

Sudan Situation Report

Aid Agencies Access and Security Risk Management

September 2023

The crisis in Sudan has been characterised by urban warfare and increased ethnic tensions, with challenging implications for aid access and aid agency security risk management practices. Increased food and fuel prices, more restrictive administrative requirements for aid agencies, and severe disruptions to the banking system and health care services have created further obstacles.

Summary

- Fighting in Sudan is likely to remain largely in urban areas, requiring aid agencies to adapt their security risk management practices to the specific challenges that result.
- Tribal and ethno-religious loyalties have drawn a diverse range of actors into the conflict. This requires aid agencies to understand underlying concerns in order to effectively manage local staff relations and work with local partners while maintaining respect for all stakeholders.
- Fuel and food prices will likely continue to increase as the conflict persists, especially if the Rapid Support Forces or Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) are able to control oil fields or refineries. Supply chains will very likely be disrupted over the next six months.
- Physical access to cash has been severely disrupted, making it difficult for humanitarian agencies to pay their staff.
- A large proportion of hospitals in Sudan are reported to be out of service, especially in areas close to active fighting. With attacks on health care having **persisted** throughout August, challenges preventing people in need from accessing health care are likely to remain, which in turn create added risks for local staff and partners.
- Access to grain and agricultural supplies is likely to worsen through 2023 to 2025 due to a combination of conflict, climate and economic factors.
- The suspension of programmes has led to widespread redundancies among local aid staff.
- Social media use is reinforcing conflict-related sentiments. Some social media communities with links to the SAF have issued threats against medical aid providers on social media.
- Widespread sexual violence is occurring during the conflict.

Context

On 15 April 2023, fighting erupted in Sudan between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group, and the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) (see **Conflict Parties in the Current Crisis**). The fighting marked a severe escalation of violence in the country and, although initially concentrated in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum, it has since spread more widely, while multiple declared ceasefires have failed to produce tangible security improvements. As of early September 2023, fighting continued to be especially fierce in towns and urban areas across the Darfur and Kordofan regions in addition to Khartoum.

Overview of the Various Conflict Parties in Sudan

Conflict dynamics have been further complicated by several other conflict parties having been drawn into the conflict apart from the SAF and RSF. This includes the al-Hilu faction of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), which has engaged in clashes with the SAF in South Kordofan. The RSF has also been active in South Kordofan, and as of mid-August, each of these conflict parties (the RSF, SAF and SPLM-N) were **reported** to control various areas of the state. In North Kordofan, the Kababish people are **reported** to have taken up arms in clashes with the RSF, while in Darfur multiple tribes have **pledged allegiance** to the RSF.

These complex conflict dynamics have created severe security challenges for aid agencies and the people they assist. As such, this document provides information and analysis regarding documented incidents affecting aid agencies, emerging foreseeable risks, and strategies to mitigate these risks.

Reported incidents affecting aid agencies and challenges affecting security risk management practices

Since the start of the conflict, humanitarian agencies have operated in an environment of largely urban conflict, characterised by small arms fire and the use of explosive weapons with indiscriminate effects. Such conflict dynamics have left many civilians in populated urban areas – especially vulnerable demographic groups – **trapped** in their homes, often with diminishing supplies of essential items such as food and water, while security risks persist around them. The same risks have created severe challenges for aid agencies seeking to safely reach civilians in need in urban areas.

In addition, aid agencies have been targeted by local criminal gangs, the RSF, SAF, and militia units seeking monetary gain and access to vehicles and buildings. Such groups have looted aid agency supplies and equipment on a large scale. On 21 August, the **World Food Programme** (WFP) reported that in addition to one of its logistics hubs in south-central Sudan having been overrun, over 40,000 tonnes of its food assistance in Sudan had been stolen since mid-April. It is possible that some of the looted items from aid agencies have been sold at so-called "**Dagalo markets**" that the RSF has established across Khartoum and the Darfur and Kordofan regions to sell looted goods.

- **Explosive weapons use in populated areas**

As of 9 August, Insecurity Insight had identified at least 31 reported incidents of explosive weapons use directly affecting health care, aid operations, and protection programmes in Sudan between 15 April and 24 June 2023. Barriers to accurate reporting mean that the stated figure is unlikely to be representative of all the incidents that occurred during this period, further underscoring the gravity of the situation.

More than two-thirds of the reported incidents occurred in populated areas of Khartoum state, where the indiscriminate wide-area effects of the explosive weapons' detonations suggest that conflict parties failed to distinguish between civilian and military objects. All incidents in which conflict parties were identified were attributed to either the RSF or SAF.

Reported explosive weapon incidents that directly affected aid operations were particularly frequently reported from Khartoum state in April. For example, in one of these incidents a UN vehicle was damaged outside the home of a Sudanese INGO employee in Burri neighbourhood, Khartoum city. In the others, a projectile struck and damaged an international UN worker's home in Al Amaret neighbourhood, Khartoum, and an unexploded ordnance item of unidentified origin was reported to have landed in the home of an INGO worker in Al

Diyum East, Khartoum. In an incident outside Khartoum, an INGO aid worker was killed in May together with his brother when a bomb of unidentified origin struck his family home in Nyala city, South Darfur.

Hospitals and health centres were damaged or destroyed by aerial bombings in at least eight incidents between 15 April and 24 June 2023. In at least one of these incidents, four health workers were killed when a hospital was damaged during an RSF drone attack in June on the headquarters of the Armoured Corps in Khartoum.

A further five incidents involving the use of explosive weapons between 15 April and 24 June, all of which were attributed to the RSF, damaged or destroyed universities and secondary schools in Khartoum and West Darfur. On 18 May, both the Al-Nahda University College and the Ahfad University College in Khartoum were reportedly almost completely destroyed by RSF forces.

One incident directly affected an IDP camp when it was reported on 17 April that an IDP camp near Nyala city, South Darfur, was hit by shelling of unidentified origin, killing a woman and two children. The camp had already been cut off from the city by clashes, leading to a shortage of water, food and medicine in the camp.

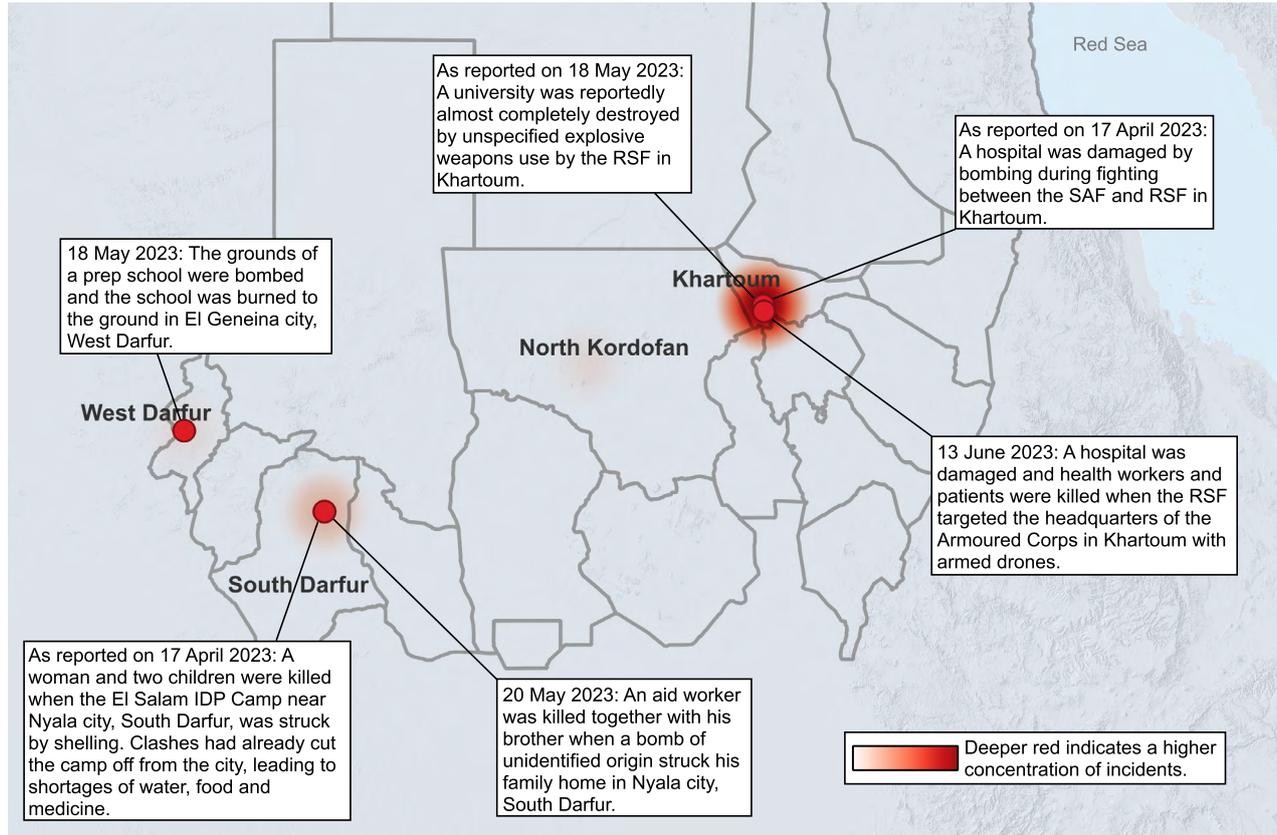
- **Further security threats facing aid agencies: killings, abductions and lootings**

As of 6 September 2023, Insecurity Insight had identified the reported killings of at least 21 aid workers in Sudan between 15 April and 7 July 2023 in 15 separate incidents. These figures are provisional and will be updated as better information becomes available. The killings were spread across Central, North, South, and West Darfur and South Kordofan. In the majority of incidents the armed actor responsible remained unnamed or unidentified. While two of the aid workers were killed by explosive weapons, as discussed in the previous section, and in several incidents the victims were shot and killed with firearms, in many incidents the weapons used were not reported. However, it is clear that several of the killings occurred in the contexts of ongoing clashes between armed groups. Three of the aid workers were WFP staff killed on 15 April in Kabkabiya, North Darfur, in the context of clashes between the RSF and SAF. An INGO finance officer was also killed on the same day (15 April) during clashes between the RSF and SAF in El Fasher, North Darfur. In other incidents, aid workers were killed while off duty, as was the case for an INGO IDP camp manager killed by armed men in El Geneina city, West Darfur, on 7 July. In addition to killings, at least three aid workers are reported to have been kidnapped in Sudan since 15 April 2023. Two of these were Nigerian nationals working for an INGO and taken from a neighbourhood in Khartoum on 17 April. The third was an INGO health worker kidnapped from an INGO office in an undisclosed location on 26 April.

Reports of widespread conflict-related sexual violence began to emerge just a few days after the onset of fighting. On 17 April, just two days after the start of the fighting on 15 April, online reports of a female international aid worker being sexually assaulted were shared. The woman was attacked by alleged RSF members who had broken into a hostel hosting INGO expats. The attack was part of the same incident in which the two Nigerian aid workers were kidnapped.

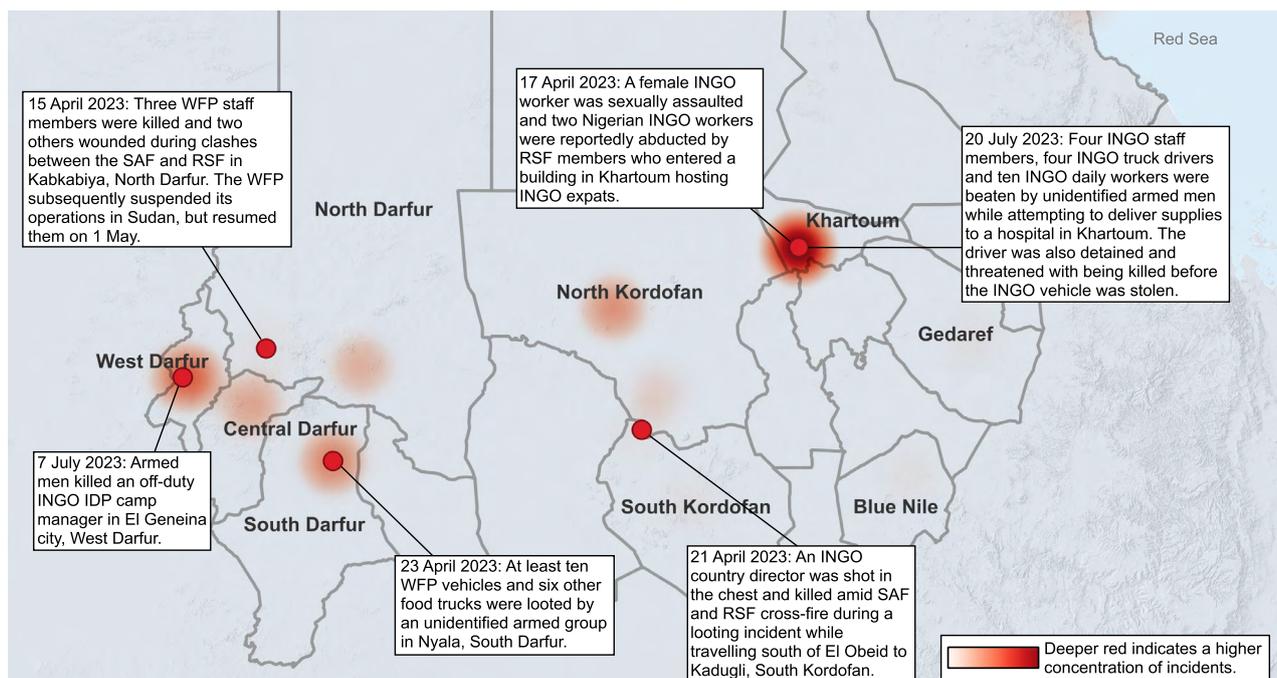
The intimidation and, in some cases, beating of aid workers by armed actors has further exacerbated the dire operational conditions for aid workers. While the full extent of threats is unclear due, for example, to less routine reporting of verbal abuse compared with killings, a particularly notable incident occurred on 20 July. On that day, 18 INGO workers were violently assaulted by armed men arguing about the legitimacy of the aid workers' presence while they were attempting to deliver medical supplies to Khartoum. The INGO driver was also temporarily detained and verbally threatened before the armed men stole their vehicle.

Figure 1: Examples of reported explosive weapons use affecting health care, education and aid operations in Sudan since 15 April 2023



Source: [Insecurity Insight](#). Base Map Data Source: United Nations OCHA. The boundaries and names used in this map do not imply official acceptance or endorsement by Insecurity Insight. Note: The information was obtained from user profiles.

Figure 2: Examples of non-explosive weapon-based security threats affecting aid agencies in Sudan, 15 April-20 July 2023



Source: [Insecurity Insight](#). Base Map Data Source: United Nations OCHA, Natural Earth and OpenMapTiles.org. The boundaries and names used in this map do not imply official acceptance or endorsement by Insecurity Insight.

Reduced humanitarian space

In addition to the conflict violence, there are also concerns about the increasing reduction of the humanitarian space needed to deliver aid impartially and independently solely based on needs. Difficulties in obtaining visas for international aid workers and permits to distribute aid across the country are among the key bureaucratic hurdles aid agencies and their employees have to face. Sudan's Humanitarian Aid Commission, which manages aid operations in Sudan, has long had a tense relationship with aid agencies due to **concerns** that it is closely associated with the country's military intelligence. *"Clearly there are people among the authorities who don't want INGO's getting visas There is a massive institutional culture within the security services of distrust of internationals", **commented** one senior aid worker.* Sudan's **declaration** of the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Sudan as persona non grata in June this year appears to support this argument.

The **announcement** by General Hemedti, leader of the RSF, on 13 August that the RSF would be establishing an organisation called the Sudan Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations

Social media users believed to be close to the SAF are highly critical of health care providers. Similar accusations have been made on social media at different times against the Sudanese Doctors Syndicate and MSF, with criticism often being triggered by the use of language these organisations employ to maintain a neutral position and not to side with any conflict party. Some social media accounts have issued threats and called for violence against health care providers.

Designation of MSF attackers as "armed men" criticised by SAF supporters online in Sudan:

- Research conducted by Insecurity Insight using social media data for the period 10-30 July 2023 in Khartoum suggests that pro-SAF social media users, presuming the perpetrators to be RSF militants, reacted overwhelmingly negatively to MSF's neutral description that attributed an attack on MSF staff on 20 July to "armed men".
- The main reason behind the negative reaction was the decision not to name the perpetrator.
- Furthermore, some social media users (around 16.5%) in the sample made explicit their belief that MSF "deserves" to be attacked by the RSF, while another 10% of users threatened the organisation with violence.
- Finally, a minority (around 6.9%) believed that MSF collaborates with the RSF or its supporters. Read the full document [here](#).

Sudan's doctors falsely accused of siding with the RSF by pro-SAF partisans:

- Research conducted by Insecurity Insight using social media data for the period 15 April to 21 May 2023 in Sudan suggests that the neutral position of the Sudanese Doctors Syndicate in the armed conflict was widely interpreted by pro-SAF social media users as a sign of its partiality towards the RSF.
- Data showed that pro-SAF social media users systematically targeted the Sudanese Doctors Syndicate with allegations of aiding and abetting the RSF, in some instances threatening the syndicate and its members with violence. Read the full document [here](#).

(SARHO) increases concerns regarding the humanitarian space in Sudan. It was stated that the SARHO will “operate in RSF-controlled territories” with a focus on Khartoum, Darfur, Kordofan and displacement areas, and will require “national and international humanitarian organisations” to obtain “licences” from the RSF to act in these areas. While further detail regarding the practical effects of this proposal are unclear, it appears likely to aggravate the obstacles facing aid agencies. Given **allegations** regarding the RSF’s widespread disrespect of established international norms, the proposal could also result in further disrespect for humanitarian principles and the politicisation of aid delivery, especially in RSF-controlled territory.

Comments and reactions on social media in particular highlight how poorly these humanitarian principles are understood and how quickly intentions are misinterpreted, as is illustrated by the example of accusations made against Sudanese doctors and in response to the attack on Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) staff on 20 July (see below). These reactions show that organisations risk backlash whether they do or do not publish perpetrator names.

Security risk management and duty of care to staff at the start of the crisis

The Sudan crisis has been very challenging for aid agencies’ security risk management (SRM) practices and duty of care. NGOs have had to face several crises simultaneously, making it difficult to roll out individual crisis plans. Often faced with limited budgets and staff, strained resources, and unpromising evacuation routes or safe areas for personnel, and with many emergency staff regionally or internationally located (often in different time zones), they had to ensure that the safety of their personnel was prioritised over humanitarian delivery. At the earlier stage of the conflict the priority was to support international staff – as also happened in Afghanistan – and the focus only turned to the remaining staff more recently.

Hibernation, relocation and evacuation (HRE)

Despite generally having HRE plans in place, many aid agencies were largely unable to activate them for a number of reasons. Most organisations had critical infrastructure or personnel in Khartoum and, because of the risk of small arms fire, their protocols required them to hibernate immediately, depriving some aid agencies of the key staff needed to manage other operations. Air evacuation was not possible for international staff due to the immediate closure of the international airport. It was also difficult by road because of reported incidents along key road arteries. The airport is located in the centre of the city, very close to most of the aid agency headquarters, and evacuation plans generally considered it to be the main route out of the country in an emergency. A UN-led road relocation by a convoy of 40 vehicles from Khartoum to Port Sudan occurred on 23-24 April and took twice the time planned. Places on the convoy were limited, and were mainly taken by international staff.

Several aid agencies experienced takeovers of their offices and thefts of vehicles. While water, food and emergency provisions that staff had to hand dwindled, continuing small arms fire made sourcing supplies impossible – or at best inadvisable – and many agencies reported gunshot injuries to staff at this time. Meanwhile, the cost of fuel rose prohibitively, with a report from a **commercial company** in May that black market prices of fuel had at times reached US\$80 per gallon, due to the SAF requisitioning and stockpiling fuel and the RSF taking over the Garri oil refinery. This, compounded with many organisations attempting to focus on evacuating international staff from the country, while ensuring local staff were either transferred to safer areas to stay with relatives or had food, water and medicine, meant at times INGOs were either faced with vastly inflated prices for supplies and vehicles, or were unable to either extract personnel or ensure the acquisition of essential supplies (whether from international or local sources).

Duty of care for local staff

National staff make up the majority of the aid agencies' workforce and have been disproportionately affected by the conflict. Agencies have in some cases had to review and extend the level of support they provide to national staff. In the absence of reliable international banking systems and because Sudan's central bank had been set **ablaze**, it has proved difficult to make transfer payments or pay salaries. In many cases organisations have chosen to extend additional support to national staff, for instance in cases where staff have health needs exacerbated by the lack of health care or by injuries sustained during the conflict, and to support them in leaving the country. There has also been at least one case of emergency response organisation staff being injured in Khartoum while attempting to get medical supplies to national staff who are unable to leave their houses during the conflict. Sexual violence is widely prevalent in the conflict and there is a significant risk that it could affect local staff.

However, a number of aid agencies have also ended contracts for local staff because they have suspended programmes due to risks to **staff**. Several organisations noted that donors refused to continue funding salaries when programmes were suspended. Aid workers also noted that the funding cuts and layoffs reflect common practices in the sector, where conflicts and climate shocks often force organisations to pause programmes.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in its revised 2023 **Humanitarian Response Plan** noted: "Violations of IHL and International Human Rights Law are driving the humanitarian crisis". This ties in with verbal evidence from some INGOs that many policies implemented at the time were in reaction to the "complex and often interconnected protection issues" that faced many humanitarian organisations, and therefore led at times to staff being affected and the transfer of humanitarian aid to those who most needed it being delayed.

As aid agencies resume their activities with limited capacity to respond to growing humanitarian needs, there is a danger that local implementing partners will be targeted by the various conflict parties. It is essential that their neutrality is preserved and they are not put into a position of higher risk.

Reflection exercises are now taking place to ensure that lessons have been learned and feed into the next steps of operations in Sudan. Inevitably, work is being planned with different focal points – some organisations are resuming humanitarian operations from subsidiary offices with staff who are able to work in less conflict-affected locations, such as Gedaref or Kosti.

Recommendations for the way forward

Policy:

- Monitor conflict incidents, threats of violence against personnel and access constraints to ensure the best possible understanding of operating contexts. Where possible, this information should be shared with other aid agencies to help reduce the likelihood of further incidents and increase the likelihood of aid being safely delivered. **More guidance**
- Be aware that the humanitarian principles and concepts of neutrality and impartiality are not always well understood among conflict parties and the general public. Draft communications based on an understanding of partisan perceptions. Be aware that not identifying members of conflict parties that are known to have committed violations can also be perceived as partisan by those who have suffered from conflict-related violence.
- Consider aid agencies' duty of care to all staff, in particular local staff, during periods of severe crisis and conflict.

- Take the opportunity to engage staff and gather lessons learned from experiences so far during the conflict, and ensure that these lessons feed into risk assessments for future activities.

Mitigation measures:

- Ensure the safety and security of all staff and local partners in the spirit of risk sharing rather than risk transfer. This will especially affect local partners, which are becoming increasingly important for the distribution of aid and implementation of humanitarian measures – but this will attract the further attention of both conflict parties and criminal gangs. Therefore, constant communication between local staff and INGO headquarters should be in place. This can include using physical communications equipment, holding weekly/monthly meetings, and ensuring timely reporting to both local staff and senior external staff on the situation on the ground.
- Promote an equitable, transparent and mutually beneficial approach to SRM when working with local partners.
- Provide resources to empower local and national NGOs (L/NNGOs) to build their own SRM capacity and manage the SRM aspects of partnerships with other L/NNGOs and INGOs.
- Ensure that sufficient fuel supplies are available and arrange in advance that the agency is able to transfer cash to suppliers. Consider alternative methods for cash transfer and where possible stockpile fuel, although this may become a target for conflict parties and criminals.
- Discuss with local partners possible evacuation routes and a “grab bag” in case they need to leave urgently. Establish “trigger points” that define when evacuation will become necessary to ensure they are able to leave in a timely manner.
- Practise good communication and computer discipline drills, so that local partners cannot be traced on social media or are not detained due to work reporting, and if possible ensure that all staff have “burner” phones (i.e. cheap disposable phones with temporary, unidentifiable phone numbers that cannot easily be traced back to their users).
- Provide all staff with access to counselling services, especially if they are working with complex situations such as sexual violence.
- Work with donors to avoid redundancies during periods of conflict. Abandoning employees during periods of high personal needs and stress will have serious reputational repercussions.
- For further resources, see: **Global Interagency Security Forum, Partnerships and Security Risk Management**: A Joint Action Guide for Local and International Aid Organisations (wpengine.com).

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