

Politics > Gaza: Operation at risk of life - this is how aid organizations work in the war zone.

 **ATTACK ON FOOD CONVOY**

# Delivering food while rockets fly: This is how aid organizations work in Gaza



Mike Seawright is the founder of ReliefAid. He and his employees specialize in crisis areas such as Ukraine (pictured here), Afghanistan and Gaza

© ReliefAid



from **Katharina Kunert**

April 3, 2024, 12:01 p.m. · 5 min.

 **NOTICE**

**They risk their lives to help other people and have to maintain contact with the army and Hamas: Mike Seawright, head of the NGO,**

## ReliefAid, talks about the strict security protocols in Gaza - and why even these hardly protect humanitarian aid workers.

A white van, burnt out, roof and doors blown off - a metal sign still reads: "World Central Kitchen". The name of the aid organization whose employees died in an airstrike on the car convoy in Gaza. This is shown by videos and pictures from on site. Seven aid workers from Australia, Great Britain and Poland, as well as a man with US-Canadian citizenship and a Palestinian, killed during the humanitarian mission. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called his army's attack an unintentional "tragic incident." The Aid organization World Central Kitchen under star chef José Andrés described it as unforgivable.

THE WCK FAMILY MOURNS THE LOSS OF THESE HEROES

			
Saifeddin Issam Ayad Abutaha WCK RELIEF TEAM AGE 25, PALESTINE	Lalzawmi (Zomi) Frankcom WCK RELIEF LEAD AGE 43, AUSTRALIA	Damian Soból WCK RELIEF TEAM AGE 35, POLAND	Jacob Flickinger WCK RELIEF TEAM AGE 33, USA & CANADA
			
John Chapman WCK SECURITY TEAM AGE 57, UK	James (Jim) Henderson WCK SECURITY TEAM AGE 33, UK	James Kirby WCK SECURITY TEAM AGE 47, UK	

Because logos on vehicles in crisis areas are actually considered one of the clearest means of showing: We don't belong to any of the warring parties - don't attack us. But in the war between the terrorist organization Hamas and Israel in the Gaza Strip, aid workers don't seem safe despite this method. How do the helpers work under hostile conditions? And how do their organizations protect them?



 **WORLD CENTRAL KITCHEN**

**José Andrés: the top chef who wants to save Gaza from starvation**

The founder and CEO of the relief organization ReliefAid, Mike Seawright, tells the *star*, the safety rules would apply in all crisis areas in which you work. But "many of the things we took for granted no longer exist in Gaza, such as the protection of humanitarian actors."

## **Contact with both warring parties**

The first step for many organizations: information. "We are in contact with both warring parties and inform them about where we work," says Seawright. Offices, storage rooms, vehicles. "For example, we tell the Israeli Defense Forces or Hamas that we are moving from one place to another in a vehicle." This contact is important so that you are not suspected of being one of the enemies.

What should actually help: signs on the roof of the vehicle. "Large logos can be seen from the air on car roofs. From airplanes and drones. This is actually supposed to protect against air attacks." However, that didn't help with the World Central Kitchen's cars - which is now alarming some organizations.

Seawright: "You get the feeling that there could be dead helpers again if the usual security precautions no longer work." Our own organization, ReliefAid, has also feared this since the convoy was shot at. "None of us would have expected the attack on the World Central Kitchen."



## ✦+ POST-WAR ORDER

### The clans of Gaza: Will these men take power in the future?

## Vehicle rescue plan

Aid organizations have so-called communication protocols for cars that drive through crisis areas: A transport plan is created, which

contains route and times. At certain times, employees in the vehicle report to the organization's headquarters and confirm that they are safe. If they are supposed to call around 7am, but there is still radio silence at 7:30am, steps will be taken to help. "The headquarters then tries to figure out: What is the problem?" explains Seawright.

Army checkpoints are contacted, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), "they are asked, have you seen our vehicle? It has disappeared." In this case, a search party can be sent out or a decision is made depending on the danger of the situation, the search party could also be in danger. Additional lives should not be endangered, for example, in areas where there is active fighting.

### **Transparent advance planning is essential for survival**

In general, most aid organization employees wear protective equipment - Mike Seawright reports, but this is also shown by footage of aid operations in Gaza and other crisis areas. Bulletproof vests and helmets, for example. They protect the body if fragments fly through the air or distant shots are fired during rocket strikes. However, in the case of attacks directly on the vehicle or targeted shots at the people themselves, protective clothing only helps in a few cases. The risk that unprotected parts of the body will be hit or that the material will not be able to withstand the explosive force is too high. Even armored vehicles do not guarantee protection against direct missile attacks.



The destroyed roof of the vehicle in which seven aid workers died in Dair El-Balah in the Gaza Strip

© World Central Kitchen / Imago Images

That's why aid organizations plan in advance how they can avoid attacks. "We look closely at where the checkpoints are, where there is fighting, which streets are safe and which are not," says Mike Seawright. "But no place in Gaza is currently completely safe from attacks." A rule of thumb, however, is to stay away from military targets. From army convoys or local battle group headquarters. Otherwise, you could quickly get caught in the crossfire or be confused.

### **Food should be distributed inconspicuously.**

ReliefAid, Seawright reports, is currently working in Gaza with 16 Palestinian employees who are experienced in crisis situations. Employees would also receive training on how to behave in dangerous situations. If the car was pursued by a fighter jet, they would have to decide within seconds: Is it safer to flee at breakneck speed - or to get out of the car as quickly as possible? The answer is: as quickly as possible.

Get out and move away from the vehicle. This knowledge could save lives.

The strategy of some aid organizations such as ReliefAid is to distribute food as inconspicuously as possible. No organization logos on warehouses – this could lead to them being looted. No crowds at the food distribution. Better to go from house to house, family to family.

Otherwise, trouble will quickly arise, says Seawright. If a large number of people gather and become uneasy, there are emergency vehicles that can transport employees and food away. Otherwise, the crowd would endanger them, but also themselves.

## Aid organizations must be neutral

Mike Seawright describes the neutrality of aid organizations as the most important principle. "We have to talk to all warring parties. But we must agree with none of them. That's an important difference." The organizations' employees would have to ensure that they do not carry weapons themselves and, through discussions, ensure that armed groups are allowed through checkpoints. "We must not support any warring party in any way – political, material, religious."



**ON SITE**



**HUNGER IN THE WAR ZONE**

**UNRWA is heavily criticized - but who else is supposed to provide care for the people in Gaza?**

---

Preliminary checks on employees in Gaza are carried out through surveys: Is the person known in political or religious circles? A leading employee of the Palestinian relief organization also reports this,

United Nations, UNRWA. However, these surveys were not always successful there, as reports suggest some Palestinian UNRWA employees are said to sympathize with Hamas, and some were even involved in the massacres on October 7th.

However, it is important that the employees are neutral so that they can be checked by both warring parties. From the border crossings, employees transport food and medical products to those in need. They drive through areas of both warring parties in order to reach remote places. The organizations report: Too few aid deliveries are still getting through. Checking trucks for smuggled weapons takes a long time.

More and faster deliveries are needed.

---