In the parlance of aid agencies, protection is distinct from assistance. Where assistance takes the form of the provision of raw commodities (food) or services (healthcare attention), protection refers to something more subtle: helping local populations avoid being targeted for persecution or attacks. The core concept is to prevent any displaced population from being killed or harmed during or immediately after an emergency. Longer-term protection roles also arise for populations that have been interned, displaced for extended periods, or for those that may permanently alienated from their home after war or genocide.

In this regard, protection also has a distinct meaning from security. When aid agencies refer to security they are more often referring to either the personnel security (from harm) of their staff (international and local), or referring to military security, as in peacekeeping, to quell overall violence and banditry in general. Sometimes security refers to the guarding of aid itself, as with armed security guards. The boundary between these two concepts is not always easy to define. In practical terms, protection is what civilian agencies do, security is what armed guards and military forces do.

Protection implies action—doing something to stop or reduce a genocide, massacres, or systematic rape. Increasingly in the community of NGOs, a sense has grown that each agency has an unavoidable responsibility to report what it observes, which often means to report to external authorities, the UN, western governments, or the news media.

Most humanitarian aid agencies do not characterize or advertise their work as protection, even if they deliver protection as an ancillary aspect of their operations. For example, although IRC, IMC, Relief International, World Vision, and dozens of traditional aid NGOs focus on food, water, and health care, they also provide protection through their presence, observation, and reporting. Their very presence of expatriate doctors deters persecution of many local populations. And NGOs informally share observations with journalists, or host journalists to observe for themselves. Yet, the same NGOs rarely advertise these forms of protection as their main work.166

166 The best review of how NGOs have pioneered field-level practical protection mechanisms is in Diane Paul, Protection in Practice: Field-Level Strategies for Protecting Civilians from Deliberate Harm (London: Overseas Development Institute, 1999)
In the same situations, they may refer to their protection work when they hire protection monitors (often lawyers) to do only protection work. Some operational NGOs, such as Medicins sans Frontieres (MSF, or Doctors without Borders) speak out on abuses they observe frequently. For MSF, public voice and medical assistance are both core goals of their work.

Another set of NGOs who recognize protection as a central basis of their work are human rights organizations. That is, they monitor and report on human rights problems as their main activity. These groups do not deliver any direct services (food, water, and so on) to local populations. These include NGOs that emphasize voice over aid, who publish reports, meet directly with leaders and policymakers, and speak out through the media.

Several of the agencies best known in the United States and very involved in defining policy debates in Washington, DC, include the following:

- Amnesty International (AI)
- Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement
- Human Rights Watch (HRW)
- Human Rights First (formerly the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights)
- Physicians for Human Rights (PHR)
- Refugees International
- U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)

One group that focuses on research publication attempts to protect civilians by reducing the stocks and flows of light weaponry in developing countries. The Small Arms Survey is an independent research group, based in Geneva, that publishes an annual survey about the problems and solutions to small arms.

A third, smaller, category of NGOs seek to provide protection not through advocacy, nor through assistance, but purely through presence and accompaniment. One is Peace Brigades International (PBI), which deploys unarmed volunteers, committed to nonviolence, to zones of conflict and persecution, including Nepal, Indonesia, and Colombia. Peace Brigades has headquarters in London and in Washington DC. A similar NGO focused only on local protection work, accompanies local leaders threatened with persecution, including indigenous human rights monitors is Nonviolent Peaceforce, which has offices in Minneapolis and Brussels.\footnote{Liam Mahoney and Enrique Eguren, \textit{Unarmed Bodyguards: International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights} (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 1997)}

\section*{Differing Interpretations of Protection}

Protection for the local civilian populations in emergencies is a long-standing and basic element of humanitarian law: civilians and all those not taking part in the fighting must on no account be attacked and must instead be spared and protected. The 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional...
Protocols contain specific rules to protect civilians. In situations that are not covered by these treaties, internal disturbances in particular, civilians are conferred protection by other international bodies of law, notably human rights law, national laws compatible with international laws, and the principle of humanity.

The field of humanitarian protection has evolved and grown over the past decade. Although protection actors have come to no agreement on the overlapping elements of human rights, justice, equality, international humanitarian law, common law, peace, war-crimes trials and enforcement of protection, many definitions and an understanding of responsible protection programming have been reached: for example, the ICRC’s Professional standards for protection work, the Australian NGO Consortium’s Minimum Agency Standards for Incorporating Protection into Humanitarian Response, and SPHERE.

Several key civilian agencies view protection as being composed primarily of observing or documenting human rights abuses in the field and then reporting—arguing with governmental authorities, sometimes in outrage. Other NGOs add to this a list of other practical activities that can be undertaken to protect the displaced.

The following are examples of protection activities:

- Legal action or lobbying or enjoining a government to allow asylum-seekers to stay in a country—that is, to not be forcibly returned to the country they fled where, if returned, they might be killed. This would be an example of reference to refugee conventions and the principle of nonrefoulement. In more recent years, many of those human rights groups that had focused their attentions on refugees have shifted to give equal attention to internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had long been neglected.
- Advocacy and lobbying by groups like Human Rights Watch, asking warring factions not to fire weapons (such as mortars) into civilian population areas, which would be a violation of the laws of war and Geneva Conventions.
- Generating international attention to attacks on civilians in the hopes of stopping killings through international embarrassment or by the intercession of governments. For example, if an advocacy group like Refugees International calls attention to extrajudicial killings Afghanistan, or rape as an instrument of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, they expect that the media highlight or attention will compel armed killers to back off.
- Providing refugees with some form of personal identification so that each refugee can reclaim some legal status or record that will help them achieve some rights as a citizen, perhaps later when returning home, an activity many agencies helped with, for example, when Kosovars fled to Albania in 1999 during the war with Serbia.
- Helping smuggle populations in danger out of areas where they are being persecuted, a common activity of protection groups working with Jews during World War II and with the underground railroad before and during the U.S. Civil War.
• Creating and enforcing safe areas where civilians will not be targeted is a common tactic, often unsuccessful. Aid agencies help displaced families in Sri Lanka in these open assistance camps, in enclaves in Bosnia, and in IDP camps in Burundi and Rwanda.

• Reporting rights violations as part of public health monitoring. For example, the American Refugee Committee, in charge of health surveillance for the Cambodian refugees in Thailand (in the largest camp, Kao I Dang), added physical violence to their list of reportable health events, allowing aid agencies and authorities to begin to track down and reduce cases of political persecution within refugee communities. In more recent years, physicians have become important in speaking out against torture.

• Just being there. Aid agencies have an enormous indirect impact on local protection when they live and work among emergency-affected populations. Just before he was killed in Chechnya, Fred Cuny called on more NGOs to join him there, pointing out that expatriate presence in Grozny, by itself, had kept the Russians from aerial bombing. Cuny was concerned about the less-mobile, urban-based elderly who would have been killed. The NGO he founded, the Cuny Center, promotes an innovative strategy for improving the readiness of communities to cope with targeted violence, called preparedness support, led by the American Casey Barrs (see http://www.cunycenter.org/Activities).

Civilian aid organizations often strive to defend their humanitarian space, by which they mean their ability to reach populations in need without compromise by affiliations with military or political forces. Thus, for NGOs and other organizations, their ability to protect local populations frequently requires them—as they see it—to keep their distance from combatants, whether U.S. armed forces or regional security forces.

### International and Other Organizations that Lead in Protection

A protection response may involve a range of actors, including legal, security, and humanitarian organizations. Although governmental actors remain the primary duty bearers in protecting civilian populations, other organizations have been mandated to assume certain protection roles, such as country-specific peacekeeping operations with protection mandates.

Other organizations, including the ICRC, OHCHR, UNHCR, and UNICEF, have protection mandates derived from a variety of sources including international treaties, the Statutes of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, and UN General Assembly resolutions.

The ICRC’s mission is, on the basis of the Geneva Conventions and protocols, to protect and assist victims of armed conflict and those affected by internal disturbances or tension. This includes the following:

• visiting and interviewing, without witness, prisoners of war, and detained or interned civilians;
• searching for missing persons;
• transmitting messages between family members separated by conflict, including from prisoners of war and detained civilians;
• working to reunify dispersed families;
• providing basic health-care services;
• providing urgently needed food, water, sanitation and shelter to civilians without access to these basic necessities;
• monitoring compliance with and helping develop international humanitarian law; and
• spreading knowledge of international humanitarian law.

The ICRC is known—and sometimes criticized—for its confidential approach to dealing with sensitive issues, such as its work in places of detention. The ICRC maintains, however, that discreet dialogue is key to protecting and assisting those affected by conflict. Confidentiality allows the ICRC to build trust, open channels of communication, and influence change. Discretion also has its limits, and the ICRC reserves the right to speak out, publish findings, or stop working in exceptional cases. For example, if a detaining authority issues excerpts from a confidential report without consent, the ICRC reserves the right to publish the entire report to prevent inaccurate or incomplete interpretations of its observations and recommendations. Similarly, if after repeated requests, prisoners continue to be mistreated or the ICRC is prevented from working according to its operating procedures, it may suspend detainee visits or other operations and publicly explain the reasons.

Whereas the ICRC is frequently the lead organization promoting protection for populations caught within conflict zones, UNHCR tends to be the lead in assisting those populations who have fled conflict and crossed an international border. It too demarches, meets with governments, reminds authorities about their treaty obligations, and provides direct observation and presence for refugees. Historically, UNHCR has divided its work into the two categories of assistance (most of their budget, for shelter, camp management, water, education, and the like) and protection. Of these two, although assistance dominates in their budget, protection has always dominated as their reason for existing. Thus, UNHCR fields protection officers to more areas than assistance.

UNICEF describes its work as rooted in concepts of protection. UNICEF works in more countries in the world than almost any other agency, both in development and in emergencies. They promote the protection of children from harm in active conflict areas through the safety of schools. They also frequently seek to protect civilians from land-mine injuries through education.

In principle, the Office of the (United Nations) High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) ought to be a leader in mobilizing protection. They convene meetings, do field research, and sometimes deploy field monitors to provide protection, as in Rwanda 1995 and 1996. But they are not well funded to be operational in this area.
Shortfalls

NGOs have been prominent in bringing human rights abuses to international communication and news channels. But NGOs have been less effective at taking more practical actions in field locations—monitoring or negotiating security, or providing security with force.

For many U.S. NGOs, a challenge has been to find funding for field-level protection. Most donors, including USAID and foundations, are reluctant to fund protection-only activities, such as monitoring and accompaniment for several reasons: in part because it veers away from their assistance focus, in part because of liability (personnel being harmed) concerns, and in part because it’s often easier and more visible to fund groups that focus on publication and voice.

One useful example has been the militarization of many refugee camps. In numerous camps of refugees and IDPs in Pakistan, the Horn of Africa, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indochina, and Central America, the social structures, economics, and population movements are controlled by refugee and IDP leaders who exert their own credible threats over the refugees with the threat or use of force, often with bandit or gang-like groups.

Because refugee camps may exist for many years, armed factions in conflicts are able to draw on their populations for recruitment, allowing their military effort to survive or grow. Even when the warrior community lives apart from the women and children, the two groups remain linked. The refugee community provides a pool for recruitment, serves as a buffer population against attack, is a political symbol of the failure of the opposing faction, and legitimizes the warrior community. The Khmer Rouge army drove a large civilian population along with it when it retreated from Cambodia to the Thai border in 1979. Many among that population became refugees because they were so instructed and remained in exile for more than a decade because of the strategic needs of the Khmer Rouge warrior faction.\footnote{For a detailed account of the events that led to the Khmer Rouge setting up warrior camps in Thailand, see William Shawcross, The Quality of Mercy (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).} A more recent example is in the Darfur refugee camps in Chad where children are a target for recruitment by warring factions.

The challenge of persistent refugee warrior communities has not been solved by donors or the UN. Refugees (not combatants) have not been effectively disarmed in most crises. Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Somali refugees in Kenya remained heavily armed, though there were few threats to them while they were in these countries of asylum. The Rwandan Hutu refugees, in contrast, used their period of exile in Zaire (DRC) to rearm and retrain. In recent years, success stories of defusing warrior communities have come when political negotiations have included the leaders of each faction and peace accords have laid clear steps for demobilization and integration. Limited success has been seen in Mozambique, El Salvador, and South Africa. Even with peace agreements, however, demobilization and disarming may not succeed, as in southern Sudan.
Conclusion: A Few Protection NGOs

Five protection-oriented NGOs are profiled here and in annex 1. These are not specifically emergency-response NGOs, but are nonetheless active in emergencies in a variety of ways.

Human Rights Watch (HRW). Possibly the largest and most recognized of all agencies that report on human rights problems, HRW not only covers every country in the world, it also has specialized programs that track issues like landmines, arms trade, refugee asylum, torture, slavery, and the rule of law. The Human Rights Watch network grew out of Helsinki Watch, which was established as a mechanism to promote human rights across the Iron Curtain.

Amnesty International (AI). Because of its extensive networks of volunteer civilian groups (chapters) around the world, particularly the United States and England, Amnesty International is the best known reporting agency. Like HRW, AI does not specialize in large-scale crises, but has traditionally focused on smaller sets of prisoners of conscience—those jailed or tortured for their political views. As an extension of this work, AI has observed patterns and trends that tip them off to larger problems, growing refugee flows, and so on.

United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI). Based in Washington, DC, USCRI is best known for its annual survey—the World Refugee Survey—which tallies the numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons in each crisis around the world. USCRI advocates for the right to asylum and testifies before Congress to encourage funding for refugee protection and assistance. They release special reports from time to time. In recent years they have focused on the problem of warehousing refugees—that is, when refugees end up in isolated and closed camps for far too long, sometimes generations.

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR). Based in Boston, Physicians for Human Rights is an American NGO with a large network of concerned members, including chapters at numerous medical schools. More than other human rights groups are able to, they apply scientific methods of inquiry to document problems in crisis zones, for example, reporting on the numbers of unarmed civilians harmed in Palestine, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Darfur, Zimbabwe, Kosovo, or Rwanda. Along with the ICRC and the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, PHR catalyzed the international movement to ban landmines, which resulted in the landmine-ban treaty, for which it won the Nobel Peace Prize. PHR has developed a capacity for applying forensics in war zones, blending archaeology (unearthing graves) and forensic detective work to human rights documentation. PHR teams, among others, documented the numbers of people executed, found in mass graves in Kosovo and in Srebrenica, Bosnia. NOTE 167 [The world was aware, based on journalist research, that 7,000 men were killed in Srebrenica shortly after the massacre. PHR forensics research later provided more accurate data, that more than 8,000 had been killed.]

Cultural Survival. Like its British counterpart, Survival International, the Cambridge-Massachusetts-based Cultural Survival strives to protect small minority populations that many would label as ethnic
or tribal. It focuses particularly on indigenous groups that speak unique and endangered languages, are not well integrated into modern economies, and are ignored or persecuted by the governments of the countries where they live. Most of Cultural Survival's work is in the Andes, Amazon forest, Guatemala, West Africa, and South Pacific islands. It raises money from the public to run centers for local language and culture documentation and training. It is the operational extension of much of the academic research done by anthropology departments of universities. Cultural Survival is especially closely tied to Harvard University's Department of Anthropology and Museum of Anthropology. Its journal, the Cultural Survival Quarterly, appears on newsstands across the United States and deals with themes such as refugees, land-use rights, tourism, and conflict.