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CT operations**

Shooting the Arab Spring

Training for hostile environments


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Amid the political and civil turmoil being played out in the Middle East and North Africa, **Anna Averkiou** looks at how organisations can prepare their staff to operate safely while still allowing them to do their jobs

THE ARAB SPRING: A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

Deciding to work abroad is, for many people, a lifestyle choice that provides the opportunity to experience and enjoy the benefits of a more conducive environment than they are used to. For many others it is a necessity of their business. But when it comes to potential threats, one should consider what the victims of 9/11, the Madrid and London bombings and the Mumbai siege were doing when the incidents occurred. Quite simply, they were going to work, and most were doing so in environments in which they felt completely safe and relaxed.

While mitigating against such atrocities is difficult, the ongoing Arab Spring is just one example of how potentially dangerous situations can rapidly evolve, with a heightened threat of violence to foreign nationals during civil disturbances, looting and running battles between protestors and government forces. When these threats are viewed alongside the increased risk of kidnap in high-risk oil regions in Africa it becomes clear why many organisations are having to review their risk management procedures and ensure their staff are properly appraised when travelling. If they do not, they face potential litigation by ill-prepared employees who could become victims.

Legally, UK-based companies have an obligation to risk assess all activity under the 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act, and most do provide guidance via their intranets – whether it's in-house policy or links to official advice such as that given by the British Foreign office or the US State Department. Increasingly, however, they are looking to specialist training companies to provide safety courses that not only raise awareness but also provide practical hands-on scenarios to help prepare personnel for potential threats.

"A threat can be anything from pick-pocketing to major disasters and volatile situations," explained Gary Purssey, Operations Manager for Aid Training & Ops. "Yet all too often people think that, by virtue of their good nature or wanting to help, nothing bad will happen. At the very least, organisations should be looking at providing personal safety training. This will help their staff to take a few simple precautions to

greatly lessen their vulnerability in certain situations."

Not surprisingly, some of the most publicised attacks have been those on members of the media. The International News Safety Institute described 2011 as "one of the bloodiest in recent years," with 120 journalists killed worldwide since January. Today's 24/7 news culture means many incidents are broadcast live and then replayed continuously when

Taking cover: foreign journalists shelter with Egyptian protesters during the anti-government riots



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they turn violent. Those committing crimes see any coverage as evidential, however, resulting in news teams being regarded as “fair game” for attack. The deaths of documentary filmmaker Tim Hetherington and photographer Chris Hondros in Misrata, and the vicious attack on CBS reporter Lara Logan in Tahrir Square, were well-documented and debated not only by those responsible for staff safety but in the wider public arena.

Most of the major media organisations take safety very seriously and over the years have worked with training companies to provide courses that take into account the fact that journalists will head towards danger rather than stay out of the way. “The very nature of their job means they cannot afford to turn up second when a competitor is on the ground – but the possibility of them being able to conduct bespoke training prior to reacting to unforeseen world events is unrealistic,” explained Mr Purssey. “Generic training as a baseline is possibly the best solution for these situations,”



2011 has shown how vital specialist training is, especially in Libya because of the undisciplined nature of the forces involved

The more responsible organisations, such as Reuters, the BBC, Sky News and European Broadcasting Union (EBU), will only deploy staff if they have been on a recognised course – and this also applies to freelancers. “This last year has shown how vital specialist training is, especially in Egypt and Libya,” said Julian Tarrant, an EBU News Editor. He described how their satellite feed point came under fire on at least one occasion in Libya: “A correspondent was forced to take cover as he was delivering a live piece to camera. Libya was particularly dangerous because of the undisciplined nature of the forces involved on both sides, the random firing and discarded ordinance.”

INSI’s Deputy Director, Hannah Storm, said: “Sadly, not all threats are avoidable. But by equipping journalists and their editors and managers with skills to better assess threats and respond when they happen, training can make a difference. This can be pre-deployment training, first aid, crisis management, or through teaching journalists how to react to gunfire, what to do in the event of earthquakes or how to practice basic vehicle safety. The problem is not just confined to foreigners, with local staff facing detention and torture. They too need training.”

While the media actively seeks out trouble and hotspots, other organisations face specific threats unique to their industry sector. But many are reluctant to talk about the risks for fear of scaring off existing and potential staff. Hamish, a training and safety advisor with Aid Training & Ops, reports a definite shift in the commercial sector’s approach to the problem. “Until recently there was an attitude of ‘hear no evil, speak no evil’, particularly in the petro-chemical, telecoms and construction industries in West and North Africa through to the Middle East,” he said. “But they are working



A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

on this and starting to pay serious attention to safety rather than just lip service. We're seeing an increase in consultants and expatriates being sent out to look after staff and operations."

He notes that this is partly due to the introduction of Corporate Manslaughter Legislation in 2009, which states that if an employee has not been informed of the risks and sufficient measures have not been put in place, senior managers will be held culpable. Training and intelligence, he argues, are the best ways of mitigating against risks. "Situations differ from country to country – especially when it comes to Westerners," he said. "It would be far better and less costly to go to a specialist company to do a risk assessment, identify the relevant threats and train staff to deal with them, discounting those threats which aren't relevant to the region and nature of your business."

A threat doesn't have to be a bomb or bullet. In the past many organisations have managed to keep any bad incidents out of the news. This is now almost impossible with the extraordinary growth of mobile phones, citizen journalism, social networks and other digital media. These not only add to the potential risks, they can also irreparably damage both corporate and personal reputations. Aid Training & Ops make a point of including media awareness in their safety training, because while there are no guarantees something won't happen, being prepared to handle the media in a crisis will certainly help to ensure that coverage is fair and in some cases, more well-disposed to the situation.

There are many contributing factors as to who requires training and whether it should be generic or bespoke. "On-the-ground bespoke training should be conducted if the situation dictates – for example with a CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear) threat, getting the trainer to you if, on arrival, you see shortcomings," he advised. "If, however, a team is being sent on a specific task and is not reactionary, then a bespoke course should be conducted. These can vary in length from one to six days, but the most essential part of bespoke training, is to conduct a 'training needs analysis' (TNA) meeting between the employer, team and trainer to establish the training requirement."

A non-operational manager working in the security sector recalled how he was stunned to find himself hauled in front of his bosses because he hadn't done a risk assessment for a routine business meeting in a European capital. While they eventually agreed that perhaps their reaction was a little extreme, the fact remains that every year business men and women are subject to abduction, mugging, sexual assault and petty crime worldwide.

"The suggestion that all business travellers conduct a hostile environment training course is not viable, and nor is there a requirement," said Mr

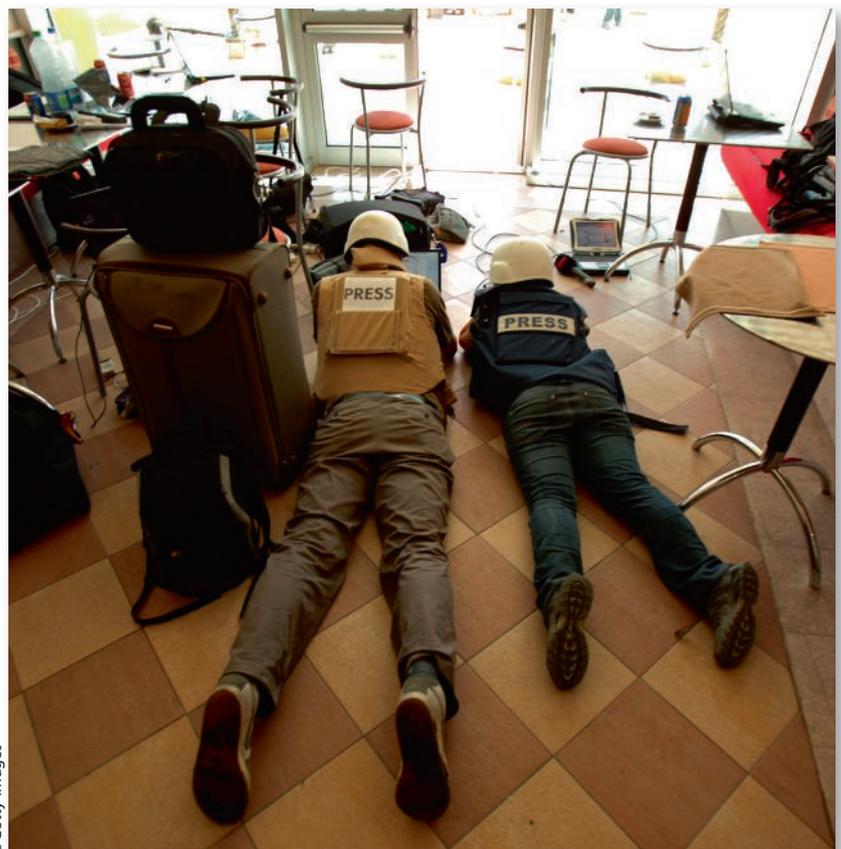
Purssey. "But as a minimum, all business travellers should have a basic understanding of travel and personal security awareness (TPSA). A TPSA course can be conducted in one day or can be bespoke over a number of days, and covers details businesspeople take for granted – advising on carriage of documents and money, hotel safety, going out/about, and surveillance awareness etc."

One of the most important aspects of all training is to ensure the delegate concludes the course with confidence to deal with situations they come across and they are not scarred by the training to the extent they do not wish to deploy. Trainers also believe it is beneficial – if not essential – for ALL employees to attend the training even if they do not actually deploy so that they understand what their colleagues might be facing and make decisions based on this knowledge.

The rapid growth in safety training and security providers can make it difficult to distinguish between reputable and dubious operators. A simple Google search will bring up a variety of companies, but there is no guarantee of professionalism. Mr Purssey concluded: "After many years in the industry, both training and deploying with a multitude of clients, I have witnessed some exceptional training and safety services and some truly unprofessional and unacceptable services. My personal advice would be to always meet the training provider where possible, ask for references prior to committing and if the company will not give a point of contact within the reference, walk away."

Anna Averkiou is an international media consultant specialising in strategy, crisis and reputation management. She uses her experience as a journalist to help organisations understand and engage with the media. She is also an Associate Lecturer at the London College of Communications and a tutor and examiner for the NCTJ.

Working under fire: Libya proved a highly dangerous environment for foreign journalists covering the conflict



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