HUMANITARIAN ACADEMY · HUMANITAIRES JOBS

Mini MBA Security and Risk Management: protecting teams and maintaining access

Course handout · Week 7 : Managing a crisis: crisis management team, hibernation, relocation, evacuation, kidnapping

A programme of exactly 3 months (12 weeks, 144 hours) to manage the security and risks of a humanitarian organisation: duty of care, context analysis, risk assessment, plans and procedures, acceptance and access negotiation, incidents, crisis management and kidnapping, staff health and wellbeing, digital security and data protection, organisational risks and compliance, risk sharing with partners, governance and business continuity. Corrected numerical exercises, three monthly exams with case studies, and a verifiable diploma from the Humanitarian Academy.

https://humanitairejobs.org/en/academy/mini-mba-securite-risques/semaine-7/

Free document from the Humanitarian Academy. It may be printed and shared freely for training purposes, without modification.

Week 7 : Managing a crisis: crisis management team, hibernation, relocation, evacuation, kidnapping

Objectives

- Organise a crisis management team and its first hours: roles, information, decisions, log.
- Plan and decide on hibernation, relocation or evacuation, including for national staff.
- Know the principles of managing a kidnapping or detention and the role of each person.

What is a crisis?

A **crisis** is a situation that seriously threatens people, the organisation's ability to function or its reputation, and that goes beyond ordinary procedures: kidnapping, violent death, attack on a base, evacuation from a country, a disaster affecting staff, a serious scandal.

Crisis management relies on a structure prepared in advance:

- **Crisis management team** (at headquarters or regional level): decides the strategy, mobilises resources, manages relations with families, authorities, donors and the media.
- **Incident management team** (at country level): manages the situation on the ground and implements decisions.

This separation allows the field to concentrate on action while the crisis management team manages the environment and strategic decisions. Both must have written terms of reference, designated members and alternates, and have carried out at least one simulation exercise.

The first hours

The first hours often determine the outcome of a crisis. Typical action list:

- **Activate** the team according to the agreed criteria; appoint a lead and a secretary who keeps the **crisis log** (time, information, source, decision, person responsible).
- **Establish the facts**: distinguish what is confirmed, probable, rumour.
- **Protect people**: move the rest of the staff to safety, medical assistance, regrouping.
- **Inform** families (through a designated person), staff and senior management; control external communication (no public comment without a decision by the crisis management team).
- **Take** urgent **decisions**: security level, suspension of activities, movements.
- **Plan** the next hours and the handovers: a crisis can last for weeks, and fatigue is a risk.

> The crisis log is not a formality: it keeps a record of decisions, protects the organisation legally and avoids repeating the same discussions at every handover.

Hibernation, relocation, evacuation

Three options when the situation deteriorates, described in the security plan:

- **Hibernation**: staying in place, gathered in a safe location, until the immediate danger passes (fighting in the town, riots). It requires stocks (water, food, fuel, medicines), communications and a decision on the maximum duration.
- **Relocation**: moving some of the staff to a safer area within the same country (capital, another region), generally the most exposed or non-essential staff.
- **Evacuation**: getting staff out of the country. For international staff, this often means returning to their home country; for national staff, evacuation out of the country is legally and practically complex, and rarely possible.

The **point of no return**: beyond a certain moment (airport closed, roads cut), evacuation is no longer possible. You must therefore decide **early**, on the basis of indicators, rather than waiting for certainty.

Evacuation calculation. 46 people to relocate by a 12-seat aircraft; 2 seats reserved for airline staff and communications equipment: 10 usable seats per rotation. 5 rotations are needed. If each rotation takes 3 hours and the airstrip closes at nightfall, only 3 rotations can be made per day: 2 days at least. The priority list (most exposed people, sick people, non-essential staff) is drawn up in advance.

National staff in crises

National staff are often the most exposed and the least protected during crises. Good practice:

- Discuss in advance with each staff member their own risks (profile, place of origin, family) and the realistic options.
- Provide **internal relocation** options for those who are threatened because of their employment.
- Guarantee **continuity of salaries** in the event of suspension (salary advances before an evacuation, remote payment methods).
- Maintain **contact** and support after international staff have left.
- Do not transfer responsibility for programmes to national staff or partners without resources or agreement, thereby exposing those who remain.

Example. Before an evacuation, an organisation pays a three-month salary advance to its 60 national staff, sets up a daily call tree, and agrees a simple protocol with them: no activity is maintained without an assessment and the agreement of each person, and no staff member keeps organisational assets that would put them in danger.

Kidnapping and detention

Kidnapping is one of the most serious and longest-lasting crises. Generally accepted principles (to be adapted to each organisation's policy and the applicable law):

- **Prevention**: analysis of exposed profiles, low profile, varied routes and timings, control of published information (including staff social media).
- **Preparation**: a written policy (including the organisation's position on ransoms, which varies between organisations and laws), confidential "proof of life" forms completed in advance by exposed staff (questions to which only the person knows the answer), specialist insurance where appropriate, specialist consultants identified.
- **Management**: a dedicated crisis management team, strictly controlled communication, coordination with the family and, depending on the case, with the authorities and governments concerned, support from specialists.
- **Afterwards**: long-term medical and psychological support for the released person and their family, as well as for colleagues.

Arbitrary detention by authorities or armed groups requires a rapid reaction: locate the person, contact the authorities, legal support, visits if possible, inform the family.

Practising and learning lessons

A crisis management team that has never practised loses precious hours. **Exercises** range from a discussion around a scenario (a 2- to 3-hour tabletop exercise) to a full simulation with real-time information injects.

A good exercise tests: activation (who calls whom, and how quickly), allocation of roles, flow of information, keeping of the log, difficult decisions (for example: whether or not to inform the media, evacuate or hibernate), and handover.

A simple indicator. Time to activate the crisis management team: target under 2 hours. During an exercise, the alert is given at 22:00; the first member is reached at 22:20, and the full team meets at 00:45: 2 hours 45 minutes, beyond the target. Cause: the contact list was out of date and two alternates had not been designated. Action: quarterly update of the list, alternates appointed, monthly call test.

After any real crisis, a **review** (after at least a few weeks) examines what worked and what needs to change, with the same learning culture as for incidents.

Exercise: the town is surrounded

Situation. Fighting is approaching a town where the organisation has 8 international staff and 54 national staff, 12 of whom come from another region and are threatened because of their ethnic group. The airport is still operating; a 14-seat aircraft (12 usable seats) can make 2 rotations a day to the capital. 4 out of 6 indicators of the "encirclement" scenario are present. The road to the capital is cut. The stocks at the main residence allow 5 days of hibernation for 20 people.

Task. 1) Hibernate, relocate or evacuate, and for whom? 2) How many days are needed to relocate the priority people by air? 3) What measures for the national staff who remain?

Answer. 1) With 4 indicators out of 6 and a road cut, the point of no return is approaching: relocate the most exposed people to the capital now (the 12 threatened staff members, with their agreement) together with non-essential international staff; keep a small essential team only if hibernation is possible and safe. 2) Priority people: 12 threatened staff + 8 international staff = 20 people, i.e. 2 rotations of 12 seats, possible in 1 day. If dependants of the threatened staff are added (for example 16 people), 36 people = 3 rotations, i.e. 2 days. 3) A salary advance of several months, daily contact through a call tree, no activity maintained without assessment and agreement, removal of organisational assets that could expose them, clear information on the options and psychological support; a plan to resume as soon as the situation allows.

Key takeaways

- Crisis management team (strategy, environment) and field team (action): terms of reference, alternates, exercises.
- First hours: activate, establish the facts, protect, inform, decide, plan; keep a log.
- Hibernate, relocate, evacuate: decide before the point of no return, on the basis of indicators.
- National staff, often the most exposed, are entitled to real options and support.
- Kidnapping: prevention, written policy, proof of life prepared, controlled communication, specialists.

Quiz

1. 30 people to relocate, aircraft with 10 usable seats. Number of rotations:
   A. 2
   B. 30
   C. 4
   D. 3

2. Hibernation of 15 people for 8 days at 4 litres of water per person per day:
   A. 120 litres
   B. 32 litres
   C. 480 litres
   D. 600 litres

3. The crisis log is mainly used to:
   A. Inform the media
   B. Keep a record of information and decisions, and facilitate handovers
   C. Appraise staff
   D. Calculate costs

4. Why prepare "proof of life" forms in advance?
   A. To verify, in the event of a kidnapping, that the person is alive, using questions to which only they know the answer
   B. For health insurance
   C. For visas
   D. For human resources

5. A crisis management team meets 3 hours 10 minutes after the alert, against a target of 2 hours. Priority action:
   A. Remove the target
   B. Do nothing, it was an exercise
   C. Change director
   D. Update contacts, designate alternates and test regularly

Quiz answers : 1. D · 2. C · 3. B · 4. A · 5. D