

WHICH STRATEGIES ARE SUCCESSFUL FOR THE PREVENTION OF POLITICAL MURDER? - REFLEXIONS OF PBI ON INTERNATIONAL OBSERVATION AND ACCOMPANIMENT -



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Under which conditions and utilizing which strategies is it possible to prevent politically motivated murder? Peace brigades international (pbi) is an organisation that must continually grapple with this question. The organisation was founded in 1981 and focuses on the areas of non-violent conflict transformation and civilian protective accompaniment.

Pbi is a UN-recognized international peace and human rights organization that accompanies human rights defenders (HRD) within areas of conflict, who are subject to threats and persecution from governmental forces because of their commitment to the rights of all people. The organization sends out teams of international volunteers into these conflict areas to serve as protective companions and human rights observers. In this way, the organization serves in promoting violence prevention and strengthening the civilian conflict resolution effort.

The international organization adheres to the principles of non-violence, independence, non-partisanship, and non-interference and is only active where requested. Currently, it maintains projects in Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, Nepal, Indonesia, and is also involved in a peace-coalition in Chiapas, Mexico (SIPAZ).

The goal of pbi is to provide HRD with the political space needed in order for them to be able to pursue the legitimate work of human rights protection in their country without placing themselves or their families in danger.

In order to be able to answer the questions of whether it is possible to prevent political violence and, if so, through which strategies, it is first necessary to take a look at the surrounding context.

Description of the conflict situation

In conflict areas, the use or threatened use of violence against HRD for political purposes leads to intense fear and political paralysis. The deficiency or total absence of constitutional and democratic structures intensifies this paralysis and can lead to a complete standstill of social

initiatives. The state uses these repressive means because, in its view, the social movements threaten to change the status quo and thereby endanger the political and economic interests of the powerful elite. The populations of these failed states, however, still attempt to break through these decrepit and unjust structures and, in the spirit of social justice, attempt to close the „social gap“ between rich and poor.

In turn, the state uses the criminalization tactic in order to avoid losing its privileges and to enforce its political and economic interests. It creates artificial enemy concepts and uses them to justify massive violence against the population. HRD are portrayed as criminal activists who destroy the public order and who impede economic and social progress. As a consequence and in turn, the victims of repression join together in communities of solidarity which attempt to counteract the states' efforts towards repression and criminalization.

The Strategy: Creating political space

Pbi works on the premise that all political actors in complex conflict situations carry out a cost/benefit analysis of their political actions, in which the consequences of these actions appear either as acceptable/profitable or as unacceptable/unprofitable. Through this, they define the limits of their political maneuvering room.

Pbi's central assumption is that the international presence provided by international observers (without direct interference) increases the political costs of human rights violations for the aggressors and their enlists to the extent that they abandon their plans. Pbi also assumes that „threatening sufficient negative consequences (serves) to frighten the aggressor



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into not committing the human rights violation.” (Mahony/ Eguren 1997: 84). However, the physical presence of the volunteers alone is not enough to provide the HRD adequate protection. Therefore, pbi extends beyond the physical accompaniment with political and informational components. On the one hand, the teams repeatedly conduct meetings with local, national, and international authorities and organizations within the countries and also maintain contact with the embassies represented there. As Liam Mahony and Luis Enrique Eguren note: „Moral condemnation...and diplomatic hints... by the international community (serve) to create a generalized understanding that human rights violations will result in negative consequences.” (ibid.: 85). On the other hand, pbi publishes articles and brochures about the human rights situation in the project countries. These publications are then distributed in the respective countries as well as in North America and Europe.

The political as well as the informative components of the accompaniment are further pursued in Germany. The contact to important politicians, lawmakers, ambassadors, journalists and lawyers as well as the routine publication of articles serves to enhance the protection of the HRD. In addition, workshops and lectures serve to outline the human rights violations and to elaborate upon specific incidents. Another important mechanism that serves to protect HRD in conflict areas is that of the international alarm and support networks. These are located in the European and North-American countries where pbi country groups are present. They consist of individuals, including prominent figures and politicians, who receive prompt notice of urgent human rights abuses and who then take appropriate action. What must be kept in mind, though, is that in order to generate international, political pressure with any credibility,

the „chain of communication from accompaniment to the international community to governmental pressure must be clear and effective.” (ibid.: 86).

governmental actors liable and calls upon them to fulfill their obligations to human rights as stated in international conventions and agreements to which



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Now comes the question: Under which conditions does this strategy work?

The strategy to create political space for the HRD only works, and pbi can only be involved, when certain conditions are met:

Political circumstances

The states must want to maintain or enhance their international images as HRD and implementers. There must be, or at least appear to be, present basic foundations of democracy and constitutionality. International political pressure can only be effective and have an impact when these interests exist. Under such conditions, the fear generated by threats and violent attacks on the human rights activists does not have to lead to the paralysis of the social movement but rather can challenge the existing rudiments of democracy and constitutionality and put them under pressure. Pbi holds the

they have committed themselves. Through its international character, pbi has significant potential to exert pressure.

If a political situation should deteriorate to the point that the state no longer cares about being internationally perceived as supportive of human rights - in other words, when its values have fundamentally deviated from those of the international community -, then a protective accompaniment from pbi cannot succeed. This is also the case when other benefits, such as economic or political interests, outweigh the political costs. In such a situation, not only would the volunteers be placing themselves in danger but it would also be impossible to build up international pressure and offer the human rights activists protection. The same applies when the country is infiltrated with organized crime, because in this case too, the protective accompaniment would produce no deterring effect.

Comprehensive and ongoing accompaniment

As already mentioned, pbi does not rely only on physical presence and observation as strategies to create political space for HRD, but offers a comprehensive accompaniment that includes physical, political, and informative elements. This comprehensive system of accompaniment aims to contribute to the activists' protection in both the short and long term.

According to Mahony and Eguren, „deterrence analysts distinguish between ‚general deterrence‘ and ‚immediate deterrence‘.“ (ibid.: 85). In terms of protecting human rights, a combination of various international and local efforts are needed to achieve a general deterrence with long-term effect. „Immediate deterrence, as represented by accompaniment, sends a specific message at a given time to a specific aggressor to forestall attacks against a specific target: ‚Don't touch this one while we're here!‘“ (ibid.). The two forms of deterrence complement each other. Thereby, the combination of and continuity in the implementation of all these activities is very important.

Between accompanied and accomplices

In order to establish effective political pressure, it is vital that those being threatened as well as the accompaniment organization know who the aggressor is.

When the conflict is too complex or if there is too much uncertainty about which actors and aggressors are involved and how they are connected to each other, protective accompaniment is inadvisable – it would place the lives of the accompanied and the volunteers in danger.

Furthermore, there must be clear, confidential, and effective communication between those being accompanied and the accompaniment organization. Clear agreements must be reached, and the accompanied persons must be fully aware of the mandate and methods of the accompaniment organization. Additionally, those being accompanied should keep the accompaniment organization well informed about their situation and activities.

Within the accompaniment organization

It is important to conduct analyses before, during, and after the accompaniment. Prior to an accompaniment, pbi conducts a conflict and

safety analysis to identify all the actors in the conflict. The aggressors must be affiliated with the government and must be aware of the political costs and consequences of their actions; otherwise, pbi has no deterrence effect. Pbi cannot step in when the conflict is too complex for analysis, when there is no information available about the actors, when it is a conflict between individuals, or when organized crime is involved. In such cases, intervention would fail and would endanger the volunteers' lives.

Certain precautionary measures are also taken before every physical accompaniment. Politicians and lawmakers at the national, local, and community levels as well as ambassadors of the volunteers' home countries are informed when an accompaniment is scheduled to take place. This is especially emphasized when the accompaniments take place in remote areas. If the volunteers get into danger, the ambassadors are ready to intervene. Shortly before the accompaniments, the local police and human rights organizations are also informed – on one hand to solicit support in case of emergency and, on the other hand, to exert political pressure.

It is of great importance that there is enough personnel available to implement steady and ongoing accompaniment measures. Clear agreements must also be made within the accompanying teams in order to minimize danger.

Best Practice: The 24-hour accompaniment

One example for the success of international accompaniment as a protection mechanism is the 24-hour accompaniment. Pbi utilizes this type of accompaniment in cases of severe threat and when a person's safety is seriously in danger. This means that the human rights activists who request this form of accompaniment or in whose cases it is deemed absolutely necessary are accompanied by the volunteers 24 hours a day, everywhere they go.

In 2002 Valentina Rosendo Cantú, a member of the indigenous Me'phaa people in the Mexican state of Guerrero, was interrogated, beaten, and sexually abused by members of the military. She brought the crime to court and, since then, has been fighting for justice and punishment of the perpetrators. During this battle, the now 25-year-



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old has repeatedly been followed and received death threats against her and her family. Her eight-year-old daughter was also threatened and nearly kidnapped. The acts of violence increased to the extent that in February 2010, out of fear for Valentina's life, pbi initiated 24-hour accompaniment. Up to now, the volunteer team accompanies Valentina everywhere she goes from the moment she leaves her house. Additionally, the pbi team is available around the clock via phone.

Example of an unsuccessful international accompaniment

In April of 2010, an international caravan was travelling within Oaxaca (a state in the south of Mexico) for humanitarian purposes when it was attacked. The peace caravan's goal was to deliver food and medicine to the San Juan Copala community and to document human rights violations against the Triqui people living there. However, before reaching their destination, roughly 30 members of a paramilitary group opened fire on the caravan. A

Mexican activist and an international observer from Finland, who were both accompanying the caravan, were shot and consequently died, and there were many additional injuries. One member of the caravan hid in the forest and had to hold out for several days, yet help did not arrive.

San Juan Copala is an autonomous community of the Triqui people, which has dissociated itself from the official government. The community's population attempts to lead and govern its territory autonomously and with self-determination, and is therefore a thorn in the government's eye. San Juan Copala is led by the Independent Movement for the Unification of the Triqui Struggles (MULTI). However, the group UBISORT (Unión de Bienestar Social de la Región Triqui), which has been classified by the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees as a paramilitary organization, blocked the community's access to electricity, food and medical care since January 2010. UBISORT was founded in 1994 by local members of Oaxaca's ruling party, the Institutional Revolution Party (PRI). The residents themselves are not

even allowed to leave the community, since paramilitaries hinder them from leaving. While the Oaxacan government has denied responsibility for the attack and blames the caravan organizers for entering the region even knowing what the situation in the region was, the victims of the attack blame the government and paramilitaries for being responsible for the losses. In these situations, the concept of creating protection and a larger political space for the local human rights organizations through the presence of international observers is perceived not to be working. The human rights caravan could not have hoped for support from the government because San Juan Copala has long since been considered a conflict area in which several unpredictable actors, such as paramilitaries and guerrilla groups are operating. Therefore, international accompaniment and the deterrence effect is questionable, and pbi is not active in the area. Activists criticize that politicians assume no responsibility for those who venture in the area, and they maintain that they have no control

over the groups that operate there. And as long as the blame and responsibility can be placed on uncontrollable groups, as claimed by the government, there are no political costs that can prevent this type of political murder.

The problem of the non measurability of success

The strategy of creating political space appears convincing in principle. However, accompaniment organizations such as pbi and other face a problem: the success of efforts in international protective accompaniment and human rights observation cannot be objectively measured. It is not possible to determine whether the accompaniment contributed to keeping a person alive due to the large number of factors that might have played a role. Unfortunately, only the failures, i.e. the death of or attack on an accompanied person, are measurable. Throughout its existence, though, pbi has had no such failures to report – no one has been killed while being physically accompanied.

Subjective success is, in a way, more measurable: the thanks of the HRD. Guatemalan environmental activist and pbi-accompanied Eloyda Mejía of the Friends of Izabal Sees Union (ASALI) said the following: „The protection that I have received from pbi has saved my life.“

And Colombian journalist Claudia Julieta Duque commented that „pbi was always there to save my daughter’s and my life. Its members became my guardian angels, my friends, and my essential company. If I was able to smile during that period, it was thanks to them. It was thanks to these foreign nationals, so concerned for our situation, who worked with dedication and deep respect.

I was fully aware that without their presence, the threats might have turned from words into actions.“

Tita Radilla and her brother Rosendo from the AFADEM organization (Association of Relatives of Disappeared People and Victims of Human Rights Abuses in Mexico) were also accompanied by pbi and reported the following: „pbi was very important during the trials. The accompaniment from pbi gives us strength and a great deal of security. The presence of pbi means the government knows that the international community is watching the trial.“

The keys to successful protective accompaniment for the prevention of political murder

In summary, pbi emphasizes the following points as the key to successful protective accompaniment:

- **Comprehensive accompaniment: physical, informative, and political**
- **Continuity in regard to all three aspects of accompaniment**
- **Effective and efficient networking, on both the local and international level**
- **Advocacy work at all political levels**
- **Transparency of their actions**
- **Confidentiality with the accompanied persons**
- **Excellent communication between those being accompanied and the accompaniers**

During pbi’s many years of experience with international accompaniment it has become clear that the combination of these key factors is crucial for minimizing the probability of political attacks and murders. ■

SOURCE

- Mahony, Liam and Eguren, Luis Enrique (1997): *Unarmed Bodyguards – International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights*. Kumarian Press, Inc.

