

Afghanistan Challenging For Humanitarian Workers

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Guests

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10 humanitarian workers were killed in a remote area of northern Afghanistan while on a medical mission. They were part of International Assistance Mission, one of many international non-governmental organizations providing assistance to the Afghan people. Aid workers face danger daily, caught between military forces and insurgents.

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TONY COX, host:

This is TALK OF THE NATION. Im Tony Cox in Washington. Neal Conan is away.

Last week, 10 humanitarian workers were killed in a remote area of northern Afghanistan while on a medical mission. They were part of a nongovernmental organization, NGO, International Assistance Mission, just one of many international NGOs providing assistance to the Afghan people.

While aid workers focus on issues like health care and education, they also face daily dangers operating as civilians caught between military forces and insurgents.

Today, we talk about the perils of international and local humanitarian workers in Afghanistan. Later in the hour, we will discuss what non-Muslims don't know about the Ramadan. But first, humanitarian workers in Afghanistan.

If you have been an NGO worker or have worked with NGO personnel as part of the military, tell us your story. Our number here in Washington is 800-989-8255, talk@npr.org. That is the email address. And you can join the conversation at our website. Go to npr.org, and click on TALK OF THE NATION.

COX: We begin today, with Joanna Buckley. She is a research analyst for Peace Dividend Trust, a nonprofit organization working with humanitarian operations around the world. She joins us from our bureau in New York City. Joanna, welcome to TALK OF THE NATION.

Ms. JOANNA BUCKLEY (Research Analyst, Peace Dividend Trust): Hi, thank you for having me.

COX: You just returned from a 14-month assignment in Afghanistan. What were you doing there?

Ms. BUCKLEY: Well, I was working with Peace Dividend Trust. I was there as a market researcher. Peace Dividend Trust, as you said, are an NGO, and they support private-sector business development. And they do that through linking Afghan businessmen to international and national contracting opportunities.

And these are opportunities that come from people like the U.S. military, the European militaries who are there, donors, embassies, private businesses, NGOs. So we really work with a very wide variety of the actors that are operating in Afghanistan.

COX: Now, you talked about the organizations or the agencies that you interact with, but what about the individual Afghan people that you interact with? Who are they specifically?

Ms. BUCKLEY: Well, we work with about 5,500 Afghan business men and women, and they operate across a variety of sectors, and they're a very resilient business community who are doing well for themselves, and we try and support them just by helping to facilitate them getting access to business opportunities.

COX: So how would you do that, for example? I'm trying to get a sense of what your day-to-day activity would be like.

Ms. BUCKLEY: We do in a number of ways. So one of these is we have an online business portal, and this advertises all of these businesses. It contains basic contact information, shows that they're taxpaying, registered - gives people the opportunity to know they're out there. For example, if you go to Afghanistan, you might now know that you can get renewable lamps, for example.

Another way we do that is we advertise tenders. So we post tenders from buyers on our websites. So we allow businesses to access these opportunities that way. We also do matchmaking activities. So, say you come to me, and you say I need radio equipment. We'll say okay, we have a list of suppliers who can do this for you. This is where they operate, and we can link the two of you together.

And then we also do some advocacy. So we do trade fairs now and again to showcase the kind of products that are available in Afghanistan. Because really, people are always surprised at just the variety of what is available on the local marketplace.

COX: Now, unlike the Americans who were just killed in Afghanistan, who were traveling into remote areas, are you primarily operating in urban centers?

Ms. BUCKLEY: Yeah, we have offices throughout the country. The main one is in Kabul, the center; but we also have one in the north, in Mazar-i-Sharif; in the east, in Jalalabad; and in the south in Helmand and Kandahar.

COX: So what kind of risk, then, do you take on a day-to-day basis?

Ms. BUCKLEY: On a day-to-day basis, our risk is always very measured. We have a security company. So we have movement plans, which we must adhere to. Everything's very coordinated, very streamlined. Nothing's done off the cuff.

COX: Do you coordinate through ANSO, which is, what, the Afghanistan Nongovernmental Safety Organization, I believe, is the correct acronym for that?

Ms. BUCKLEY: We use another service provider, but of course we read the ANSO security reports, which are circulated on a weekly basis.

COX: What was your reaction when you heard about what happened to the Americans?

Ms. BUCKLEY: I mean, obviously, it's completely tragic. I would say, as somebody who's been in Afghanistan, it's one of those things that you think will never happen to you or to somebody that you know. But inevitably, perhaps sometimes it can happen because of the volatile environments.

COX: What's and I know that you're coming, I'm assuming that your returning here has nothing to do with, had nothing to do with that incident, but when something like that happens, which is fairly rare in one sense, in terms of the numbers of people who were killed in that one incident, does that give you pause about what it is you are doing, or does it in some way, any way, alter the way that you go about doing what it is that you do?

Ms. BUCKLEY: I'd say it's definitely a motivating factor, primarily because of friends and family, who when something like this happens, is so concerned that it could happen to you, that it is a point to reevaluate what you're doing and assess why you're there and the motivations behind it and make sure that you're still really passionate about being there and that you're comfortable being there.

COX: This is TALK OF THE NATION. We are talking about NGOs and people who are doing work in other countries, particularly in Afghanistan, and we would like to hear from you.

If you have been an NGO worker or have worked with NGO personnel as part of the military, we'd like to hear your story. Our phone number is 800-989-8255. The email address is talk@npr.org.

Let me come back to you, Joanna, with another question. What about the military? What kind of interaction do you have with the armed forces fighting the Taliban, if any?

Ms. BUCKLEY: Oh, really none at all, no. I mean, the fighting is outside of our remit in terms of what we're doing there to support the Afghan community.

COX: So does that mean that there are areas, then, that you will not go into?

Ms. BUCKLEY: Oh, absolutely, definitely. Some areas, we just don't operate in primarily because it's not safe for our national staff.

We're primarily made up of national Afghan staff members, and we really rely on them a lot to tell us where they think is safe areas to operate and what they feel comfortable doing because we don't want to put them in any kind of jeopardy.

COX: Is that the way that you would say most NGOs operating in Afghanistan are, or are there others that are more, that will be more willing to take risks and go into areas where the danger is greater?

Ms. BUCKLEY: I don't think I could comment on that. I think it would very much depend on the type of work that was being done and what the project entailed.

So for example, perhaps something like health care in a very remote area would be seen as being more something that perhaps would lead people to go to more remote areas.

But in general, no. I would say people take account of what Afghan staff thing because they're just an absolutely vital component of all the programs that are there, and you have to have their support in order to operate.

COX: Give us a sense, if you can, of how many people and I don't necessarily need to know the

numbers, per se, I don't expect you to know that but give us a sense of how many people who are involved in NGO activities are in Afghanistan? Do you run into each other? Do you all know one another? Are you in competition with one another? What's the circumstance?

Ms. BUCKLEY: I would definitely say that one of the benefits of working somewhere like Afghanistan is that it is such a tight expatriate community. Obviously, you don't meet everyone because people operate within different circles, but insomuch as there are limited activities that you can do when you're not in work, so you're bound to bump into people in the small number of places that there are. And that's very rewarding.

COX: Joanna Buckley is our guest. She is a research analyst for Peace Dividend Trust, a nonprofit organization working with humanitarian operations around the world. She joins us from our bureau in New York City.

We had a voice clip a few moments ago from the widow of Tom Little, who was one of the Americans who was killed in Afghanistan, and she made this point. She says volunteering is a privilege. Do you feel that way, especially when doing it in a dangerous war zone?

Ms. BUCKLEY: Well, I think the main thing to remember is that people who go and work in war zones, they're not saviors. They're just ordinary people who are looking to help other ordinary people who are going through some really unfortunate times.

And I think it's a great privilege to be able to travel to countries that are in these situations and to be able to try and assist in whatever way you can and to interact in those countries when most people only see more sensationalized news media.

COX: Did you happen, by chance, to know any of the Americans who were unfortunately killed?

Ms. BUCKLEY: No, I don't.

COX: All right. Here's a phone call we're going to take. This is Jim(ph) from Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Jim, welcome to TALK OF THE NATION.

JAKE (Caller): Yeah, hi there. I was just listening to your show, and it brought back a lot of bad memories when I was deployed over in Afghanistan. And I've just got to say, most of these people, I mean, they do request, and then we have to do some type of force protection, when we already didn't have the manpower to do it.

And mind, it's just been a couple years ago since I've been deployed there, but they always go under the auspice of the fact that oh, we're going out there, but oh, we're not a religious organization. And then the second we turn our back, when we're securing the perimeter, they're handing out little pieces of the New Testament.

And you have to understand this, is that even though the Taliban, we consider them fanatical, they've been doing this for thousands of years. We just don't consider this with modern day. Well, I've got news for you. Afghanistan is not modern day. As a matter of fact, there have been more incidents of these workers dying. This has been the most public one.

But there's been a ton of incidents where these people go in there, and they believe they're going to be protected by the great might of Jesus, and I'll tell you this: Jesus left Afghanistan just like the Mongols

did and everybody else.

Hell, these guys beat the Russians, and I'll tell you this, maybe one day they'll beat us, not now...

COX: Jake, thank you for that. He raised some interesting questions before he sort of went in some other directions, one of which I want to go back to, which is the interaction between the military and the civilians, the NGOs such as yourself.

Is there a disconnect between the military and a suspicion on the part of even the American forces, that some who are involved in NGO activity are proselytizing or putting the whole strategy, the war strategy, at risk by their very presence? Do you sense that at all?

Ms. BUCKLEY: I would say that making those kind of very broad, sweeping statements can be quite dangerous. When I was there, I never came across any people who were there in a religious capacity, and I was there for 14 months.

And even in the case of the workers who were recently killed, it wasn't proven that they were with a religious organization, or at least the British woman, it was never said by her family that she had religious ties and that was why she was there.

I think this is something used to perhaps delegitimize people's activities. In terms of a disconnect between internationals and the national population, from what I've seen, I would definitely say no. The majority of organizations that are there have very clear mandates why they're there, very clear activities and goals, and they stick to those.

COX: All right, we're going to continue the conversation. We are talking about the risk civilian humanitarian workers take on when working in a war zone. Are you a former humanitarian worker? If so, call us, tell us your story, 800-989-8255. The email address, talk@npr.org. I'm Tony Cox. It is TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

(Soundbite of music)

COX: This is TALK OF THE NATION. I'm Tony Cox in Washington.

The recent deaths of 10 humanitarian workers in northern Afghanistan underscored the dangers civilians face trying to bring assistance to people in warzones.

Today, we talk about the perils that these aid workers face in Afghanistan. Our guests are Joanna Buckley, a research analyst for Peace Dividend Trust, a nonprofit organization working with humanitarian operations around the world. And in a few moments, we will be joined by Sam Worthington, president and CEO of Interaction, one of the largest coalitions of U.S.-international nongovernmental organizations.

If you would like to join the conversation, tell us what dangers you have faced doing humanitarian work. Tell us your story. Our number here in Washington, 800-989-8255. The email address is talk@npr.org. And you can join the conversation at our website. Go to npr.org, and click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Well, as we said, joining us now is Sam Worthington. He is president and CEO of Interaction, one of the largest coalitions of U.S.-based international nongovernmental organizations. He joins us here in Studio 3A in Washington. Sam, nice to have you.

Mr. SAM WORTHINGTON (President and Chief Executive Officer, Interaction): Good afternoon.

COX: So you heard the caller, Jim(ph) I think it was, angry and talked about some of the stereotypes and suspicions that he, at least, felt as part of the military, dealing with NGOs in Afghanistan in particular.

Before we get into the broader scope of this, is that an issue? Is the perception a problem issue for those in the military versus those who are there voluntarily working in these NGOs?

Mr. WORTHINGTON: I think there's a good degree of dialogue between the NGO community and the military at the senior level. And we've established guidelines and principles with the Department of Defense that enables the international nonprofit community and the military to not work closely together, to provide a space, a neutral space for the NGO community to operate.

I think one thing to take into account is many of these organizations have been working in Afghanistan for 20 to 30 years. They are well-established with local populations. They were there in many ways during the Taliban and will continue to be there for years to come.

COX: Tell us a little bit about what you do. Is this an umbrella organization, Interaction?

Mr. WORTHINGTON: Yeah, we provide a secretariat function for the international, U.S. international NGO community. We have working groups on Afghanistan, Pakistan, Haiti, other places, that focus on the coordination of our community, its relationship to the U.S. military, the U.N. and the broader role we play as part of - an important part of the international humanitarian community.

COX: This is dangerous work. What are the safety protocols?

Mr. WORTHINGTON: It is critical that this really is professional work. These humanitarian organizations have been around for decades. They have security risk assessments that they undertake. You know when it is safe to go across town, which valley to engage in.

But most of the security that comes to the NGO community comes through the fact that we are integrated with and part of the local population. It is that ability to be an extension of the local population with clear security protocols in place that allow you to take measured risks, though of course, sadly, we can't always get it right.

COX: Now, the situation that made headlines here, with the death of the 10 workers, including six Americans, was that, from your perspective, as someone who knows about NGOs worldwide, was that an anomaly or was that something that could have been anticipated and expected?

Mr. WORTHINGTON: Well, sadly, every year, about 260 humanitarian workers are killed. Many are from banditry and so forth. This, the scale of this killing and the number of expatriates killed, Americans and others, is very large.

Sadly, we have seen the concerted targeting of different NGOs in areas of Pakistan over the last three to four years. But in general, unfortunately, it tends to be local national staff who are killed. But in many ways, you're really talking about tens of thousands of staff in Afghanistan functioning, the ability of the NGO to operate below the radar with the acceptance of different armed groups is the crucial security dimension that they need to function.

COX: Let me ask this, before I bring Joanna back in, because Joanna Buckley made it clear that her group is one that has no religious ties, which was not the case, necessarily, with the Americans who were killed, although they insist they were not there proselytizing.

How do you, as an organization, as an umbrella for NGOs, how do you tell them -and do you tell folks, that you need to make it clear that you are not proselytizing, and you need to do that by perhaps either not carrying a Bible, not talking about religion or making sure that whatever it is you do is completely nonsecular?

Mr. WORTHINGTON: I mean, first, we think the overall claim that this was based on proselytizing is baseless. We do, as Interaction, have very clear guidelines about non-proselytizing for our faith groups, whether it be Islamic relief or a group focused a Jewish group or Christian group.

These are professional organizations that have no interest whatsoever in stirring things up, particularly in rough areas. They want to be there and have been there for decades. So it is your acceptance by the local population, the fact that people know and trust you.

In the case of this group, it was widely advertised that they were traveling through the area. You want to be known for what you're doing, and you have no interest in challenging local culture in such a way that you'd put people at risk.

COX: Joanna Buckley, you were there for 14 months in Afghanistan, correct?

Ms. BUCKLEY: That's correct.

COX: Why did you stay that long, and why did you come home when you came home, which I suppose is really two sides of the same question.

Ms. BUCKLEY: Sure. Well, the reason I went there was because I was so interested in the organization. And the reason I stayed was because I perceived it as being so effective on the ground and that it was so accepted by the local population and was something that was very, very strongly supported by the business community.

And I think, in essence, unless you have a job there that you are really passionate about and that you're very motivated within, you wouldn't go there in the first place.

I'm still with the same organization. So I didn't leave because I wasn't happy in my current role. It was that I got a promotion, and I came back in order to do that because it was in a different field office.

COX: In the time that you were there, did anyone in your organization or who was doing work similar to what your organization is doing, was anyone hurt or captured or killed?

Ms. BUCKLEY: No.

COX: Now that seems, Sam, to be good news, obviously. Why can't it be why is it not being replicated? Why are some being killed and some are not?

Mr. WORTHINGTON: I mean, if you look at the U.S. international NGO community, it's roughly 120,000 staff around the world. You know, sadly two years ago, it was about 43 individuals within that community were killed.

There is a real concerted attempt by these organizations to manage their security protocols. These organizations have adopted minimum security standards. There's a partnership with the U.N., something called Saving Lives Together, to work closely with the U.N. to establish security norms.

Sadly, the world is becoming a more dangerous place for humanitarian workers. And this, the core concept of neutrality, of focusing on human well-being, on local dignity of the local population, can at times be challenged by different armed groups who see these humanitarian workers who are primarily, in our case, 99 percent local individuals that are a threat to them.

COX: Joanna, when you went to Afghanistan, did your views of what was occurring there, including, and particularly including the war, did they change from prior to your arriving in Afghanistan to something different once you were there?

Ms. BUCKLEY: Absolutely. I mean, how could they not? You get such a completely one-dimensional view when you read, watch the news on Afghanistan. And when you're there, you realize that's a country like any other, insomuch as people get up, they go to work, they try and support their families. In the evening, they cook food.

So I think you see a much more human side of the country when you've actually gone there and lived there and made friends there.

COX: Do you become more conflicted?

Ms. BUCKLEY: More conflicted about whether or not we should be there?

COX: The war, yes.

Ms. BUCKLEY: I think you question a lot more the type of stories that are shown, what stories aren't shown, and there's a lot more discussion about it by the very nature of the country that you're living in.

COX: All right, let's take another call. This is Ruby(ph) in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Ruby, welcome to TALK OF THE NATION.

RUBY (Caller): Thanks for taking my call.

COX: You're welcome.

RUBY: I've been in Afghanistan three or four times. I'm an aid worker. I have been for many years. I'm about to go back to Afghanistan shortly, and I just wanted to share a little bit about my impressions when I was there.

COX: Please do.

RUBY: Two things, on the military and on people who are with humanitarian workers who are with faith-based organizations. I think both of them sometimes can, with the best of intentions, do quite a lot of harm. In particular in Afghanistan, with the development of the so-called PRTs, the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, we suddenly had lots and lots of military out of uniform doing humanitarian work such as building schools and hospitals and such.

When you have NGOs also doing similar work, and we're now indistinguishable visibly to the local

population, that was a huge point of contention for those of us in the NGO world.

COX: Well, hold on. Hold on. Don't go anywhere. I'm not hanging up on you. I want to get Sam to respond to that because I think you're raising a very key point. And what about that, Sam?

Mr. WORTHINGTON: I mean, this actually gets to the point I made earlier about guidelines between the U.S. military and the international NGO community. The U.S. military has accepted guidelines where it will not go out of uniform and distribute aid.

The challenge is to ensure that those guidelines are implemented down through the captains and lower within the ranks because this concern of confusion of roles is a critical one and has been accepted by the U.S. Department of Defense as a key distinguishing factor, so that they should not be out of uniform, armed, delivering aid precisely because it provides a degree of confusion with the NGO community.

COX: Did you feel, Ruby, that you were more at risk as a result of that?

RUBY: Absolutely. Several of my colleagues were killed. I lost more than a few friends and colleagues there, and even our beneficiaries. I work primarily with refugees returning and with people internally displaced. And even with the children, you know, the soldiers have this habit of throwing candy out the windows of their vehicles, which brings little kids running towards armored vehicles. And that's great when they're in the mood to throw candy.

But when they're on a mission and there's a big sign, actually, in English that says, you know, if you come within X meters, you will be fired upon. We've got little kids running up to these vehicles because they think they're going to get candy and they get run over or they get hurt. And so there's all these kinds of things that people do with good intentions that really can backfire in a big way.

COX: Ruby, thank you very much for that call. It raises another question for me, Sam, that I'd like to ask you, which is this: In terms of going into an area, it's one thing in terms of dealing with the United States military and the complications that can arise, as we've already heard. But what about negotiating with the people who are already there once you get there about the ability to move around and not be killed?

Mr. WORTHINGTON: I think the first thing to realize is that the face of most of these U.S. nonprofits is very much a local national face. So what you're - your first engagement with the community is through individuals from that community working with you. It is building trust over time. It implies a dialogue to understand the signals that are being sent by armed group, to be very clear that your purpose is agricultural production or schools or health services. So you're very transparent, open as to who you are and what you're doing and the fact you're neutral. If there are signals that they don't want you there, you then back out.

But what happens most of the time is that there is an acceptance, even in very difficult areas, for NGOs to operate in an appropriate manner, as long as they are focused exclusively on a humanitarian or well-being mission.

COX: You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

I want to follow this up, Sam Worthington, with another question.

By the way, this is TALK OF THE NATION. 800-989-8255 is the phone number if you'd like to join the

conversation. The email address is talk@npr.org. We'd like to hear from people who have either been in Afghanistan, who have been humanitarian workers outside of the United States.

The question that I have for you is - I'm trying to figure out the best way to say this. As a person who has an overview of NGOs in general, do you find that there are those that are well-organized and professional and who are there doing what they say they are going to do, and are there others who are there who are not so well-organized, who are not so professional and who may not be doing what they claim that they are there to do?

Mr. WORTHINGTON: I think one of the challenges we face, and this is, you know, the 21st century, we saw this in Haiti, is a human outpouring, desire to make a difference in the world from all sorts of different groups. The more challenging the environment - we saw this in Chad with some unfortunate incidents around children. The more challenging the environment, the more you have to know what you're doing.

And there tends to be a winnowing process because you really have to think twice before you go in different areas. But to a large extent, those organizations operating, whether it's the Fatah area of Pakistan, Afghanistan, areas of Darfur, our organizations that have well-established professional records and know how to get to these places. The individuals that show up or organizations of limited experience are taking a significant risk, not only for themselves but they also put other organizations at risk as well.

COX: We have time to take maybe another call. We'll try to squeeze two if we can. Here's the first one. This is David(ph) from Michigan. David, welcome.

DAVID (Caller): Yes, thank you. I agree with many of the comments that two of the callers have mentioned. I spent a year and a half in Iraq. I'm actually heading to Afghanistan in about a month for work with an NGO. My wife just returned from there working for an NGO.

And I think, you know, some of the points that are being made, I guess, in terms of the, you know, the effectiveness of NGOs and the safety issues, you know, goes back its really critical to know that, you know, it's so important to follow the security procedures and - you know, have, you know, good security folks that you're hiring to work with you there in the country. Not following that puts yourselves at risk, but also puts your Afghani or your local counterparts at extreme risk and that's really irresponsible for a lot of people to do.

And, you know, some of the NGOs that go over, you know, there's a lot of money being spent there and, you know, some of them, you know, are chasing the money unless, you know, want to cheap it up on the things they do. And sometimes they do that with security. And that's - I had a colleague of mine killed in Iraq. He was a best mate of mine. And, you know, that was not out of any lack of security its just lack out of - it was the luck of the draw or lack of the draw, I guess, that we all took when we were there traveling. But...

COX: All right, David, thank you. I've got to stop you only because we're running out of time and I want to be able to get one quick word in with you, Sam and Joanna, if possible. Is the situation for NGOs in Afghanistan worse than it was in a place like Iraq?

Mr. WORTHINGTON: Again, it depends where you are in each country. One thing to make just to the caller's point, I think we need to make distinction between NGOs and contractors that work. And it really does come down to, do you have a policy on acceptance, on avoidance of conflict? How do you

approach your protection? What is the deterrence you're using? You need to go into this with eyes wide open and understanding the security risks you're taking.

COX: Unfortunately, Joanna, we've run out of time and I can't get your answer in, I apologize for that.

Sam Worthington is president and CEO of Interaction, one of the largest alliances of U.S.-based international nongovernmental organizations. He joined us here in Studio 3A. Joanna Buckley is a research analyst for Peace Dividend Trust, a nonprofit organization working with humanitarian operations around the world. She joined us from New York City.

Next, we talk to author Vali Nasr, who writes about the Muslim faith and consumerism. Tell us how you observe the holy month of Ramadan. Give us a call. I'm Tony Cox. It's TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

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david bockoven (davy_B) wrote:

Thank you, Tony. I still look forward to hearing a report about whether a Bible in Dari language was or was not present.

Tue Aug 10 15:31:40 2010

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david bockoven (davy_B) wrote: