



BEST SECURITY PRACTICES IN SHORT-TERM MISSIONS

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Introduction

Short-term mission trips can be incredibly meaningful, fulfilling, inspirational and Kingdom-building ... but they can also be risk-filled, ill-conceived and even catastrophic. Two of the most tragic mission events in the recent past involved short-term teams: the murder of an entire 10-member medical missions team in Afghanistan in 2010 and the kidnapping of an entire church missions team, also in Afghanistan, in 2007.¹

The success or failure of short-term teams depends on many factors, and security is only one of those. But in today's world, security is a major factor facing any missionary or any missions team. Understanding and complying with best security practices is always the right thing to do for a number of reasons – the most important one being our responsibility to be the best possible stewards of the only irreplaceable asset God has provided to us to fulfill the Great Commission: the lives of the workers.

This paper is intended to serve as a foundational resource for any entity and leader preparing to take teams into the international missions field. The principles and practices described here should be part of the planning and execution of any missions trip. They are presented as five (5) specific areas of best practice:

1. Risk assessment (and mitigation)
2. Profile assessment (and reduction)
3. Personnel screening and selection
4. Three "Ps"
 - Policies
 - Procedures
 - Plans
5. Equipment and resources

¹ In the church missions team case, the sending country ultimately paid a ransom of over \$20 million for the surviving 21 hostages and also removed all of its citizens serving as missionaries in Afghanistan.

Risk Assessment and Mitigation

A risk assessment should precede every mission trip – even for returns to previously visited destinations. There are numbers of risk assessment tools and instruments available. Any system that uses a variety of sources of information and classifies risks based on both their potential impact (severity) and likelihood (probability of happening) is probably quite reasonable. As a minimum (duty of care) standard, we recommend that the sending entity:

- Obtain all the public information published by the home government (typically the U.S. Department of State)² on the destination
- Distribute that material to all trip participants
- Provide an opportunity for discussion and questions
- Document that all participants received the information

Depending on the degree of risk that exists, additional sources of information should be checked, such as:

- The Overseas Security Advisory Council (www.osac.gov)
- The Faith-Based Organization Working Group of OSAC³
- The Risk Management Network⁴
- Private security services provided by your insurance carrier(s)
- Subscription services⁵

When risk is understood, examine options to mitigate (reduce) it, by reducing the chance of occurrence (probability) and/or the potential severity (impact) of any particular event. Consider options that may reduce either of these two components of risk (such as changing routes, methods of travel, dates of travel, etc.).

Finally, mitigate risk as much as possible by providing training to participants before the trip. Multiple training options, tailored for the Christian community, are available. Available training ranges from online courses costing less than \$50 and taking about 60-90 minutes to complete to multi-day, intensive field courses. (CCI offers a [range of training opportunities](#).)

Profile Assessment and Mitigation

The sending organization, the participants, and the trip itself all have a profile. The profile is simply all the information that a potential adversary can observe or obtain, and the perception this profile creates in the mind of that potential adversary. It is incredibly

² Typically this will include the country profile and information, all relevant travel advisories and warnings, and all current Embassy security notices to U.S. citizens in the country (all can be obtained via the State Department's website www.travel.gov).

³ Membership in the FBOWG requires sponsorship. Contact CCI for assistance.

⁴ Membership in the RMN requires sponsorship. Contact CCI for assistance.

⁵ Examples include (but are not limited to) [Stratfor](#), [WorldAware](#), [Control Risks \(CORE\)](#), [Dataminr](#), [Navigo](#), and [NC4](#).

important to understand that it does not matter what the truth is; what matters is what an adversary perceives or believes the truth to be. If an adversary is convinced that the fact that a trip is partially funded by USAID is in fact a cover for intelligence-gathering by the U.S. government, the actual risk is a function of this belief or perception, *not* of the truth.

Profile ranges from the visible (the clothing participants wear, the vehicles they drive, the hotels they stay in) to online (organizational sites and – possibly the greatest risk – personal social media accounts). Trip sponsors and leaders must diligently assess these profile factors and require participants (and organizers) to adjust profile factors as necessary.

Personnel Screening and Selection

Personnel screening and selection is a critical part of the overall security management of missions trips and projects. Especially in cases of short-term trips, leaders and sponsoring agencies often find it difficult to say “no” to those who desire to go. But saying “no” when appropriate (or necessary) is a function of leadership and is a manifestation of the stewardship responsibility of those entrusted with overseeing the work. Security-related factors that should be carefully considered in personnel screening and selection include:

- Medical factors and fitness needed to work in the environment and perform the tasks required
- Emotional stability commensurate with the stresses likely to be encountered
- Submission to leadership and agreement to abide by policies, procedures and practices of the trip
- The profile of the individual participants, and whether or not objectionable profile elements can be eliminated or sufficiently mitigated

Policies, Procedures and Plans

Policies, procedures and plans are the guidelines that help participants deal appropriately with the wide varieties of situations that may be encountered. Policies are broad in scope and should always be consistent with the values, ethics and objectives of the trip or project.

For example, the author led a multi-year project to an unengaged unreached people group in one of the Nigerian states governed by Sharia law. As an overall part of the strategy of access, for the first two trips into the people group (which provided primary health care in a village) participants were directed not to initiate any statements that could be perceived to be proselytizing or evangelizing. Participants were free to respond to any questions that touched on motivations, faith, etc., but could not initiate these conversations. This was a difficult boundary for some participants, but as subsequent trips occurred and the context changed, this restriction was eased and subsequently eliminated. The policy proved to contribute to the overall success of the project by protecting the team’s right to work with this people group and demonstrating integrity to the Islamic leadership of the region.

In the security environment, policies, procedures and plans will be dictated by the conditions and context. But these should be carefully considered, written, distributed to all participants and leadership should both expect and require compliance. An example of a set of security policies, procedures and plans used by the author in leading medical short-term trips in Nigeria is attached as a reference/example.

Equipment and Resources

Every trip or project will require specific types of equipment and resources. However, from a security perspective, all trips and projects should have adequate equipment and resources in three major areas:

1. **Communication:** The ability to maintain communications, both within the project country and with the sending organization, is crucial. The near-global use of cellular phone technology has made communication far easier than in the past. However, the ease of use and widespread availability of cellular communications has also tended to create a dependency on this singular resource. And, that dependency comes at considerable risk, as cellular systems are typically not robust and subject to disruption and failure from a wide number of causes. We recommend that all trips and projects include multiple communications options:
 - a. Local cellular service
 - b. International cellular service (using home-country phones and providers)
 - c. Satellite telephone service
2. **Navigation:** Whenever local travel is involved, navigation is critical, and all participants should have a basic understanding of destinations, routes and alternates. Although the use of cellular and GPS technology has made navigation much easier much of the time, this is technology that can fail without notice. Hard-copy maps should be a mandatory backup resource for all local travel.
3. **Evacuation:** Every trip or project should include evacuation plans for both individuals and for the entire team or group. Quality and consistent medical evacuation insurance should be mandatory. Depending on the political and/or security environment, purchase of additional evacuation insurance may be appropriate. In any case, the team should always have a pre-existing evacuation plan that is reasonable and realistic and that provides more than one method of evacuation, more than one means of travel, and more than one destination (along with the resources necessary to accomplish each).

Attachment

The attached document is an actual security policy, procedure and planning document used by the author for short-term medical mission trips in Nigeria. It has been sufficiently altered to mask real names and project locations but is otherwise the actual document used.

“SEEKING THE UPG”
February 2015 [CHURCH] Unreached People Group Project

Leadership and Security Procedures

Confidential – For [CHURCH] Team Use Only

Leadership Responsibility

There are three primary areas of leadership responsibility for this project:

1. Leadership responsibility for the [CHURCH] team
2. Leadership responsibility for the ministry and Nigerian teams
3. Leadership responsibility for the provision of medical services

These leadership responsibilities are assigned as follows:

1. Leadership responsibility for the [CHURCH] team is shared between Bob [Deleted] and Eric [Deleted]
2. Leadership responsibility for the ministry and for the Nigerian teams is assigned to Ezekiel [Deleted]
3. Leadership responsibility for the provision of medical services is shared between Dr. Dave and Dr. Sebastian

Lines of Authority:

1. Bob and Eric share final field leadership responsibility for the [CHURCH] team and one speaks for the other and for the church in this environment.
2. In the unlikely event of a conflict between direction from Bob/Eric and Ezekiel, if action must be taken immediately, the [CHURCH] team is to follow the direction of Bob/Eric.
3. In the unlikely event of a conflict between medical direction given by Dr. Dave and Dr. Sebastian, if action must be taken before the conflicting direction can be resolved, the [CHURCH] medical team is to follow the direction of Dr. Dave.

[CHURCH] Assistant Leaders:

1. Reed [Deleted] and Ken [Deleted] are designated as Assistant Leaders for the [CHURCH] team.
2. Reed and Ken (along with Bob and Eric) will each be responsible for one vehicle when we are convoying in groups. Those responsibilities include:
 - a. Supervising drivers to insure compliance with the convoy plans
 - b. Communicating with the other vehicle leaders to facilitate convoy management
 - c. Providing direction to vehicle occupants during checkpoints, etc.
 - d. Providing leadership to vehicle occupants in emergencies

3. Reed, Ken, Eric and Bob will divide the team funds between themselves. Each will be responsible for the security of his entrusted funds, and for keeping a record of disbursement or transfer of his assigned funds.
4. Reed, Ken, Eric and Bob will be assigned two-way radios during all convoy operations and will maintain radio contact during convoys.
5. Reed, Ken, Eric and Bob will each carry a small emergency trauma kit on their persons (not in baggage) during convoys.
6. Reed and Ken may be assigned other tasks and responsibilities to assist and support team and project leadership.
7. In the absence of Bob or Eric, Reed and Ken speak with their authority.

Security Procedures

We have a responsibility to be good stewards of all the resources God has entrusted us with to answer His call to the UPG. Of all these resources, the only irreplaceable ones we have been entrusted with on this trip are our lives and the lives of our teammates. So it follows that we need to be attentive stewards of those lives. So, what we discuss and expect concerning security is done through the lens and priority of Biblical stewardship. And, it is done in the full knowledge and complete confidence that our ultimate safety and security rests in God's hands. So we present these procedures not in a spirit of fear and we certainly don't want them to be received that way. They are simply guidelines of good stewardship of a part of the environment we will be working in – and, not all that different than the stewardship procedures of good hand-washing, maintaining universal precautions in dealing with patients, etc.

We will, at different times, be in very different security environments. Abuja is a large, dynamic African urban center with all of the “normal” traffic and crime issues found in any such city. Sokoto, Birnin Kebbi and Kamba are smaller, but still retain sufficient urban identity that traffic and crime are potential threats. Driving in Nigeria is like driving in much of Africa: an adventure. That adventure includes some very poor and very aggressive drivers, overloaded (REALLY overloaded) vehicles, and roadways of questionable design and poor maintenance. The project village is actually the most tranquil place we will be, and the place where our presence is most appreciated. There, crime and traffic are replaced by things such as exposure to disease and perhaps an unhappy encounter with a snake.

Simply discussing a potential threat or danger here does not mean that we think it is likely that such a thing will happen. In fact, the contrary is the case. There has been and continues to be a careful process of assessment of risk. The “worse” some of these events are, the less likely they are assessed to happen to us, near us or otherwise affecting us. But because there are no certainties or absolutes in this arena, we are as “wise as serpents and as harmless as doves” in preparing ourselves.

The list of security procedures that follows is not all-inclusive and does not address every potential threat or danger. But by following these basic procedures, the risk of any unwanted event happening is very substantially reduced. Some of these procedures involve your mindset, your awareness, etc. and compliance cannot be measured or

mandated. But where procedures are operational and require certain actions or behaviors, compliance is expected.

1. When our team is traveling between locations by land, we will do so using convoy best practices. These include:
 - a. Complying with the convoy plan; including following the designated route, keeping all vehicles together in a line, maintaining eyesight of the convoy vehicles in front and in back of you and complying with the directions of the Assistant Leader in charge of the vehicle.
 - b. If one convoy vehicle has to stop, all stop together until the situation is resolved or a plan is developed.
 - c. If your vehicle stops during a convoy, stay inside unless directed otherwise by your Leader or Assistant Leader; or unless a uniformed government officer or agent directs you to do something else.
 - d. If you do get out of your vehicle, stay very near to it unless directed otherwise by your Leader or Assistant Leader; or unless a uniformed government officer or agent directs you to do something else.
2. When driving through Nigeria, we will encounter many checkpoints. Procedures to be followed at checkpoints (unless directed otherwise) include:
 - a. The driver is to comply with directions given by uniformed, government staff manning checkpoints.
 - b. All occupants of the vehicle should remove sunglasses before the vehicle stops at the designated location in the checkpoint.
 - c. Radios, music, etc. should be turned off prior to arriving at the checkpoint
 - d. Do not initiate conversation with (or ask questions of) checkpoint staff.
 - e. Comply with the instructions or directions of checkpoint staff.
 - f. If you are directly questioned by checkpoint staff, keep your answers as short as possible and just tell the truth. If you don't understand a question, say so.
 - g. Do not offer bribes!
3. Whenever away from "home" (a guesthouse or hotel, or Ezekiel's house in the project site):
 - a. Stay in pairs – never alone! Use the 'buddy system'.
 - b. If you are leaving "home" for shopping, photos, exercise, etc.; a Team Leader or Assistant Team Leader must know where you are going and when you plan to be back. If asked, you must take either a radio or mobile phone and remain in communication with the leaders.
 - c. Leave valuables secured in your room or in the care of a teammate – don't carry more with you than you need.
4. Remember that we are guests in a very different culture (actually, cultures). Pay attention to social norms and courtesies and do your best to follow them. Be

careful in your conversations and comments and refrain from saying anything that might be considered critical of any part of the culture, the environment, the religion, socio-economic conditions, etc. Remember that English is a major trade language and the official language of the country, and it is certainly possible that things you did not intend to be heard and understood by others – were.

5. Remain observant of your surroundings. You should always know where you are in relation to a place of safety (your “home”, the convoy, the clinic, etc.).
6. Try to discern things around you that, even though new to you, may be indicators of relative levels of danger or safety. For example, crowd behavior at major airports is usually not difficult to “read” if you just take the time to observe if people look fearful and tense or simply busy and rushed.
7. Especially as we get closer to and into the project site, people will be very curious about you. Many will want to get close, to talk to you, or just to watch the “strangers”. This is normal and can be an opening to build relationships. Do your best to distinguish this type of normal, harmless behavior from behavior that is perhaps not benign and may indicate a potential threat:
 - a. Person(s) following you over a distance or period of time that is not just casual
 - b. Person(s) following you from a distance without any effort to make contact, or to go somewhere else
 - c. Person(s) following or appearing to watch you today (now) who you recognize as having done so earlier or on a prior day
 - d. Any person who makes any kind of a threatening statement to you

If any of these things happen, take the most direct route back “home” or to the location of the rest of the team. Report what happened immediately to Bob or Eric.

8. If you and your buddy find yourself somewhere you do not recognize, or do not know how to get back:
 - a. If it is safe, stay where you are. We will come looking for you, and the sooner you stop and stay in one place, the easier it is to find you.
 - b. If you have a radio or mobile phone, use it to call one of the leaders.
 - c. If you don’t have a radio or mobile phone, ask someone around you if you can use his or her phone to make a local call.
 - d. If you don’t feel safe, identify and move to a safer location:
 - i. A police post
 - ii. A hospital or clinic
 - iii. An open restaurant or business
 - iv. Any public place with people present

- e. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to ask for help – the vast majority of the people around will be hospitable, willing to help, and even perhaps honored that “foreigners” chose to ask them for help.
9. In the very unlikely event that you are caught in some place where rioting, shooting or some other violence erupts:
 - a. First, take cover in a safer place while you assess the situation. In cases of shooting, get down close to the ground and behind the most substantial object close by.
 - b. Try to determine if the threat is moving towards you, is building rather than diminishing; and if there is a safe escape route.
 - c. Decide whether there is more risk in remaining where you are; or in moving rapidly and potentially attracting attention or entering an area less safe than you just left.
 - d. If you do decide to escape, move as rapidly and as directly towards your objective as possible. Your first goal is to put distance between yourselves and the threat; then your second goal is to find a safe place to regroup, re-assess and plan your next steps.
 10. If there is an explosion (bomb), do not move towards the scene (even if you believe you can provide aid). Most bombings today are multi-stage: A first bomb that is followed a bit later by a second bomb that is specifically intended to target first responders and others coming to the aid of the initial victims.
 11. In the project site, the primary natural threat is snakes. There are different varieties around, they don't look like California snakes, and almost all of them are very venomous (even the small ones). So stay away! (Note: In multiple trips to the project site, neither Eric or Bob have ever seen a snake)
 12. Finally, if you feel ill or suffer any injury, notify Dr. Dave and either Bob or Eric immediately – no delays.