

WORKBOOK ON SECURITY: PRACTICAL STEPS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AT RISK



CHAPTER 3: THREAT ANALYSIS

“We know from our discussions with HRDs that they often ignore threats. They sometimes feel that to pay attention to the threat is to give in to those threatening them, or that denial is the best strategy. But we also know that in many cases of HRDs who have been killed they have received threats in the preceding days that they did not react to.”

Andrew Anderson, Deputy Director, Front Line

“After the assassination of our Director, I started receiving threats. My organisation set up a whole team to work on different ways to reduce threats. One team considered how to influence the Chief of Police and the Minister of Security. Another team concentrated on getting support from Embassies - especially those which gave bi-lateral aid to the justice and security systems. A third team looked at increasing protection for me at home and whilst travelling. It was a truly organisational response.”

HRD, Asia

This Chapter defines and gives examples of different kinds of threats and security incidents. It proposes five questions to ask in order to analyse a threat. There is a case study of a HRD at risk for you to consider. Then you can apply the five questions to threats you receive. There is a section about security incidents, and a section on surveillance. The Chapter concludes with some strategies for reducing threats.



Dom-an from the Philippines in a role play on receiving and reacting to a death threat

What are threats?

We have defined a threat as a declaration or indication of an intention to inflict damage, punish or hurt.

A threat may be a direct threat against you, your organisation or your family.

Some examples of direct threats HRDs have received are:

“You will not live to see the New Year”

“Your office will be burned down”

“Your organisation will not be registered (be legal) next year if you continue with this type of work”

“We will kidnap and rape your daughter”

Symbolic threats – such as dead animals nailed to the front door

A threat could also be a **possible threat** – such as when other HRDs working on similar issues are threatened and there is a chance that you may be threatened next.

We will also consider here **security incidents** – events which could indicate or lead to a threat.

Examples of security incidents are:

- you think someone may be watching you or your office
- your home or office or car is broken into
- you receive anonymous phone calls

Why are you being threatened?

A threat almost always has a purpose – to stop you from doing something. HRDs often receive threats when their work is challenging powerful actors. The threat shows that your work is being effective – and the threat is intended to stop you having that impact. The challenge is to achieve that balance of managing the threat as far as possible, whilst continuing to be as effective as possible.

It is useful to consider why you are being threatened but not attacked?

- It may be the perpetrator of the threat does not have the capacity to carry out an attack against you and is hoping the threat will be enough
- It may be that the perpetrator is aware of the political costs of attacking you, and is trying to stop your work whilst avoiding the consequences of being implicated in attacking you

However, the situation can change quickly. A perpetrator without resources may gain resources, and the political situation may change so that the perpetrators are willing to risk the consequences of attacking you. **So all threats must be taken seriously and steps must be taken to avoid the risk.**

Responses to receiving a threat

Receiving a threat is a shocking experience. Different people respond in different ways.

HRDs who have received threats describe their reactions, and illustrate different types of responses:

“I was petrified! I just stayed at home thinking about the threat and didn’t talk to anyone.” (paralysed by the threat)

“So maybe they would come for me? I didn’t think I could do anything to stop them. I just carried on as normal.” (ignoring the threat)

“I started drinking more alcohol.” (numbing oneself to the threat)

“My colleagues and I sat down and discussed the threat and what I and the organisation should do.” (analysing the threat)

“When I received a threatening text message, I immediately bought a new unregistered phone for use with my family and in emergencies.” HRD Asia

Analysing a threat is a constructive response which assists you to deal with the situation.

How to analyse a threat

The purpose of analysing the threat is to find out as much information as you can about the threat, and be able to assess – as far as is possible – the likelihood of the threat being put into action.

This analysis is best carried out with trusted colleagues. They may be more objective than you at this time, and they may be able to contribute different interpretations. (However, in the end, you are the person affected and you should not be pushed to act in a way you are not comfortable with.)

“When I had completed my research, I wrote a controversial report. I was proud to write my name as the author, but later I realised that identifying myself in that way put me at risk”

HRD, Eastern Europe

“I was invited to be interviewed on TV. I didn’t ask the journalist what questions she would ask me. In the event, my interview followed that of the Minister, and I was filmed saying some very negative things about him. After that, a suspicious car parked outside my house for weeks.”

HRD, Eastern Europe

“I was assisting a woman who had been raped by two soldiers. The soldiers were arrested and awaiting trial. I began to receive to receive threatening text messages, saying that my family would be burned alive and the family name would be obliterated. After an investigation, it was found that the text messages had been sent by the wives of the two soldiers awaiting trial, who were afraid of losing their husbands and their economic support. I realised they did not have the capacity to carry out their threats.”

HRD, Africa

Five questions to analyse a threat:

NB Do not expect that you will necessarily have answers to all these questions.

1. What exactly are the facts surrounding the threat?

- Who communicated what, when and how?
- If it was a phone call, were there background noises?
- What was the language and tone?
- Did it follow some (new?) activity of yours?

2. Has there been a pattern of threats over time?

Patterns could include the following:

- You receive a series of threatening calls or messages
- You have been followed for two days and your son was followed yesterday
- Another HRD was called for questioning by the authorities and then s/he was detained. Now you have been called for questioning

There could be patterns involving:

- The type of threats issued
- The means by which the threat is made (in person, by phone, etc)
- The timing of the threats (day of the week and time)
- The perpetrators of the threats (if they are known)
- The place the threats are made
- The events preceding the threats, such as your organisation issuing a press release

NB: When the pattern of threats increases in severity, it is an indication that the situation is increasingly dangerous.



Rene Gradis, environment activist in Honduras, has survived two assassination attempts

3. What seems to be the objective of the threat?

Is it clear from the threat what the perpetrator wants you to do? If this is not clear, sometimes the objective can be deduced from the timing of the threat - what actions are you planning or have you have taken recently?

4. Do you know who is making the threat?

- Often you do not know. Do not jump to conclusions
- Be as specific as possible. If, for example, it is a police officer, which station is s/he from? What rank is s/he?
- Consider if a signed threat is really from the person/organisation whose name is used
- If you know who is making the threat, consider if the perpetrator has the resources to carry out the threat. If they have, that increases the likelihood that the perpetrator will follow up on the threat with an attack.

“The President of our country said ‘all these HRDs are terrorists’. This increased the number and type of perpetrators willing to attack us. We had to react to this threat at the highest level”.
HRD, Americas

5. Finally, after analysing the above questions, do you think that the threat will be put into action?

- This is a difficult assessment to make and you can never be 100% sure
- Your response will take into account your context including the history of attacks against HRDs in your country, the perpetrators’ capacities, and the degree of impunity for perpetrators
- When in doubt, choose the option which seems to you to be the safest.

Should you report the threat to the police? Here are some very different assessments from different HRDs:

“Yes, a threat is a crime and the police are responsible for upholding the law.”

HRD, Europe

“No, the last HRD who reported a threat to the police was sent back to his family in a coffin.”

HRD Middle East

“We work to ensure that laws are implemented in our country – if the local police do nothing we take it higher.”

HRD Africa

“Yes, if you can prove you have taken all the usual steps to report a crime but the police do nothing to protect you, you can use this as evidence if you want to use international mechanisms.”

HRD, Americas

Clearly you must take your own context into account.

“Although the police can be the ones who attack us, we realised it was essential for us to build relationships with the police at high levels. We held discussions with the Chief of Police to make him aware of the political costs of their attacks on HRDs being publicised. Then one of our members was abducted by two policemen and thrown into the boot of their car. The police hadn’t searched him thoroughly and he still had his mobile phone. He managed to phone us and tell us the name of one of the policemen. We immediately phoned the Chief of Police with this information and he called the policemen, who let our colleague go. If we hadn’t developed this contact, our colleague would have disappeared for good.”

HRD, Africa



Activity – case study

Look at this case study, consider the 5 questions, and compare your answers with the ones that HRDs have provided.

Case study

A woman HRD was sent by her organisation to assist a rural community to protest against the building of a dam which would lead to the displacement of thousands of people and the destruction of a unique ecosystem. The community was virtually united against the construction, although there was a small group who were in favour of the dam because it would bring construction jobs in the short term.

One day, a police officer stopped her husband and said ‘you should keep better control over your wife’.

A week later, a message was pinned to the door of their house saying ‘Stop causing trouble – or else!’

Three days later, after a lunchtime demonstration, the WHRD returned home to find the house had been broken into, the children’s dog had been killed, and a message had been left saying ‘You will be next!’.

Consider the five questions, and make an assessment about whether you think the threat to kill the WHRD should be taken seriously.

1. What exactly are the facts surrounding the threat?

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2. Has there been a pattern of threats over time?

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3. What seems to be the objective of the threat?

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4. Do you know who is making the threat?

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5. Finally, after analysing the above questions, do you think that the threat will be put into action?

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What do you think the WHRD should do? Consider her vulnerabilities and capacities and then her options.

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Here are comments by HRDs on this case:

- The context is very important and the facts need to be considered within that context.
- There is a pattern of threats. The police officer warning the husband might not be part of that pattern – it is a security incident where it is unclear if the police officer is speaking as an individual from a patriarchal viewpoint, or if he is issuing the first threat.
- The objective seems to be to stop the WHRD helping the community to mobilise. As the strongest threat was issued during or after the demonstration, it shows that the perpetrators are worried that her efforts may undermine their interests.
- The actual perpetrators are not clear, but the dam project must involve the state (and therefore could involve state agents, such as the police). Foreign governments or companies, who may or may not be sensitive to human rights, are likely partners. Huge amounts of money are involved - therefore the interests being challenged are powerful and influential. On the other hand, the small group in the community in favour of the dam could possibly be the perpetrators – who may or may not be acting in an alliance with the dam project partners.
- The three biggest indicators that this threat can be put into action are:
 - Powerful actors with the capacity to carry out the threat are probably the perpetrators
 - Increasing severity of the patterns of the threats (breaking into the house and killing the dog indicates a capacity for violence and a lack of fear of being caught)
 - Seemingly there is a climate of impunity as the perpetrators feel secure enough to break into the WHRD's house during daylight.

Do you think the threat can be realised? Yes, probably. This is a dangerous situation for the above reasons.

- The WHRD's vulnerabilities include:
 - She is in a new community where she may not have access to or know the normal channels of influence
 - She has her family with her – they may also be at risk
- The WHRD's capacities include:
 - The community
 - Her organisation (although it could be argued that they may also be a vulnerability if they sent her to a dangerous location without a security plan or sufficient resources)



Environmental protection group in La Unión, province of Olancho. When the young people started documenting illegal logging the death threats began. Other members of the community then rallied round to protect them

What should the WHRD do?

There is no 'correct' answer, partly because it depends on the context and partly because there will always be unknowable elements. However, here are some options – some are alternatives, some can be carried out simultaneously:

- Discuss what the WHRD and her family want to do
- Immediately contact her organisation and ask for advice and backup resources – people and/or equipment – and agree an exit strategy in case she has to leave quickly
- Discuss with the community how they can protect her personally, her family and their home – maybe by a system of accompaniment
- Discuss how the community can gather intelligence about the perpetrators of the threat
 - Consider what psychological support the WHRD would like at this stressful time

Depending on the results of these discussions, the WHRD could consider these options:

- Leave the area immediately with her family
- Move her family away while she stays
- Increase her physical security by securing the home better (get a guard?)
- Ensure she does not go out alone or leave the family alone, and that a member of her organisation is aware of her schedule and movements at all times
- Consider her local travel arrangements – she may be most vulnerable then
- Report the threats to the police (even though they may be implicated, she will be showing that they have a duty of care and will be documenting the threats)
- Ask for police or state protection (if it is assessed that they are not the perpetrators)
- Call a press conference and publicise the threats
- Network with other local or regional human rights organisations
- Communicate with international organisations who can publicise the case (especially if foreign governments who have a reputation for espousing human rights are involved in the dam project)
- Consider if the tactics of the protest against the dam, and the messages used are the most effective. Depending on the context, she could consider whether asking for a meeting with the dam construction partners in which the community's concerns can be negotiated would be useful.



My threat analysis

Have you received threats? If yes, take some time to go through the 5 steps of analysing a threat.

1. What exactly are the facts surrounding the threat?

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2. Has there been a pattern of threats over time?

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3. What seems to be the objective of the threat?

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4. Do you know who is making the threat?

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5. Finally, after analysing the above questions, do you think that the threat will be put into action?

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Given your own vulnerabilities and capacities, what actions will you take?

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Security incidents

We have defined security incidents as events which could indicate or lead to threats. Some examples were given at the beginning of this Chapter. Two more are:

- You have reason to think your emails may be being intercepted
- Unknown people are asking your neighbours or colleagues questions about you

Security incidents may be extremely important indicators of when the threat against you may be increasing, and should never be neglected.

What to do if you experience security incidents

1. Immediately write down the facts and circumstances of the security incident
2. Discuss the security incident with your colleagues
3. Analyse the security incident and decide what action to take

What to do if you experience many security incidents

In some countries, HRDs experience a series of threats and also security incidents. The same principles apply. They should all be written down with as many facts as possible – specific wording, description of personnel, car number plates etc. If you are in this situation, it is a good idea to create a security incident book, where each threat or security incident is logged. Then you can more easily identify if there is an escalation.

If you are working in an organisation, you should make clear that all staff should log any security incidents in the security incidents book. So if, for example, one staff member thinks they may have been followed home, another has their laptop stolen and a third hears that suspicious characters have visited their home, all these are reported and logged. If only one of these incidents happens, perhaps it is just the person's imagination that it is linked to their work as a HRD. But if all these incidents happen within a short period, then it would be a clear indication that negative interest in the organisation is rising and security plans should be moved to a more rigorous level.

"We noticed taxis started parking outside our office. Staff would often take these taxis rather than going to the nearest taxi rank as usual. The taxi drivers started conversations with the passengers, asking what they had been doing that day.

Our organisation regularly met with other organisations to discuss their work and security issues. At the next meeting, we mentioned this security incident. Members of the other organisations present then realised that taxis had also started parking outside their offices too.

We concluded that the authorities were either using taxi drivers to collect information on us, or had planted security personnel as taxi drivers.

Our organisations then decided that the safest response would be to pretend we had not noticed, but we warned the staff not to say anything about their work in the taxis but instead to chat about harmless issues."

HRD, Americas

Surveillance

A pattern of security incidents probably mean that you are under surveillance by the authorities or others (although an extremely professional surveillance team may be able to do this work without you being aware of it).

There are three possible reasons why the perpetrators put you under surveillance:

- Information gathering (this may be because of your activities, or because you are

- linked to a person or group whose activities threaten the perpetrators)
- Intimidation
- Preparation to detain, abduct or attack you

The reason could change, depending on what the perpetrators believe they find out, or because of changes in the political context.

If you are under surveillance, you and your colleagues need to assess from your experience and from the history of incidents the most likely reason for it. It is important to maintain a balance between taking precautions and not becoming paranoid.

Whether or not you are under surveillance, as a HRD at risk, it is good to develop situation awareness skills. As a minimum:

- Be aware of your instincts – if you think something is wrong, you may have noticed something subliminally – take action to get out of the situation
- Be particularly aware of the possibility of surveillance outside your home and outside your office – a surveillance team will have a ‘starting point’ where they can be sure of finding you, and generally it will be one of these two
 - Notice anything out of the ordinary – strange characters, unusual behaviour, unexpected gifts (it is best to refuse these – they could be bugged)
 - Notice people you see and describe them in terms of someone they resemble – this will help if the same people turn up in different situations
 - Notice vehicles you see and make a point of remembering key features, eg vehicle make, colour, number plates

In terms of surveillance, it is advisable to:

- Make a plan for how you would deal with this **before** it happens to you – you can agree code words and phrases, or passwords for encrypted messages with your family and colleagues in advance, obtain an emergency phone not connected to your name and arrange access to a vehicle not associated with you for use in emergencies
- Assess the purpose of the surveillance – information gathering? Intimidation? Preparation to detain you? (If you believe you are in danger, take steps to get out of the situation and to a place of safety)



“Communications of HRDs are routinely monitored”, Human Rights lawyer Martin Oloo, Kenya

- If in doubt, assume that you **are** under surveillance (your person, your phones, your vehicle)
- Avoid putting others at risk
- Act naturally – to check for surveillance you could look outside your house in the morning by taking the rubbish out, or have someone in your home discreetly watch what happens after you leave for work
- Change all your routines: differ the times (and even days) you go in to work, take different routes if possible, do not develop predictable habits (such as always going to the shop or gym or bar at a certain day and time)

“Before we knew how risky it was, we used to challenge the surveillance guys all the time! I would go and take pictures of their number plates and faces with my mobile phone. Now I pretend I haven’t seen them.”
HRD, Africa

It is generally not advisable to:

- Challenge anyone you think is keeping you under surveillance (this may mean that they will make the surveillance more discreet in future and you won’t know it’s there)
- Use old-fashioned counter-surveillance techniques such as looking in shop windows (your body language could reveal what you are really doing) or speeding away from a car (you don’t know how many vehicles are in the team following you).

For more information, see Appendix 14 on Surveillance Technology & Methodology.



Women Journalists Without Chains in Yemen received a grant from Front Line to install an office alarm system

Note: Remember all the pages on which you can start building up your security plan can be torn out of this Workbook and kept together in a secure place.

“Symbolic actions can help you and your organisation respond to threats and attacks. After our office was ransacked we cleaned the office and then held a symbolic event - coming together with flowers and hope to re-dedicate our office to our struggle for human rights.”

HRD, Americas



Khalid El Jamai is one of the few journalists in Morocco who, because of his outstanding reputation, could write an open letter to the King on the issue of torture without suffering severe consequences

Threat Reduction

As mentioned earlier, reducing threats is the most difficult aspect of using the Risk Formula. Reducing your vulnerabilities and increasing your capacities are easier because they are under your control (see Appendix 4: Capacities identified by HRDs).

However, there are some ways you may be able to reduce threats. You can use more than one strategy at the same time. You will have to judge which would work best for you:

- Face the threat:
 - Develop a dialogue with the perpetrators (maybe they do not clearly understand what you do or are not aware your work is legal)
 - Find ways to communicate to the perpetrators the high political cost of threatening or attacking you either directly or via others (eg demonstrate you have influential allies at home or abroad)
 - Publicise the threats you receive

NB: only use this strategy if you think it is safe to do so. Avoid it if you assess it could inflame the situation.

- Share the threat
 - Publish controversial information as a coalition instead of just your organisation
 - Do not put the names of individuals on sensitive reports etc – just the name of the organisation
- Avoid the threat
 - Temporarily stop doing the work that is receiving negative attention (or pretend to stop doing it)
 - Move away temporarily to a safer place
 - Increase your protection measures in other ways, eg:
 - Have people accompanying you at all times
 - Change your routes and routines
 - Be very wary of any new contacts you have not initiated
 - Leave a detailed schedule of your movements with a trusted security contact, who should check in with you regularly during the day
 - Do not deviate from your schedule without informing your security contact

“After receiving threats from conservative religious groups, we approached a leader of one of the biggest Muslim organisations. He agreed to talk at a public meeting and there he said that he supported our work. This reduced the threats.”
HRD, Asia

“We use recording devices a lot. We videotape any interviews we give, so we cannot be accused of saying something we didn’t. When our office was searched, we filmed the whole event so nothing could be planted. We have a recording device linked to the telephone so we can record any threats we receive. This helps protect us.”
HRD, Eastern Europe

Finally, it is important to stress that you cannot foresee the future or know the minds of others accurately, so it is always best to take the approach which seems to you to be the safest.

“I was receiving threats and feeling very vulnerable. The Council of Europe invited me to every Council of Europe meeting that year. I became very well-known and untouchable!”
HRD, Eastern Europe



EU High Representative Catherine Ashton greets Dr Soraya Sobhrang, winner of the Front Line 2010 Award