



OBSERVATIONS ON FLEET OPERATION IN HARSH AND HOSTILE ENVIRONMENTS

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By the very nature of their work, humanitarian agencies tend to operate in remote insecure areas with limited resources to safely operate their fleets. However, in my experience the majority of these agencies do not have the correct systems and procedures to maintain and safely operate their vehicles.

A vehicle is the lifeline of all humanitarian work. Safe vehicle operation requires the commitment of managers from the top down to ensure that procedures are put in place and followed. Fleet management is, at times, left to personnel with more of an administrative than a technical background. Fleet safety then becomes compromised, as the national mechanic and driver start to maintain and run the fleet in different ways. This may result in dangerous assumptions being made.

Generally speaking, this dual approach lacks the appropriate knowledge to safely operate the lifeline due to a lack of correct training. Nevertheless, it is one which is increasingly relied upon. Poor attention to detail and safety and a “just keep it going” attitude then prevail. Guess who gets blamed when things go wrong?

Motor vehicle crashes and collisions *are* avoidable. Organizations must assume a zero tolerance attitude otherwise the unacceptable statistics of vehicle-related injury and death in the humanitarian sector will continue. Each incident can be traced back to a chain of errors made by the organization’s staff.

An Example

Four years ago in Northern Uganda, a humanitarian worker was injured and medivaced. One of the organization’s vehicles had a faulty fuel gauge. The fuel system was not fixed before the vehicle was sent into a potentially hostile area to perform field work.

The vehicle *ran out of fuel* in a remote area as dusk was falling. An emergency call was sent to the field office. An international member of staff with little or no training on four-wheel drive vehicle operation came to the rescue.

Driving too fast, the rescue vehicle lost control and overturned. Now two vehicles were stranded and one person injured, possibly seriously, in a potentially hostile area. Luckily, no one was killed.

As always, this situation could have been avoided if correct systems and training had been put in place and followed.

The Basics

When conducting training we always go through pre-use vehicle inspection. During one session in Sudan, I rejected 25% of the organization’s vehicles that we were supposed to train on because they were unsafe:

TYRES

Safety problem identified: Low/high/uneven tyre pressure.
Reason: There was no tyre pressure gauge available. The only one in use was at the local marketplace attached to the compressor used by most organizations. As in other areas, the calibration of this gauge had to be suspect. Most drivers had never seen a pen type tyre gauge before.

Safety problem identified: The tyre tread level was below the acceptable limit.
Reason: The acceptable limit for driving on unsealed roads was not known so drivers therefore applied the “local” principle of getting the most life out of the tyres.

Reason: New tyres had been requested but had been denied because the “person in charge” had deemed there was still “more life in them”.

Safety problem identified: Cuts on the tyres and badly damaged side walls.

Reason: There was no need to change the tyre yet as the tread level was still acceptable.

Safety problem identified: The vehicle was running on cross-ply tyres.

Reason: Cross-ply tyres were the cheapest tyre available. Staff did not know the difference between cross-ply and radial tyres and the inherent safety implications.

Safety problem identified: Running the vehicle on a mix of cross-ply and radial tyres.

Reason: Staff were unaware of the types of tyres and thus that it was a safety issue.

UNDER THE BONNET

Safety problem identified: The brake fluid/ steering fluid/ coolant level/ engine oil level were very low.

Reason: The driver did not check the vehicle as he was only given it that morning and did not have time.

Reason: They had no stock of fluids at field office and the local marketplace had run out.

Safety problem identified: A loose battery or low battery level.

Reason: As above, coupled with the failure to appreciate the safety implications.

Safety problem identified: The vehicle lacked seat belts.

Reason: The vehicle was rented locally.

OTHER EXAMPLES

Safety problem identified: The windscreen was cracked on the driver’s side.

Reason: There was no spare windscreen available. Staff failed to appreciate the safety implications and explained that it was impossible to work in the area without getting the windscreen cracked.

Safety problem identified: The mirrors and lights were broken.

Reason: Staff explained that there were no spares available and failed to appreciate the safety implications.

Safety problem identified: The lights were not working.

Reason: There were no spare bulbs available and travel was normally limited to daylight hours only.

Safety problem identified: The 4WD system was inoperative. Only the 2WD option was functional.

Reason: The vehicle is not going to a place where it might get stuck.

Safety problem identified: The winch wire/cable was frayed, badly kinked, broken and then tied in a knot.

Reason: Staff could not get a replacement locally and failed to understand the safety implications.

Safety problem identified: No winch kit was available for safe winch operation.

Reason: No one knew they were available.

Safety problem identified: General recovery gear and emergency tools were in poor condition and stowed incorrectly.

Reason: Staff were unaware of how to check recovery gear and emergency tools and where to stow them.

What Needs to be Addressed

The following are the basics that need to be addressed:

- Ensure that vehicles and equipment are safe prior to use.
- Ensuring safety from A – B.

The Driver

One of the main complaints I get from drivers is the way they are pressured to get from A to B. Managers who have not planned their itineraries well may urge a driver to go faster than is safe for the environment/conditions with catastrophic results.

Drivers tend to be taken for granted and at times are seen as an extension of the vehicle. Managers do not realize that they operate in the third most dangerous working environment: namely the road.

If we look at a normal office day for office staff, generally we see that it is broken down into segments. 09.00 – 10.30. Tea break. 10.45 – 13.00. Lunch etc. The reason for this is productivity (and this is in a low-risk working environment). Consider the driver: He or she is the person that manages the safety of the organization's most valued assets, human and material, in a very dangerous working environment.

An Example from North Darfur

A manager was determined to reach his destination. He had not planned his itinerary correctly and reached a swollen wadi just after dark. His destination was just past the wadi. His drivers advised him to set up camp and cross the wadi in the morning. Wanting to find a more comfortable place to sleep, the manager crossed the wadi on foot and then walked to his destination. He had already ordered the drivers to get the vehicles across and meet him there. The vehicles got stuck and the drivers spent long hours in the dark recovering them (using winches and high lift jacks is risky enough during daylight hours if not used correctly) and finally managed to get them across just before sunrise. Hopefully, the drivers took some rest before moving on. It was sheer luck that no one was killed or injured.

Conclusion

A system must be introduced to ensure that safety is the primary concern and to eliminate as many of the links in the chain of disaster as possible. Also, as a starting point, the Fleet Forum has a comprehensive safety guide that is well worth reading and adopting.

ABOUT OnCourse

OnCourse specialize in 4WD training courses, off-road security driving courses and defensive driving courses tailored to suit the harsh and hostile driving conditions common to developing countries.

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