational decision.	• Establishing and maintaining written safety protocols covering site access, protective equipment, secure transportation, and medical evacuation procedures. • Conducting routine safety briefings and regular risk audits to anticipate and mitigate threats before incidents occur. • Where staff face specific or heightened threats, implementing context-appropriate local protection measures (such as adjusted

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
		working hours or travel routes, secure transportation, temporary relocation, safe accommodation, or on-compound lodging). • Providing financial or in-kind support for essential security measures (including replacement of compromised phones, secure communications, or safeguarding of critical documents) where risks are linked to employment. • Ensuring all staff have access to emergency medical care and secure evacuation channels at all times.
4	**Assess the Threats and Strengthen Accountability** Threats evolve; vigilance must be constant. Accountability means tracking, responding to, and learning from every risk faced by local staff.	• Implementing a continuous threat-assessment system (individual, family, and regional) informed by local intelligence and staff feedback. • During engagement, missions must continuously review and adapt worst-case contingency plans established during pre-mission engagement, based on evolving threats and staff feedback • Designating a Protection Focal Point to or stable liaison function, with responsibility for logging and responding to reported incidents, coordinating protective actions, and ensuring continuity of duty-of-care oversight (including across staff rotations and organisational turnover) — and produce regular protection summaries. • Requiring missions to report duty-of-care compliance through measurable indicators, reviewed by senior management.
5	**Ensure Fair Pay and Sustained Benefits** Fair pay prevents corruption. Consistent, transparent compensation is fundamental to staff safety and trust.	• Guaranteeing timely and transparent payment of wages and benefits, even during operational disruption or crisis. • Maintaining continuity of health checks and insurance, hazard pay, and allowances throughout employment. • Establishing clear channels for grievances related to pay or benefits, with defined resolution timelines.
6	**Prioritise Mental Health and Trauma Risk Management** Mental well-being is integral to mission health. Normalising mental-health care saves lives and strengthens teams.	• Providing confidential, trauma-informed, culturally appropriate counselling and peer-support programmes accessible to all staff. • Conducting trauma risk assessments as part of post-incident debriefings. • Integrating mental-health checks into annual medical assessments.

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
7	**Prepare for Injury, Illness and Death** Preparedness for medical emergencies and tragic loss reflects the organisation's integrity and humanity.	• Establishing transparent compensation covering injury, illness, and death from the first day of employment. • Establishing written procedures for medical evacuation, hospitalisation, and next-of-kin notification. • Ensuring families are pre-briefed on entitlements and have designated contacts for claims and support. • Confirming that duty-of-care obligations during crises are supported by adequate insurance coverage or guaranteed financial backing, rather than ad hoc or discretionary arrangements.
8	**Extend Protection to Families** Protecting staff includes protecting those they love. Family safety is part of organisational duty of care.	• Extending key protection measures to immediate family[3] members of at-risk staff. • Defining "immediate family" and any extended eligibility criteria in consultation with staff and, where appropriate, their representatives, reflecting dependency relationships and local cultural norms • Sharing security updates and emergency guidance with families in appropriate languages and accessible formats. • Facilitating temporary relocation or other protective assistance where credible threats to staff or their families are identified.
9	**Safeguard Data to Protect People** Information security is human security. Protecting data protects lives. Mishandling, loss, or unauthorised disclosure of personal data may expose local staff and their families to serious harm and must be treated as a protection incident requiring mandatory reporting, corrective action, and accountability.	• Storing personnel data in encrypted, access-controlled systems that comply with data-protection laws. • Strictly limiting access to authorised staff and prohibiting use of personal information for non-employment purposes. • Establishing data-retention and deletion protocols to prevent exposure or misuse beyond mission closure. • Maintaining secure off-site backups of critical personnel records, including storage in jurisdictions or systems where data are less likely to be destroyed, seized, or misused during crisis escalation or mission collapse. • Conducting periodic digital-security risk assessments (including risks of surveillance, device compromise, hacking, or data leaks) and updating protection measures accordingly, particularly in high-threat or rapidly changing environments.

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[3] *Immediate family generally includes spouse/partner, dependent children, and other dependents relying primarily on the local staff member's income; criteria should be defined transparently and adapted in consultation with staff to reflect local norms and dependency patterns. For example, the definition of 'family' can apply to all those living in the same household.*

A Canadian soldier questions an Afghan elder about Taliban activity in the Panjwaii district, Afghanistan, through an Afghan interpreter on March 20, 2007.

Photo by John Cotter/The Canadian Press

WORK PACKAGE 3

| AFTERCARE – TRANSITION, POST-TRANSITION & REINTEGRATION

The objective of this work package is to support Local Staff through active service to post-engagement, recognising that effective aftercare is not a voluntary extra but a central element of international duty of care. Comprehensive transition and reintegration planning safeguard trust, dignity, and long-term well-being for individuals and their families.

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
1	**Plan the End from the Beginning** End-of-mission planning must be deliberate and inclusive. Early, transparent communication prevents uncertainty and builds trust.	• Integration of local staff into the mission's overall drawdown and exit planning from the outset. • Communicating timelines, continuation criteria, and post-employment responsibilities clearly and early. • Defining and publishing policies on severance pay, continued employment options, or protective measures.
2	**Ensure Fair and Transparent Redundancy Procedures** Workforce reductions must be handled with fairness, respect, and due process.	• Applying transparent redundancy and dismissal safeguards that comply with local, recruiting country, and international labour law (including ILO Core Conventions). • Including redundancy, ex-gratia arrangements and a right of appeal. • Documenting all dismissal decisions, reasons, and approvals to ensure accountability. • Including the costs of redundancy safeguards, ex-gratia arrangements, and appeals mechanisms in mission or programme budgets and donor agreements from the outset, to ensure that fair procedures are not undermined by funding constraints at drawdown.
3	**Guarantee Continuity of Pay and Benefits** Financial closure is a critical protection measure; every staff member must leave employment fully compensated and informed.	• Completing and verifying of all payroll, and benefit payments promptly and in full. • Ensuring the full and timely pay out of all outstanding financial entitlements, including injury compensation, severance, and accrued but unused leave, and — where evacuation or planned relocation occurs — ensuring that time worked is recognised and credited for pension or equivalent benefit purposes. • Using a Transition Payroll Review Checklist for each employee to ensure no omissions.
4	**Conduct Individual Risk Assessments and Handover to Protection Actors**	• Completing an individual security and protection assessment for each staff member and their family.

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
	Every departing employee deserves an informed risk review and, if needed, linkage to appropriate protection mechanisms.	• Sharing relevant case information — with consent — with designated protection partners (UNHCR, IOM, NGOs, national authorities). • Following defined referral pathways for evacuation, resettlement, or social-protection programs.
5	**Facilitate Exit Briefings** Ending employment in conflict-related missions can trigger stress and uncertainty. Structured closure supports dignity and closure.	• Conducting standardised exit briefings covering legal, financial, and psychosocial issues. • Maintaining active communication between HR, security, and the departing employee for a defined period post-mission. • Ensuring departing staff retain access to a named point of contact within the organisation for a defined post-employment period, particularly for legal, protection, or documentation issues.
6	**Ensure Access to Legal Advice and Complaint Mechanisms** Legal recourse must remain available after employment ends to ensure accountability and prevent retaliation.	• Guaranteeing access to independent legal advice on employment rights, benefits, and post-mission claims. • Maintaining complaint channels that remain open for a defined post-contract period. • Prohibiting reprisals against any staff member who raises concerns or pursues legitimate claims • Where local legal systems are inaccessible, compromised, or pose a risk to staff, identifying alternative mechanisms to uphold legal rights and accountability and supporting local staff in accessing them (e.g., trusted legal NGOs, national human rights institutions, or international complaints mechanisms).
7	**Support Economic and Professional Reintegration** Reintegration is part of recovery. Practical pathways enable former staff to rebuild sustainable livelihoods.	• Offering career-counselling and skills-profiling sessions for departing staff. • Facilitating recognition of language and other qualifications and linkages to vocational training, employment, or entrepreneurship programs. • Integrating these options into the broader mission-closure plan including timelines, responsible actors, and referral pathways. • Where possible, negotiating with donors to fund economic and professional reintegration measures as part of exit and transition planning initiated during pre-mission engagement, recognising that sustainable reintegration outcomes depend on early resourcing and coordination.

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
8	**Provide Psychosocial and Integration Aftercare** Care continues beyond the contract. Psychosocial and integration services bridge the gap between employment and reintegration or resettlement.	• Offering psycho-social preparation sessions for transition to post-employment life, including where this involves return to civilian life or resettlement. • Establishing and actively maintaining peer-support networks or hotlines to connect individuals with trained peers, counsellors, or trusted contacts for continuing (re-)integration support and community connection. • Where specialised psychosocial services are not locally available, explore remote counselling, regional partnerships, or structured peer-support models, and at minimum provide information on self-help resources and crisis support options. • Protection actors should maintain a mechanism to monitor the welfare of relocated or high-risk former staff for a defined period (e.g., 12–24 months)
9	**Secure Employment and Personnel Records** Secure certification is a right. Supporting staff to secure essential documentation prevents exclusion, protects legal rights, and enables access to future employment or protection pathways.	• Issuing certified employment and training certificates, references, and service attestations for every departing staff member. • Using standardised templates such as the "Local Staff Service Certificate" to ensure consistency and credibility. • Maintaining and securely archiving employment and personnel records — *whether electronic or physical* — in compliance with data-protection standards, ensuring accessibility for verification, legal, or protection purposes even after mission closure. • Maintaining at least one secure, access-controlled copy of employment records outside high-risk locations, to preserve evidence for future verification, legal proceedings, or protection claims.

WORK PACKAGE 4

| CRISES RESPONSE, EVACUATION & CONTINUITY OF DUTY-OF-CARE

The objective of this work package is to ensure that states and organisations are prepared, responsible, and coordinated in protecting and, where necessary, evacuating local staff in times of crisis or escalating threat. States retain primary responsibility for cross-border protection pathways (including visas, legal status, and resettlement), while international organisations, NGOs, and contractors support these efforts by identifying at-risk staff, maintaining documentation, and facilitating safe movement within their mandates. Evacuation is not always the outcome of every mission; however, preparedness, communication, and protection planning are universal obligations that must be embedded from the start — *not improvised at the end.*

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
1	**Prepare Before the Crisis, Not After** Preparedness saves lives. Evacuation and crisis protocols must be designed, tested, and resourced before a crisis begins.	• Ensuring integration of evacuation and contingency planning into overall mission design from day one. • Establishing and periodically updating written crisis-response protocols, partner roles, and funding lines. • Conducting scenario-based simulations and staff drills to test readiness. • Ensuring crisis plans include in-country protective options (e.g., relocation within safer areas, safe houses, temporary relocation for families) for staff awaiting evacuation or for whom evacuation is not immediately possible. • Ensuring that appropriate insurance or equivalent financial protection mechanisms are in place to cover medical evacuation, injury, death, disability, and crisis-related contingencies for local staff and, where applicable, their dependents.
2	**Uphold Duty of Care Without Exception** Duty of care continues through all phases of employment — including emergencies, suspension of operations, or mission closure.	• Confirming in writing that all local staff, including personnel engaged through prime contractors and all subcontracting tiers, are covered under the state's duty of care during crises. Where measures require state authority (e.g., evacuation visas), states retain primary responsibility, supported by partners within their mandates. • Allocating contingency budgets and designating responsible focal points to ensure continuity of care and communication. • Reaffirming these obligations publicly and internally to maintain accountability and trust.
3	**Maintain Robust Documentation and Verification Systems**	• Maintaining up-to-date digital and physical rosters with verified staff details, dependents, and contact information.

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
	Reliable documentation is essential for swift, lawful evacuation and protection.	• Ensuring secure storage of identity, employment, and service records for use in crisis verification and resettlement processes. • Providing staff with standardised employment and service certificates that can support protection claims.
4	**Protect Families Alongside Staff** Local staff cannot safely evacuate or relocate without assurance that their immediate families are also protected.	• Including eligible dependents in evacuation and relocation planning by default. • Ensuring that communication and documentation systems capture family details from the start of employment. • Establishing safe interim accommodation or protection measures for dependents when full evacuation is not possible.
5	**Communicate Clearly and Transparently** Transparent communication before, during, and after crises is essential to maintaining safety and trust.	• Establishing multilingual communication channels and focal points for staff to access verified updates. • Providing regular situation briefings, clear instructions, and reassurance during evolving crises. • Avoiding contradictory or politicised messaging that may endanger staff or families.
6	**Build Logistics Networks** Evacuation and crisis response require the building of a robust infrastructure in collaboration with humanitarian, diplomatic, and logistical actors.	• Building logistics networks with NGOs, logistics providers, and international organisations (e.g., IOM, UNHCR) for emergency coordination. • Maintaining pre-cleared agreements with transport providers, shelters, and protection partners.
7	**Strengthen Interoperability Across Partners** Effective evacuation relies on coordinated action among allies, host governments, and humanitarian actors.	• Developing interoperable systems and shared communication channels between ministries, international organisations, and partners. • Conducting joint planning exercises and information exchanges to align protocols and eligibility frameworks. • Designating liaison officers for coordination during multi-state or multi-agency evacuations.
8	**Provide Safe and Legal Pathways to Protection** When evacuation or resettlement is necessary, states must provide clear, lawful, and timely routes to safety.	• Creating or utilising existing humanitarian and immigration mechanisms to facilitate protection-based resettlement. • Ensuring transparent eligibility criteria and non-discriminatory case prioritisation. • Guaranteeing post-evacuation secure legal status, residency, and access to integration support for relocated staff and families.

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
9	**Ensure No One Is Left Behind** All local staff — whether direct hires, subcontracted, and or hired via service providers—must be included in protection and evacuation planning.	• Maintaining a single, inclusive staff registry that covers all categories of local staff and their dependents. • Requiring prime contractors to maintain and share (under secure protocols) a complete, verified registry of all local staff across subcontracting tiers to ensure inclusion in protection planning. • Applying consistent prioritisation criteria that do not discriminate by contract type, role, or length of service. • Monitoring inclusion compliance through independent review or audit mechanisms.

Being forced to flee your home does not only affect your physical well-being, but can leave long-lasting emotional scars. © European Union, 2024 (Photographer: Isaak Alexandre Karslian).

"EU humanitarian aid in Armenia" by EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES & STANDARDS

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
1	**Take Responsibility and Coordinate Protection** Protection is most effective when it is coordinated. International and national bodies must work in partnership with host authorities, NGOs, and international actors to align standards, share information responsibly, and avoid duplication or gaps in protection. In multinational or coalition missions, each contributing state retains responsibility for the protection and duty of care owed to its locally employed personnel. This responsibility must be clearly defined and may not be delegated, diluted, or obscured through mission structures, pooled arrangements, or partner coordination mechanisms.	• Developing joint frameworks or Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) defining shared responsibilities. • Conducting regular coordination meetings and data-sharing exercises consistent with confidentiality standards. • Publicly reporting on collaborative protection measures and progress.
2	**Uphold Dignity and Ensure Equal Treatment** Every measure must respect the inherent dignity of local staff and be grounded in equity, equality, non-discrimination, and inclusion. Fair treatment is not conditional on role, contract type, or nationality; it is a universal right and a precondition for trust and mission legitimacy. Local and foreign staff should be seen as a team working together towards common goals.	• Applying principles of equality and non-discrimination in all employment, safety, and protection policies. • Ensuring equitable access to benefits, development opportunities, and redress mechanisms. • Incorporating diversity and inclusion training into all levels of management and mission leadership.
3	**Enable Staff Representation and Collective Voice** Effective protection requires meaningful staff participation. Where applicable, trade unions, staff associations, and professional bodies play a critical role in representation, monitoring, and escalation of concerns. Employers and missions must respect freedom of association and ensure that local staff are aware of, and able to access, appropriate representation mechanisms without fear of retaliation.	• Providing safe, confidential channels for staff representatives to raise systemic concerns and participate in dialogue on duty of care, risk mitigation, and workplace protections. • Ensuring local staff are informed of their rights to representation, collective dialogue, and grievance support, including alternative staff-representation mechanisms where formal unions are not permitted or feasible. • Recognising and engaging constructively with legitimate trade unions, staff associations, or professional bodies where they exist and operate lawfully. • Prohibiting reprisals, intimidation, or adverse consequences linked to staff representation or collective action.

	Guiding Principles	Minimum Standards
4	**Safeguard Personal Data and Confidential Information** Information security is a core protection measure. Personal and employment data must be handled with strict confidentiality, stored securely, and used only for defined operational or legal purposes.	• Complying with international data-protection standards, including the EU GDPR, ICRC Data Protection Guidelines, and UN Data Protection Principles. • Using encrypted, access-controlled, and sustainable digital systems for personnel records. • Training all staff on responsible data handling and confidentiality obligations.
5	**Exercise Duty of Care Beyond the Contract** Duty of care extends before recruitment and beyond termination. Employers and sending states must actively prevent, mitigate, and respond to foreseeable risks created by local staff's association with international missions. Duty of care cannot be outsourced. While contracting and subcontracting may distribute operational tasks, they do not diminish the duty of care owed to local staff by commissioning states and organisations. This responsibility applies irrespective of contract type, employer structure, or delivery modality, and commissioning actors must ensure that equivalent protections are upheld across all tiers of delivery.	• Integrating duty-of-care provisions into planning, budgeting, and risk-management frameworks. • Providing ongoing support — including medical, psychosocial, and (re-)integration assistance — even after employment ends. • Monitoring of adherence to this principle through periodic reviews and transparent reporting.
6	**Commit to Review, Learn and Improve** Learning transforms experience into prevention. Systematic evaluation and knowledge-sharing ensure missions evolve and strengthen over time.	• Conducting post-incident, mid-term, and end-of-mission reviews focused on protection outcomes. • Integrating lessons learned into updated policies, training materials, and standard operating procedures. • Disseminating "*Lessons from the Field*" briefs or debrief reports across missions and partners. • Promoting systematic collection, aggregation, and sharing (where safe and ethical) of data on local staff employment, risks, incidents, and outcomes to strengthen evidence-based protection and policy development. • Establishing a cross-mission learning mechanism or repository to promote continuous improvement.

REAL-LIFE SCENARIOS

| CASE STUDIES & VIGNETTES

The following scenarios are drawn from real experiences from those with lived experiences and research interviews with individuals working on the ground across international missions. Each case study or vignette reflects situations shared by local staff, veterans, and other partners who have lived the realities these Guidelines aim to address.

These examples are not hypothetical: they capture the very real stakes when protections succeed—*and the consequences when they fail.* By grounding the Guidelines in lived experience, the vignettes highlight both the human impact of strong duty-of-care practices and the risks that have arisen in the absence of minimum principles in past missions, which will continue to occur when key principles are overlooked or inconsistently applied.

REF	RESEARCH DATA	DATE	LOCATION
WP 1.5	Interview with US veteran by Sara de Jong	27 February 2017	United States
WP 1.6	Interview with Afghan interpreter by Sara de Jong	16 March 2022	United Kingdom
WP 2.1	Interview with Canadian veteran by Sara de Jong	28 May 2023	Germany
WP 2.6	Interview with Afghan interpreter by Sara de Jong	21 February 2022	United Kingdom
WP 2.7	Interview with Swedish veteran by Sara de Jong	28 May 2023	Germany
WP 2.7	Interview with British veteran by Sara de Jong	13 March 2017	United Kingdom
WP. 3.2	Interview with Afghan interpreter by Sara de Jong	24 July 2025	Czechia
WP 3.4	Interview with Afghan interpreter by Sara de Jong	3 December 2017	United Kingdom
WP 4.3	Correspondence refugee caseworker with Sara de Jong	28 December 2025	Netherlands
WP 4.5	Respondent ID 243, Interpreter, Survey by Refugee Legal Support, Victoria Canning & Sara de Jong	October 2025	United Kingdom
OP 2	Interview with Afghan interpreter by Sara de Jong	31 March 2019	Canada
OP 4	Respondent ID 88, interpreter and 333/444 Triple Special Forces, Survey by Refugee Legal Support, Victoria Canning & Sara de Jong	October 2025	United Kingdom

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We never knew who we were actually employed by. When the threats came, each office told us to speak to someone else.

— Former interpreter

A Human Terrain Team consisting of U.S. soldiers and civilians, along with an Afghan interpreter, conducts a key leader meeting with the village elder and citizens of Koshab Village, near Kandahar Air Base, Afghanistan, April 3.

Photo by Staff Sgt. Stephen Schester | US Army Europe Flickr

WP 1.1 | TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FROM THE OUTSET

In 2006, during the early expansion of a NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, the demand for local interpreters in Kandahar and Helmand grew rapidly as security deteriorated and international forces rotated their areas of responsibility. The United States initially oversaw operations, later handing over to Canada, which then transferred responsibility to the United Kingdom in Helmand.

Amid these transitions, ministries relied heavily on a patchwork of short-term commercial contracts to recruit and manage local interpreters. Each contingent brought its own contractors, standards, and administrative practices — creating a complex web of actors with overlapping roles but no single point of accountability. The consequences for local staff were severe.

Several interpreters were left without access to safe movement or continued to pay once threats became known. Many were forced to flee their homes at personal expense and without institutional support while Ministries continued internal discussions over responsibility. The lack of early, explicit responsibility-sharing left gaps that persisted long after individual contingents rotated out.

This scenario demonstrates that without clear lines of accountability established from the outset, even well-resourced missions struggle to fulfil their ethical obligations to local staff, particularly when crises emerge or roles shift across international actors.

"Some of my colleagues walked in thinking that they were going to dictate to an Afghan military unit, 'this is how you train and we do it this way,' and it would be verbatim spit out by the translator next to them. Interpreters were just like a machine and they were there just to be a mouthpiece. Word for word, simultaneously say what I'm saying, and then it would just culturally come across as perfect and everything would be 'hunky dory.' "

— US Afghanistan Veteran

During deployments to Afghanistan, U.S. military personnel were often placed in advisory, training, or partnership roles alongside Afghan security forces. These roles required not only technical expertise but deep cultural awareness, communication skills, and understanding of how to work effectively with locally employed interpreters. However, many international staff arrived with limited preparation for the cultural, linguistic, and relational complexities of working in Afghan units or communities

Misaligned expectations and culturally insensitive communication undermined trust between international forces, interpreters, and Afghan units. Interpreters were placed in difficult positions, expected to translate messages that would cause offence or be dismissed due to tone or phrasing. This reduced operational effectiveness, strained relationships, and occasionally jeopardised safety during joint missions. The vignette demonstrates that cultural competence and responsible leadership are not optional soft skills—they are prerequisites for effective collaboration, mission success, and the respectful treatment of locally employed staff.

WP 1.6 RECRUIT AND VET TRANSPARENTLY

"I started working as a local interpreter when I was 17. There was one Sergeant Major and the Quartermaster.   When I entered the office, I had no beard, nothing. The Sergeant Major said: 'How old are you?' I said 17. When they got my ID card, the Sergeant Major said: 'You're not allowed to work with us'. I said 'OK, no problem' But the Quartermaster said, 'No come on, sit'. They just argued between each other."

— Afghan interpreter who worked for the British Army

During early recruitment for interpreter roles in Iraq and Afghanistan, hiring processes were often informal, undocumented, and reliant on the discretion of individual officers. Applicants were evaluated on the spot, with little transparency around eligibility criteria, minimum age requirements, or the protections owed to those entering high-risk roles. In one such case, a 17-year-old Afghan applicant, visibly young and with only his Tazkira as proof of age, presented himself for a position supporting British forces.

The young interpreter was hired into a dangerous role without formal vetting, protection, or consideration for his vulnerability. This lack of transparency and oversight increased his exposure to harm, created ambiguity around his employment status, and offered no recourse if problems later emerged. More broadly, inconsistent recruitment practices undermined trust in the system, opened the door to exploitation and favouritism, and weakened the legitimacy of the mission's engagement with local staff.

A transparent, documented, merit-based process—with strict prohibition on recruiting minors—would have ensured fairness, accountability, and safety for both the individual and the mission

The 1st Battalion The Royal Welsh (Royal Welch Fusiliers 23rd Foot) and assigned units including Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police, Estonian Forces and French Army carry out ongoing training and preparation for OP Moshtarak, in Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

Photo by British Army SSgt Mark Jones MOD Crown/Copyright 2010

"I always looked after the interpreter because a lot of the other young soldiers in the back of the vehicle with him didn't really care about him. They'd be like, 'you sit up there, don't touch me, don't touch my stuff'. They would always try to feed him like, you know, the pork sandwiches when it's against his religion, because the soldiers liked the halal meals that came out for the interpreters. So being the commander of vehicle itself I was like, 'no it's not happening'. So I always took Ahmed aside and I'd be like, 'okay, Ahmed, here's your food, you take this and you hide it because if you don't hide it, these guys are gonna eat it'."

— Canadian Afghanistan veteran

In high-risk mission environments, local interpreters often work in close physical proximity to international personnel, sharing vehicles, accommodation, and daily routines. While formal policies may espouse equality and inclusion, the lived reality for local staff frequently depends on the attitudes and conduct of individual team members. In this instance, a local interpreter accompanying a Canadian patrol was subjected to repeated exclusion and disrespect from some soldiers, including deliberate disregard for his religious practices. The situation illustrates how unequal treatment can persist in informal settings—such as vehicles and meals—when equal protection standards are not consistently understood, enforced, or modelled by leadership.

The intervention of the vehicle commander prevented immediate harm and ensured the interpreter's basic needs were met, demonstrating the positive impact of responsible leadership.

However, the necessity of such informal workarounds—such as hiding food to avoid harassment—reveals a deeper systemic failure.

Equal protection was not embedded as a shared responsibility across the team, leaving the interpreter dependent on individual advocacy rather than institutional safeguards.

This dynamic undermines both dignity and safety. When protections rely on personal goodwill instead of clear standards, local staff face inconsistent treatment and heightened vulnerability. Conversely, when equal protection is applied uniformly—through clear policies, training, and accountability—it strengthens trust, cohesion, and operational effectiveness.

This vignette underscores that equal protection must be enforced in practice, not merely stated in policy, and must extend to all aspects of daily mission life, including welfare, respect, and inclusion.

"The expatriates stopped movement the same day. We were told to keep going because we were local and 'less visible' — but the checkpoints knew exactly who worked for the UN."

—Congolese Local health liaison officer

In 2015, local staff working on a UN-supported stabilization project in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo were required to travel frequently between rural health posts and the provincial capital. The security context deteriorated rapidly as militia groups increased checkpoints, extortion, and targeted intimidation along key transport routes. While international personnel were quickly placed under movement restrictions and provided armoured vehicles or suspended field travel entirely, local staff were instructed to continue their duties using overcrowded public buses and shared taxis.

The consequences were immediate and severe. Two local staff members were detained at a militia checkpoint, questioned about their affiliation with the project, and released only after an extortion payment.

The incident prompted an overdue internal review, which eventually resulted in unified safety standards and guaranteed access to secure movement for all staff, regardless of employment status. However, the harm done underscored the core lesson of this principle: safety cannot be stratified. When local staff are excluded from risk mitigation measures, missions fail in their duty of care, undermine trust, and expose their essential workforce to preventable danger.

"I am taking medication for anxiety and depression. Most of the time I sleep a lot. [...] We spent three years working as interpreters, while British soldiers went out for six months. I have seen so many explosions, bomb blasts, and I have lost many friends, including British Army soldiers, interpreters and Afghan National Army. If you can get post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) within six months, I should be crazy after three years. [...] The sounds of the bullets, the sounds of the RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] is hard, and the explosions, and the crying. But we were prepared for that. But when you also don't sleep, it is too much."

— Afghan interpreter who worked for the British Army

In Afghanistan, local interpreters often served continuously across multiple rotations of international military units, remaining embedded in high-risk environments for years while international personnel deployed for comparatively short tours. As a result, interpreters were repeatedly exposed to combat, violence, and traumatic incidents without the reprieve, rotation, or structured decompression afforded to foreign troops. Despite their sustained exposure, mental-health risks among local staff were rarely assessed, discussed, or addressed as part of mission planning or post-incident procedures.

Prolonged and cumulative trauma left many interpreters struggling with serious mental-health challenges, including anxiety, emotional dysregulation, and symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress. Instead of receiving support, these symptoms were often misinterpreted as disciplinary or performance issues—such as lateness, perceived disrespect, or minor rule violations—leading to reprimands or punitive consequences rather than care.

The lack of access to basic coping mechanisms, including communication with family, further intensified isolation and distress.

For individuals, the absence of trauma-informed support resulted in long-term psychological harm that persisted well beyond their period of service. For missions, unaddressed trauma increased risk to team cohesion, decision-making, and safety on operations. This vignette demonstrates that mental well-being cannot be treated as ancillary or optional. Without confidential, culturally appropriate counselling, trauma risk assessments after critical incidents, and routine mental-health checks, organisations fail to protect their staff and weaken the overall resilience and effectiveness of their missions.
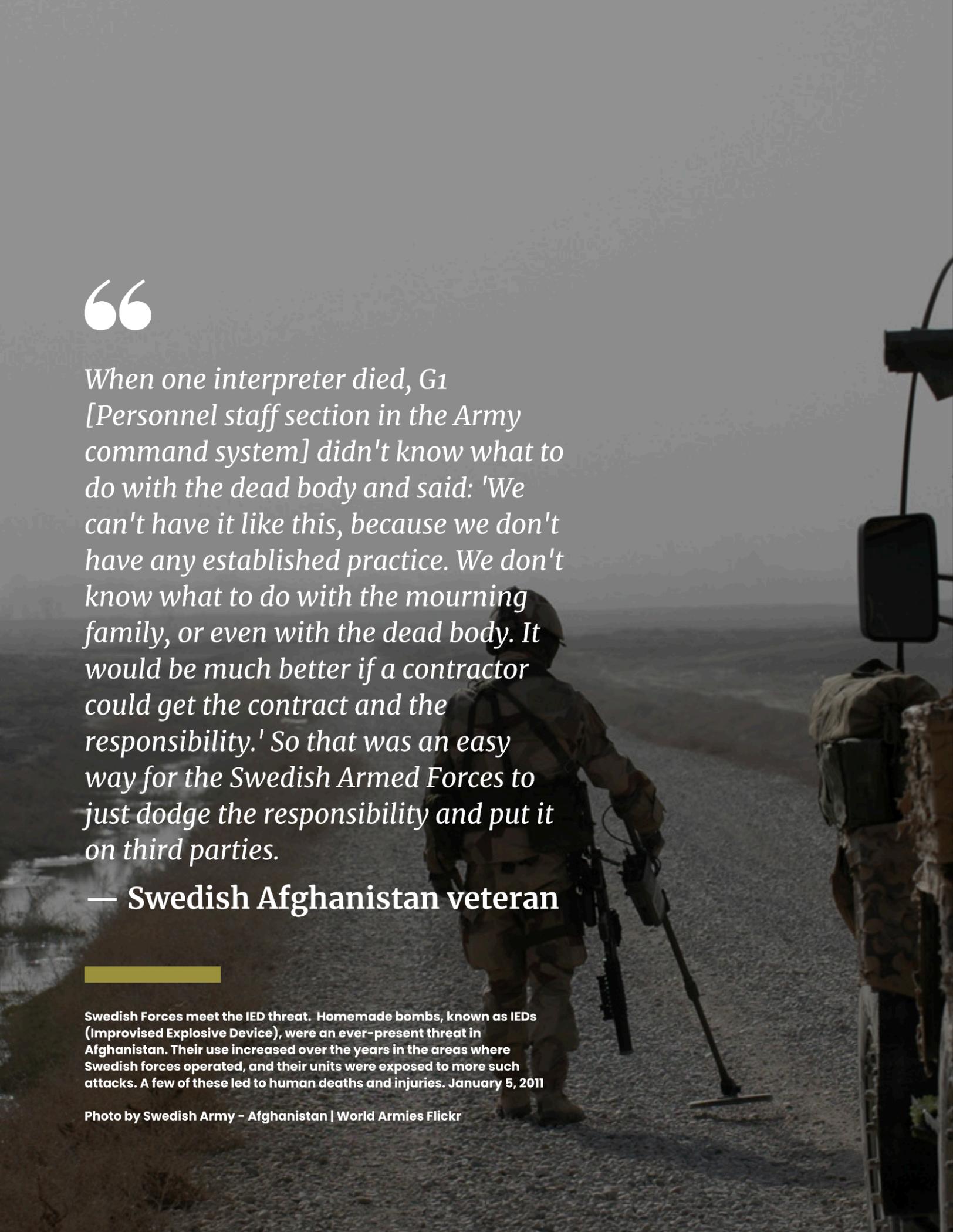
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> *When one interpreter died, G1 [Personnel staff section in the Army command system] didn't know what to do with the dead body and said: 'We can't have it like this, because we don't have any established practice. We don't know what to do with the mourning family, or even with the dead body. It would be much better if a contractor could get the contract and the responsibility.' So that was an easy way for the Swedish Armed Forces to just dodge the responsibility and put it on third parties.*

— Swedish Afghanistan veteran

Swedish Forces meet the IED threat. Homemade bombs, known as IEDs (Improvised Explosive Device), were an ever-present threat in Afghanistan. Their use increased over the years in the areas where Swedish forces operated, and their units were exposed to more such attacks. A few of these led to human deaths and injuries. January 5, 2011

In high-risk international missions, the possibility of serious injury or death among local staff is not hypothetical — it is an inherent operational risk. Preparing for such outcomes requires clear procedures, legal clarity, and institutional readiness to act with dignity and responsibility. In this case, following the death of a local interpreter supporting Swedish forces in Afghanistan, personnel responsible for administration and welfare lacked any established protocol for handling the deceased, supporting the mourning family, or fulfilling duty-of-care obligations.

The absence of preparation exposed a critical gap between operational risk and institutional readiness to respond humanely when tragedy occurred. Rather than activating a predefined process, responsibility for the deceased interpreter and his family was informally shifted to a contractor, allowing the armed forces to avoid direct accountability. This abdication of responsibility compounded the harm already caused by the loss of life.

The family was left without clear guidance, timely support, or recognition of the interpreter's service, while personnel on the ground experienced moral distress at witnessing an avoidable failure of leadership and preparedness. More broadly, the incident undermined trust in the institution's commitment to its local staff. When organisations lack written procedures for injury, illness, and death — and rely instead on ad hoc or outsourced responses — they expose families to uncertainty, delay, and indignity at the moment they are most vulnerable.

This scenario underscores that preparedness for medical emergencies and fatal incidents is a core expression of organisational integrity. Clear compensation frameworks, defined responsibilities, and pre-briefed family support mechanisms are essential to ensuring that duty-of-care obligations are honoured fully, consistently, and humanely.

"One of our interpreters had been very badly injured in a bombing incident and had actually lost three of his limbs. He received excellent treatment to begin with in [Camp] Bastion, which was our medical base in Helmand. But Bastion was never designed to be a place where definitive surgery took place, and if he'd been a British soldier, or serviceman, at the time, he would have been evacuated back to the UK and then gone through an intermediate and long-term care package, of up to a year or 18 months with follow-up packages from then. Nothing like that was on offer to him, and the attitude that I perceived was that we would try and do our best to pack this guy off and hand him over, basically, broken goods, back into the clearly inadequate Afghan system. I was concerned that we weren't applying the same standards to that individual as we were applying to our own people, and I felt that was wrong, and that always rankled and irritated me."

— UK Afghanistan veteran

In high-risk operations, local interpreters are frequently exposed to the same dangers as international personnel, including improvised explosive devices and active combat environments. In this case, an interpreter supporting UK forces in Afghanistan was critically injured in a bombing incident, sustaining catastrophic, life-altering injuries. While immediate emergency care was delivered effectively at the military medical facility in Bastion, the mission lacked a prepared pathway for long-term treatment, rehabilitation, and recovery for severely injured local staff. The systems in place were designed to stabilise casualties—not to ensure continuity of care once survival was assured.

Despite the severity of his injuries, the interpreter was not afforded the same evacuation and rehabilitation options that would have been automatically triggered for a British service member. Instead, responsibility for his long-term care was effectively deferred, with the expectation that he would be transferred back into a national healthcare system that lacked the capacity to meet his complex medical needs. This disparity reflected an absence of predefined procedures, guarantees, or insurance mechanisms to support local staff in cases of injury.

For the individual and his family, the consequences were profound: inadequate access to specialised care, uncertainty about future support, and long-term physical and psychological hardship. For those who served alongside him, the incident caused lasting moral injury and eroded confidence in the institution's commitment to equitable duty of care.

The vignette underscores that preparedness for injury and illness must extend beyond initial emergency response. Without clearly established evacuation protocols, compensation frameworks, and long-term care pathways for local staff, organisations fail to meet their ethical responsibilities and undermine the integrity of their missions.

In its report : '[Missing in action: UK leadership and the withdrawal from Afghanistan](#)' the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee concluded: *"Though the UK Government saw a rapid collapse in Afghanistan as a plausible scenario, the FCDO [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office] failed properly to prepare for it. As the situation deteriorated, the Foreign Secretary should have taken the lead on contact with third countries, making intensive efforts to put in place evacuation routes. Instead, he delegated meetings to junior ministers, only stepping into action once Kabul had fallen. It is unacceptable that Afghans who supported the UK mission were put at risk by the failure to secure sensitive documents held by the British Embassy."*

As the international presence in Afghanistan entered its final phase, senior UK government officials recognised that a rapid collapse of the Afghan state was a plausible scenario. Despite this awareness, end-of-mission planning did not adequately integrate the protection, documentation, or orderly exit of Afghans who had supported the UK mission, without being directly employed by the UK Government. Local staff—many of whom had been funded by and worked alongside UK institutions for years—were not meaningfully incorporated into drawdown planning, nor were they provided with clear information about eligibility for protection, or the safeguarding of sensitive records.

The absence of deliberate end-of-mission planning had severe consequences. Sensitive records based at the Embassy identifying Afghan job applicants were not secured in advance, and responsibility for decision-making remained unclear until the crisis was already unfolding.

Local staff were left without reliable information about their status or options, forcing many to make life-or-death decisions in an atmosphere of confusion and fear.

For the individuals affected, the failure translated into heightened exposure to retaliation, prolonged uncertainty, and missed opportunities for protection. For the institution, it resulted in reputational damage, parliamentary scrutiny, and a lasting erosion of trust among current and future local partners. The vignette underscores a central lesson of this principle: end-of-mission planning cannot be delegated down, reactive or improvised. Integrating local staff into exit strategies from the outset—through clear communication, defined responsibilities, and published policies on protection and post-employment support—is essential to meeting both moral and operational obligations.

Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants crowd into the Herat Kabul internet cafe to apply for the SIV program on August 8, 2021, in Kabul, Afghanistan. Many Afghans are in desperate need of assistance completing the forms and obtaining required human resources letters, a particular challenge for those whose U.S. government work ended years ago. The Biden administration expanded refugee eligibility for Afghans as the Taliban escalated violence in the war-torn country. Thousands of Afghans who worked for the United States government during its nearly 20-year war here now fear for their safety as the U.S. withdraws its troops from the country. Many of these Afghans, who worked as interpreters and translators for U.S. intelligence agencies and military branches, have applied to come to the U.S. as part of the SIV program, with the first such group arriving in the U.S. last month. But, for most SIV candidates, the timeline for relocation remains unknown.

Photo by Paula Bronstein. Afghanistan, 2021

"After that incident [a suicide attack by a local contractor on Bagram Airfield, which was at the time the largest U.S. military base], the US guys interviewed all the local employees, which were working in different bases, close to Bagram. They then terminated more than 4,000 local employees after that incident. I would say, ok, 20% of those were found to be, like, doubtful. But, the other 80 or 70 or 60% of them were definitely innocent. But they were kicked out because they had doubts. Because of that suicide bomber, so many other local staff were terminated, when they had their security screening interviews. My brother was interviewed a month or two months after this incident. And he was also one of those guys who were terminated without any reason. And I accept the situation, because the US military didn't want to risk it. But whoever was going through their screening interview in that period, he knew that he is going to be terminated, because of the incident."

— Afghan interpreter supporting US and Czech Special Forces

In the aftermath of a suicide attack involving a local contractor on the U.S. military base Bagram Airfield, security concerns intensified rapidly. In response, U.S. forces stepped up security screening interviews of local employees. These interviews took place under heightened pressure, fear, and urgency, with little distinction made between individual roles, histories, or risk profiles.

Rather than being used as a targeted risk assessment tool, the screening process became a de facto mechanism for mass termination. Thousands of local employees—many with long service records and no adverse findings—were dismissed in a short period following the incident.

The absence of fair and transparent redundancy procedures resulted in collective punishment rather than due process. As described in the testimony, a significant majority of those terminated were not found to pose any credible risk, yet were dismissed without clear justification, documentation, or opportunity to appeal.

The process was widely understood among staff as predetermined: timing alone—rather than individual conduct—became the deciding factor.

For affected individuals and families, the consequences were severe. Sudden loss of employment meant loss of income, and subsequent exclusion from resettlement programmes due to being blacklisted. While security imperatives were real, the lack of documented reasoning, appeal mechanisms, and ex-gratia safeguards transformed a necessary risk response into an unjust workforce reduction.

This vignette underscores that redundancy procedures—even in crisis contexts—must be grounded in due process, transparency, and accountability. Without clearly defined safeguards and budgeted mechanisms for fair dismissal and appeal, security-driven decisions risk inflicting lasting harm on innocent staff and compromising the ethical legitimacy of mission operations.

WP 3.4 | CONDUCT INDIVIDUAL RISK ASSESSMENTS AND HANDOVER TO PROTECTION ACTOR

"The people came [to the Intimidation Investigation Unit], and they had their interview, and at the end of the day, [the officials] just said: 'Well, change your mobile phone number, change your car, move your house.'" [But] if someone's life is in danger, if someone has been recognised by the enemy forces, they will get targeted anywhere in the country. [They just offered internal relocation in Afghanistan] except, as they said, if your life is in 'imminent danger'. But I am still confused, and I still haven't found the proper meaning of 'imminent danger'. Because what does that mean? When he got shot or when his head is chopped off? They said, 'If you're in imminent danger, we're going to help you.' So, what does imminent danger mean? When they get killed, and then they're going to believe him?"

— Former Afghan interpreter working for the British Forces who witnessed the interviews that British officials conducted with applicants to the Intimidation Scheme

Former Afghan interpreters who supported British forces could apply to the UK's Intimidation Scheme if they believed that their safety was threatened because of their assistance to the United Kingdom in Afghanistan. During interviews with British officials, applicants were advised to mitigate risk through internal relocation measures such as changing phone numbers, vehicles, or residences, unless they could demonstrate that their lives were at "imminent and significant risk".

The absence of clearly defined risk thresholds and meaningful individualised assessments resulted in inadequate protection.

Internal relocation advice failed to account for the nationwide nature of targeting based on prior association with foreign forces. An investigation by a parliamentary committee observed that not one single applicant to the Intimidation Investigation Unit was offered relocation to the UK between 2010-2017 and concluded that the "Intimidation Scheme, in its current form, has dismally failed to give any meaningful assurance of protection". Many applicants remained exposed to ongoing threats without access to alternative pathways, contributing to prolonged insecurity, psychological distress, and loss of trust in duty-of-care mechanisms.

"His application for relocation had already been dismissed at the highest court because they didn't believe he was working as a military guard via a subcontractor. This was despite five colleagues, including his boss, confirming his employment. The judge didn't consider this enough evidence as the statements were short and the Dutch Ministry of Defence claimed they couldn't find his name. Probably they didn't check properly, and checked with the wrong name. His lawyer then asked the Ministry of Defence to look again with his Afghan ID card number. It took a long time, but after about 1.5 years, they confirmed they could find his employment record and he was indeed eligible for relocation."

— Representative Dutch refugee agency

Accurate and secure employment records are a foundational protection measure for local staff, particularly when eligibility for relocation, legal remedies, or protection pathways depends on proof of service. In multinational missions involving subcontractors and layered reporting structures, employment records are often fragmented across ministries, contractors, and partner organisations. In this case, a former Afghan military guard who had worked via a subcontractor sought relocation but was unable to prove his employment due to gaps and inconsistencies in official personnel records held by the Dutch Ministry of Defence.

Despite corroborating statements from multiple colleagues and his direct supervisor, the absence of a readily verifiable, central employment record led authorities to conclude—incorrectly—that his service could not be confirmed.

The failure to issue local staff with a contract for their own records and to maintain secure, accessible personnel records had profound consequences.

The individual's relocation application was initially rejected at the highest court level, exposing him to prolonged risk. Only after extensive legal advocacy and a delayed re-examination—using his Afghan ID card number rather than a name-based search—was his employment finally confirmed.

For the individual, this delay meant extended exposure to danger, psychological stress, and legal limbo despite clear eligibility. For institutions, the case revealed how poor record management can undermine judicial processes, delay protection decisions, and place individuals at risk even when corroborating evidence exists. The vignette demonstrates that securing employment and personnel records is not merely an administrative task; it is a critical safeguard that enables access to justice, protection, and post-employment support. Without reliable, well-managed records, even strong protection frameworks and aftercare commitments cannot function as intended.

In its report '[Missing in action: UK leadership and the withdrawal from Afghanistan](#)' the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee concluded: Most damning for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) is the total absence of a plan, developed in conjunction with the Home Office, for evacuating Afghans who supported the UK mission, without being directly employed by the UK Government. The Government was never going to be able to evacuate all — or even many — of these people. But it failed to deliver the bare minimum that we owed them: a well-considered plan for who would be prioritised for extraction, and clear communications to those seeking help."

During the withdrawal from Afghanistan, many Afghans who had supported the UK mission—but were not directly employed by the UK Government—sought guidance on whether and how they might be protected. This group included subcontracted staff, implementing partners, and individuals funded by the FCDO but working through third-party arrangements who nonetheless faced heightened risk because they assisted the UK efforts in Afghanistan and stood up for values such as democracy, women's rights, freedom of speech, and rule of law. As the security situation deteriorated, these individuals relied on official communications to understand eligibility criteria, prioritisation for evacuation, and practical steps they should take to safeguard themselves and their families.

The absence of a clear, publicly communicated plan created widespread confusion and distress among those seeking assistance. Individuals and their UK former colleagues sent repeated emails, monitored changing guidance, and relied on informal networks for information, often receiving contradictory messages or no response at all.

Without transparent communication on eligibility, timelines, or next steps, many were left in prolonged uncertainty—unable to make informed decisions about whether to move, hide, or attempt to reach evacuation points.

The consequences were severe. Some individuals who were never likely to be eligible for evacuation remained in limbo instead of receiving clear, if difficult, answers. Others missed critical windows for protection because they lacked reliable instructions. Beyond the immediate human cost, the failure eroded trust in government commitments and weakened the credibility of future protection schemes. This vignette reinforces a central lesson of the principle: even when capacity is limited, transparent, consistent, and accessible communication is a core duty of care. Silence, ambiguity, or fragmented messaging can place lives at risk and undermine both safety and legitimacy.

"My resettlement experience has been deeply stressful despite the relief of eventually reaching the UK. The long delay 20 to 24 months after receiving the offer letter left me and my family living in constant fear and danger. The lack of clear communication and support during this period caused unnecessary hardship. While I am grateful for safety now, the process was too slow and has left lasting emotional and physical strain. Such delays should never happen again for those in urgent danger."

— Afghan interpreter who worked for the British Army

Following the issuance of resettlement offer letters, many Afghan interpreters who had supported the British Army remained in high-risk environments for extended periods while awaiting implementation. Although an offer signalled recognition of eligibility, it did not come with clear timelines, regular updates, or defined points of contact. During this prolonged interim phase—often lasting many months—families were left to navigate escalating threats without reliable information on when or how protection would materialise.

The absence of clear, consistent communication transformed an offer of safety into a period of sustained uncertainty and fear. Families remained in hiding, unable to plan, relocate safely, or access support, while repeated attempts to seek updates yielded limited or no response. The prolonged delay compounded psychological stress, disrupted livelihoods, and resulted in lasting emotional and physical harm even after resettlement was eventually achieved.

Beyond the individual case, such communication gaps undermine trust in protection mechanisms and weaken the credibility of resettlement commitments. This vignette demonstrates that transparency does not end with issuing an offer letter. Clear timelines, regular status updates, and accessible points of contact are essential to ensuring that protective decisions translate into real-world safety—particularly for those facing urgent and ongoing risk.

"

I stood at the airport gate with my children, but they couldn't find my name in their system. I was told to wait. We waited for three days in mass crowds and were were never verified and I am still in Afghanistan in 2025.

— Contracted Security
Employee for Canada

Afghans walk along fences as they arrive in Pakistan through the Pakistan-Afghanistan border crossing point in Chaman on August 24, 2021 following Taliban's military takeover of Afghanistan.

Photo: AFP Via Getty Images

When Kabul fell in August 2021, thousands of local staff who had supported foreign missions —interpreters, drivers, security personnel, analysts, and civil society partners — attempted to reach evacuation points. Yet many could not be located or verified because their personnel files and employment records were scattered across ministries, contractors, and implementing partners. Years of fragmented and, often outsourced, record-keeping left governments without a single, accurate roster of those they were responsible for protecting.

Dozens of eligible staff and their families missed evacuation flights or were unable to access the airport safely. Many remain in hiding years later, being rejected for resettlement due to a lack of proof of employment. For governments, the crisis exposed deep systemic gaps in preparedness, underscored the human cost of incomplete and fragmented record-keeping, and highlighted the urgent need for harmonised, mission-wide contingency planning.

This scenario makes clear that preparedness cannot be improvised: evacuation protocols, rosters, funding lines, and inter-agency roles must be established and regularly updated long before a crisis begins.

"I saw it with my own eyes. We were eating in the chow hall [dining area/mess hall]; a team came in from the mission, tired, dusty, dirty. They are, like, really hungry. And instead of giving him beef — [the interpreter was asking for beef] — they gave him pork. And religiously, most of the [local interpreters] were very strict. So, he asked, "What is this?" "Beef." When he started eating, he realized that it was pork. He went back there and started fighting with him, physically. Or threw something on the cook. That's how interpreters got blacklisted."

— Afghan interpreter who worked for Canadian forces

In international mission settings, everyday operational spaces —such as dining facilities, accommodation, and shared work areas — are often where power dynamics and institutional values are most visibly expressed. For local staff, these environments can either reinforce a sense of belonging and mutual respect or, conversely, signal exclusion and unequal treatment. In this case, a local interpreter working alongside Canadian forces experienced differential treatment in a shared mess hall, where basic religious and cultural considerations were disregarded, exposing deeper failures in dignity, inclusion, and accountability within routine mission practices.

The incident had consequences far beyond a single meal. The deliberate misrepresentation of food violated the interpreter's religious beliefs and dignity, placing him in an impossible position: accept mistreatment in silence or react and risk punishment.

When the interpreter protested, his response was interpreted as misconduct rather than as a legitimate grievance, resulting in blacklisting and loss of work. This outcome reinforced a culture in which local staff were expected to absorb disrespect without recourse, while those responsible for discriminatory behaviour faced no accountability.

More broadly, such incidents erode trust, undermine team cohesion, and compromise mission legitimacy. When local staff are treated as lesser or expendable, operational effectiveness suffers, grievances go unreported, and risks escalate. Upholding dignity and ensuring equal treatment, particularly in everyday interactions, is therefore not ancillary to mission success; it is foundational to safety, trust, and the ethical conduct of international operations.

"Following the recent data leak, the Taliban searched my family home and continue to threaten my relatives. One of my family members is still under their pressure, and they question my family about me every day ."

— Interpreter 333/444 Triple Special Forces, currently residing in the UK

Personal and employment data collected during international missions often includes highly sensitive information: names, roles, biometric data, locations, family details, and records linking individuals to foreign forces. In Afghanistan, such data carried life-or-death implications. Following the withdrawal, weaknesses in data-handling practices within UK institutions became publicly known, including failures to adequately secure, control access to, or assess the downstream risks associated with personnel records. These failures occurred despite the foreseeable consequences should such information fall into hostile hands.

In this case, a former interpreter who had supported UK Special Forces was directly affected by a data breach that exposed identifying information about individuals associated with international missions.

The breach was feared to have immediate and severe consequences, including the use of leaked data by armed actors to identify and target families of former interpreters, subjecting them to intimidation, surveillance, and ongoing threats. Although the interpreter himself had relocated to safety, his relatives remained exposed to retaliation, demonstrating how data breaches extend harm beyond the individual employee to entire families.

For affected individuals, the impact included constant fear, forced displacement, and lasting psychological distress. For institutions, the breach represented a fundamental failure of duty of care, undermining trust among local staff and damaging the credibility of future engagement with at-risk populations. The incident underscores that safeguarding personal data is not a technical or administrative concern—it is a core protection measure. Without encrypted systems, strict access controls, staff training, and compliance with international data-protection standards, information intended to support employment and protection can instead become a tool of persecution.

Maintaining the EU Humanitarian Aid Flight service is a team effort, from the pilots to the ground crew. This daily flight service enables the transport of cargo and humanitarian workers. © European Union, 2022 (photographer: Pierre Tripon)

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LET'S RE-BUILD KABUL TOGETHER

د نازوانا بنوویٔ د نړیوال سوله ساتی ځواک (ISAF) په مرسته بیا جوړه ریٔ

مکتب نازوانا به همکاری نیروهای حافظ صلح بین المللی (ISAF) دوباره احیا شد

NAZO ANAA SCHOOL WAS REPAIRED WITH ASSI.
STANCE FROM ISAF
FEBRUARY 2002
دلو ۱۳۸۰

ISAF

The reopening of Nazo Anaa School in Kabul, February 2002. The school had been closed under the Taliban regime but was reopened after the Royal Engineers and local contractors carried out repairs. © Crown copyright reproduced under delegated authority from The Keeper of Public Records. Image: IWM (LAND-02-012-1382)

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