

## **Letter of 31 March 2026 from the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation to the House of Representatives on the government response to the advisory letter of the AIV and the CAVV on protecting aid workers in conflict situations**

During the parliamentary committee debate of 10 April 2025 concerning the Foreign Affairs Council, the House of Representatives asked the government to request that the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) and the Advisory Committee on Issues of Public International Law (CAVV) draft an advisory letter on impunity for violence against aid workers.<sup>1</sup> The request is a response to growing concerns in society and in parliament about the physical insecurity of aid workers, as demonstrated by recent motions, parliamentary questions and appeals from civil society.<sup>2</sup>

The AIV and the CAVV confirmed in their report of 12 March 2026<sup>3</sup> that there is every reason to be concerned. The government shares these concerns. The government fully endorses the norm that violence against aid workers is unlawful and unacceptable. The Netherlands wishes to affirm and defend that norm in cooperation with other states and with aid workers. Aid workers are protected under international humanitarian law (IHL). They must be able to do their work in safety. The Netherlands intends to step up its efforts to ensure that this is possible.

### **Violence against aid workers is part of a broader trend**

In March 2025, 15 aid workers were fired on and killed in Gaza, including eight aid workers from the Palestine Red Crescent. The vehicles and aid workers were subsequently buried under the rubble. In the war in Ukraine, aid workers have been targeted by the Russian army in 'double tap' attacks: attacks on aid workers who have rushed to the scene shortly after the initial strike. On 5 March 2026, Um Salama Mohammed Abdullah of the Sudanese Red Crescent was killed in a mortar attack while she was working at Al-Dilling hospital in South Kordofan. In Lebanon, too, several aid workers have been killed in lethal attacks in recent months.

These examples illustrate a broader trend. The number of fatalities among aid workers has risen dramatically in recent years. The figures show that 2024 was a low point, with no fewer than 631 attacks on aid workers, in which 385 were killed and 308 wounded, while 138 aid workers were kidnapped. Last year, there were 406 attacks against aid workers, in which 341 were killed, 195 wounded and 116 kidnapped.<sup>4</sup> Most of the victims were local aid workers. This undermining of IHL has grave consequences. It deprives people of life-saving assistance. And the more inhumanely war is waged, the more challenging the path to lasting peace.

The government therefore welcomes the advisory letter of the AIV and the CAVV, and is grateful for their acknowledgment that the Netherlands is already doing a great deal to protect aid workers and their encouragement to continue playing a leading role in this respect. The AIV and the CAVV observe that efforts to tackle impunity need to be stepped up. In this letter the government will focus primarily on efforts to strengthen and, where necessary, supplement the system for combating impunity. In response to the AIV and the CAVV's advisory letter, the government intends to further sharpen its focus on defending and upholding IHL. In addition, in the context of specific conflicts the government will work to employ targeted humanitarian diplomacy and mediation to ensure humane, impartial, neutral and independent humanitarian action. Lastly, the government intends to increase investment in the physical security of and psychosocial support for aid workers.

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<sup>1</sup> Motion 21 501-02 no. 3108, Sarah Dobbe *et al.*

<sup>2</sup> For example, the pre-election agreement 'Care professionals and aid workers aren't targets' ('*Zorgverleners geen doelwit*'), concluded by political parties and NGOs: <https://www.artsenzondergrenzen.nl/zorgverlenersgeendoelwit/>.

<sup>3</sup> AIV and CAVV (2026): Aid under Fire: Protecting aid workers in conflict situations.

<sup>4</sup> 2024 and 2025 data from the Aid Worker Security Database: <https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/>.

This government response is also in part a response to the motion submitted by MPs Sarah Dobbe *et al.* on 11 December 2025 (Parliamentary Paper 21 501-02, no. 3303) calling for the development of policy to combat violence against care practitioners and aid workers and the motion submitted by MP Suzanne Kröger on 14 January 2026 (Parliamentary Paper 36 180, no. 192) calling on the government to speak out in no uncertain terms either publicly or, where more effective, via humanitarian diplomacy against efforts to delegitimise and criminalise humanitarian organisations.

The trend towards increasing violence against aid workers must be reversed. That means that we must take collective action. If nothing changes, or if we remain silent about these developments, the blurring of norms will continue and humanitarian aid workers will be less and less able to carry out their neutral, life-saving work. This in turn will result in greater suffering among the most vulnerable in the most difficult situations.

The government will seek to hold those who violate IHL responsible for their actions, by means of investigation and trial or by means of sanctions on them as individuals, via existing mechanisms and procedures.

### **Enforcing norms and combating impunity**

The AIV and the CAVV take the view that the greatest risk to the safety and security of aid workers is the combination of declining respect for IHL and increasing attacks on aid workers on the one hand and, on the other, the inadequate international response to these developments. According to the AIV and the CAVV, the lack of response fosters impunity, not only within armed conflict, but also in other contexts. The government agrees with this assessment of the risk.

According to the AIV and the CAVV, there is still broad support for the humanitarian principles and IHL. In their view, the challenge lies in translating this support into concrete action on the diplomatic, financial and legal fronts, and individual states, the EU and the UN all have a role to play. The AIV and the CAVV urge the Netherlands to consistently call for investigations of violence against aid workers and to follow up on the findings of such investigations.

The government acknowledges that the multilateral system, in which a range of investigative mechanisms conduct investigations into and gather evidence of violence against aid workers, is struggling with capacity constraints and insufficient funding. The Netherlands will therefore work to increase the effectiveness of this system by drawing attention in the Human Rights Council to violence against aid workers, by continuing to invest in the human rights pillar of the UN to enable the existing mandates of rapporteurs and accountability mechanisms to operate effectively, and by encouraging as many states as possible to accede to the Ljubljana-The Hague Convention in order to strengthen international cooperation on investigation and prosecution of international crimes.

In the multilateral arena, the Netherlands played an active role in the development of recent UN resolutions on IHL and the protection of aid workers, including UN Security Council resolution 2730. The Netherlands also supports the Global Initiative to Galvanise Political Commitment to IHL,<sup>5</sup> backed by Brazil, China, France, Jordan, Kazakhstan and South Africa and the International Committee of the Red Cross and with more than 100 participant countries. In addition, in 2025 the Netherlands became one of the first countries to join the Australian Declaration for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel<sup>6</sup> and the affiliated Group of Friends for the Protection of Humanitarian Personnel, which comprises more than 110 states.

The government intends to use these partnerships to solidify international support for the humanitarian principles and IHL, as advised by the AIV and the CAVV, and to give fresh impetus to the investigation of violence against aid workers.

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<sup>5</sup> IHL stands for International Humanitarian Law.

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive list of all supporting countries, see the declaration website: <https://protect-humanitarian-personnel.org/list-signatories>.

### *International investigations*

Alleged international crimes committed against aid workers require thorough and independent investigation. Attacks that affected or targeted aid workers can be investigated by the International Criminal Court and a range of investigative mechanisms established by the UN Human Rights Council. The Netherlands therefore supports extending the mandate of relevant fact-finding missions and commissions of inquiry in the Human Rights Council. For example, in August 2025, the Netherlands joined the Core Group on the Sudan resolution at the UN Human Rights Council and supported efforts to extend the mandate of the fact-finding mission for the Sudan. When necessary and possible, the government joins partners and like-minded countries in calling for investigations of alleged violations of IHL.

Individual member states cannot address the capacity problems of these UN investigative mechanisms by making earmarked financial contributions to specific investigative bodies because that could jeopardise those bodies' independence and impartiality. The Netherlands is however supporting the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in accountability efforts with a contribution of €3.5 million over the period 2025-2027. With this funding, the Netherlands is providing support for, among other things, the work of the OHCHR Human Rights Inquiries Branch (HRIB). The HRIB works to strengthen and improve the capacity of the various UN investigative mechanisms in the interests of their investigations of human rights violations and/or international crimes.

The Netherlands also provides indirect support for a variety of international investigative mechanisms via the organisation Justice Rapid Response, which maintains a pool of experts who can be deployed to investigative bodies. An amount of €900,000 was contributed to this organisation in the 2024-2026 period. The Netherlands will step up its efforts to strengthen investigative capacity by continuing to support this organisation after 2026. An appeal will be made to the organisation regarding the importance of making its expertise available in order to fight impunity for international crimes against aid workers.

In 2026 the government intends to use freed up funds within the development cooperation budget to provide an additional €2.5 million in funding for the OHCHR Human Rights Inquiries Branch and others. The government will endeavour to continue these additional contributions in the years to follow.

In December 2025, the Netherlands, together with Australia, the Netherlands Red Cross, Médecins Sans Frontières Netherlands and Legal Action Worldwide, convened a session on combating impunity for attacks on humanitarian aid workers during the International Criminal Court's annual Assembly of States Parties. In the coming year, too, the Netherlands intends to draw attention to this topic in the context of the International Criminal Court, for example during the Assembly of States Parties.

### *Investigation and prosecution at national level*

The AIV and CAVV advisory letter also addresses investigation and prosecution at national level and the possible expansion of Dutch criminal law jurisdiction under the International Crimes Act (*Wet Internationale Misdriften*, WIM). They advise against enacting such an amendment. The motion submitted by MP Sarah Dobbe *et al.* (21 501-02 no. 3303) and adopted by the House in December 2025 called on the government to tighten up the WIM. The government is still considering this, and will therefore address the options for investigation and prosecution at national level, including efforts currently under way, at a later date.

### *Ljubljana-The Hague Convention*

The government agrees with the AIV and the CAVV that the entry into force of the Ljubljana-The Hague Convention on International Cooperation in the Investigation and Prosecution of the Crime of Genocide, Crimes against Humanity, War Crimes and other International Crimes<sup>7</sup> is of great importance in the fight against impunity, including for crimes committed against aid workers. The

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<sup>7</sup> Dutch Treaty Series 2024, 39.

government embraces this recommendation and will advocate rapid ratification of the convention by as many countries as possible worldwide. To that end, the plan is for Dutch embassies, together with other partners, to undertake demarches around the world in order to urge countries to accede to the convention. In addition, the Netherlands will organise specific sessions at relevant multilateral conferences, and will host an event during the Netherlands' presidency of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers in 2027. Lastly, the government will reserve resources in order to be able to offer technical and legal support to countries that need it for the purpose of ratification.

In the coming years, the Netherlands will continue to draw attention to the importance of this new convention as outlined above in its bilateral and multilateral relations. To finance the various initiatives in this area an amount of €0.5 million has been reserved from freed up funds within the development cooperation budget.

#### *EU sanctions against individuals*

In cases of large-scale and structural violence against aid workers, the AIV and the CAVV call for further-reaching measures from the EU, for example in the form of sanctions targeting individuals. In the government's view, this ties in well with the existing EU instruments aimed at combating violence against aid workers in order to bring about behavioural change in that respect. Sanctions that can be imposed on individuals include an entry ban, asset freezing and a ban on making funds or economic resources available to persons or entities on the sanctions list. In part through the advocacy of the Netherlands, the EU has already adopted sanctions in response to violence against aid workers and the blocking of humanitarian assistance in Sudan and the Palestinian Territories. In consultation with EU partners, the government will work actively on a proposal for a thematic sanctions package targeting those responsible for serious and large-scale violence against aid workers. In selecting cases, the point of departure is EU unity, and a broader assessment should be made of matters including legal feasibility, practical implications and potential unintended consequences, specifically the impact on humanitarian access and the flow of humanitarian funding.

#### *Humanitarian exceptions in sanctions regimes*

Thanks in part to the Netherlands' efforts, in recent years humanitarian exceptions have been incorporated in EU sanctions regimes, as a result of which all European sanctions regimes now include exceptions for humanitarian aid. In the government's view, humanitarian exemptions should always be provided for when sanctions are imposed.<sup>8</sup> This facilitates the flow of humanitarian funding, and ensures that humanitarian aid workers who operate in sanctioned areas are not criminally liable.

The government is continuing this work by pursuing further harmonisation of humanitarian exceptions in EU sanctions regimes. The Netherlands will also continue working to reduce overcompliance and de-risking in the private sector. This is because overcompliance and de-risking can jeopardise access, financial and otherwise, to areas in which aid organisations operate despite the existence of humanitarian exemptions. These kinds of problems are discussed in the Dutch Round Table on Financial Access for Non-Profit Organisations, an initiative that brings together banks, aid organisations and government bodies to work on practical solutions. Internationally, this round table is seen as a model<sup>9</sup> and the government will continue to participate.

### **Targeted humanitarian diplomacy**

In the view of the AIV and the CAVV, in addition to efforts to restore norms and combat impunity at global level, diplomatic action must be taken in response to individual country situations. That is the level at which violence is occurring and where existing norms are being undermined. It is also ultimately where humanitarian space and access are at stake. The AIV and the CAVV see an important role for the UN as coordinator and, above all, guardian of humanitarian standards and

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<sup>8</sup> For more information, see for example the letter to parliament 'Doing what is needed' (*Doen wat nodig blijft*), Parliamentary Paper 36 180, no. 136.

<sup>9</sup> Alderson & Fouad (2026): Improving Financial Access for Non-Profit Organisations. ODI Global & Humanitarian Policy Group.

humanitarian space at country level. They call for diplomatic support for the UN and, to that end, closer cooperation at EU level. The AIV and the CAVV refer to the precarious balance between calling actors to account and securing or maintaining humanitarian access.

The Netherlands will engage in humanitarian diplomacy, in the spirit of the government's intention to take a more ambitious approach to conflict mediation, as it previously shared with the House.<sup>10</sup> This spring the government will establish a Mediation Support Unit (*Adviesseenheid conflictbemiddeling*, MSU) within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support that work. The MSU will bring together experts from partner organisations and diplomats to initiate or facilitate diplomatic processes that contribute to principled humanitarian aid and the protection of aid workers in specific contexts, such as Ukraine, Sudan, South Sudan, the DRC, Syria, Yemen and Myanmar.

This support unit will work with the Netherlands' existing partners in the area of conflict mediation and capacity strengthening in connection with humanitarian negotiations. The Clingendael Institute, for example, has provided training courses in humanitarian diplomacy for countless diplomats and humanitarian aid workers around the world over the past 10 years. In their report, the AIV and the CAVV underline the importance of this training. Another partner, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva, is currently working with other organisations and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to develop a special programme for humanitarian diplomacy. The Netherlands is funding this initiative and will take this opportunity to step up its cooperation with the UN, for instance with OCHA's Humanitarian Negotiations Unit.

The government intends to cooperate on humanitarian diplomacy and conflict mediation not only with the UN but also with the EU. Hadja Lahbib, EU Commissioner for Equality and for Preparedness and Crisis Management, is working on a new Commission communication about the EU's humanitarian efforts. In part thanks to the advocacy of the Netherlands, the European Commission's communication will also address the need for stronger humanitarian diplomacy and restoration of compliance with IHL.

Humanitarian mediation is becoming increasingly important for establishing contact with security actors and others who are difficult to approach and, in that way, breaking deadlocks and reaching communities that would otherwise remain inaccessible. The humanitarian principles are the guiding parameters. Humanitarian aid must not be used as a bargaining chip in ceasefire or peace negotiations.

### **Investing in security and psychosocial support for aid workers**

With the humanitarian system in flux and struggling with a significant funding shortfall, the AIV and the CAVV assert that investment in the physical security of aid workers is necessary. The government fully agrees. The Netherlands will therefore continue to provide humanitarian organisations with non-earmarked funding. This enables them to use their funds for security measures without having to request separate (earmarked) funding. Aid organisations can then act quickly when compelled to do so by the local security situation.

#### *Investing in security and protection*

As the AIV and the CAVV suggest, security should not be an afterthought in the budgets of humanitarian organisations. The government therefore intends to embed this more structurally in its commitment. In addition to the existing non-earmarked commitment of resources for humanitarian assistance via the UN, the Red Cross and the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA), the Netherlands will be reserving funds in the humanitarian aid budget for investment in the security of aid workers and supplementary measures that contribute to their safety. As the report states, there needs to be greater awareness among donors that investments in, for example, flak jackets and insurance policies are not 'overheads' (indirect costs).

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<sup>10</sup> Parliamentary Paper 36 180, no. 171, letter to parliament regarding the strengthening of the Netherlands' efforts in the area of conflict mediation.

The Netherlands will contribute to the EU-funded Protect Aid Workers initiative, which provides financial and legal support for aid workers who are victims of targeted violence and for their families. The Netherlands urges other countries and donors to do the same.

The Netherlands will also continue investing in information provision, and security training for humanitarian organisations, for instance via the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO), an international non-governmental organisation based in the Netherlands which provides aid workers with up-to-date information about the local security situation. Furthermore, by investing in globally accessible databases in which incidents affecting aid workers are registered and analysed, the Netherlands will enable aid organisations to access information that can help them make an informed risk assessment.

Together with other donors, the Netherlands is expanding protection for UN staff and their local partners by, for example, funding the UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS), which enables aid workers to travel to their destination safely. In order to gain insight into how the Netherlands can improve its contribution to the physical security of aid workers, the government will discuss this matter with the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), which is already a partner of the Netherlands.

Apart from risks to their physical safety, aid workers – and their families – are also susceptible to harm to their mental and emotional safety. Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) is essential for emergency relief workers to be able to keep doing their work and to convince their families that it is important for them to do so. For this reason, Dutch and international efforts in connection with MHPSS include specific attention for mental health and psychosocial support for staff of humanitarian organisations themselves. The Netherlands will make a targeted contribution to affordable, high-quality psychological support for staff of humanitarian organisations and their families.

#### *Risk sharing and local resilience*

The protection of civilians in conflicts as well as resilience and ownership in local communities are and will remain priorities for the Netherlands. As humanitarian access shrinks and humanitarian security declines, the main responsibility for humanitarian assistance will increasingly fall to local populations. The distinction between civilians and aid workers is blurring.

The AIV and the CAVV commend efforts aimed at 'localisation' and 'risk sharing'. These efforts empower local aid workers and ensure that humanitarian responses are better aligned to local situations and needs. In risk sharing, the donor, the intermediary organisation and the local implementing organisation(s) work together to identify and assess the main risks of their humanitarian action. They make agreements concerning the costs of measures to limit those risks and about actions and consequences should a risk materialise. This approach is important, particularly with regard to security risks. Particularly in that respect, all too often parties that are not delivering aid directly, such as donors, unintentionally increase the security risks for local aid workers through their decisions. For example, when a donor freezes its contribution in connection with an alleged irregularity at an intermediary organisation. In many cases the intermediary organisation will then suspend payment to local partners, and as a result these local organisations are immediately forced to suspend the assistance they pledged to provide. This can lead to frustration and aggression towards the staff of local implementing organisations. Concrete agreements on these kinds of risks are made in the context of a risk-sharing dialogue. The Netherlands therefore intends to apply risk sharing more broadly and to encourage other donors and humanitarian organisations to take concrete steps in the same direction.

## **Conclusion**

Humanitarian security and the safety of humanitarian aid workers in particular are an essential part of providing assistance to people in need. In the midst of a conflict, people want to be confident that they can offer and receive aid in safety. Aid workers should never be intentional targets of violence. Yet this is increasingly the case in conflicts worldwide. A reduction in the assistance provided leads to an even greater number of civilian victims and makes it even more

challenging for communities to live alongside and with each other in the future. Peace becomes ever more elusive.

The government observes, as do the AIV and the CAVV, that the growing insecurity of aid workers is part of a broader context of shrinking humanitarian space resulting from increasing conflicts, the undermining of international humanitarian law and inadequate humanitarian funding.

Therefore, the government will take the AIV and the CAVV's advisory letter as an opportunity to re-examine the strategy underlying the Netherlands' humanitarian efforts against the backdrop of global developments. Later in the year, the House will receive a new policy letter that will address this in greater detail, in part following consultations with humanitarian partners and the people they serve.

Humanitarian organisations, from the UN to Dutch NGOs and from the Red Cross/Red Crescent to local volunteer collectives, deserve the Netherlands' support, just as the people whose lives would be at stake without their help.