

Body Armour and Personal Safety Working in Hostile Environments

Humanitarian aid workers voluntarily travel to challenging environments and may face various threats. It is not unusual for aid workers to be attacked and 2013 was the most dangerous year recorded for humanitarian workers, with a staggering 155 killed, 171 seriously injured, and 134 kidnapped – all whilst trying to help others. At time of writing, official figures for 2014 have yet to be collated, yet, by August of that year, 79 deaths had been recorded.

Before workers leave for their destination, they need to prepare thoroughly for the situations they will, and may, face: depending on the location, and the cause of its problems – conflict, disease, natural disasters – some dangers will be more likely than others. In Syria, for example, the risks of gunfire and explosives is higher than in an area afflicted by an [outbreak of Ebola](#), yet armed criminals may still be present in such conflict-free zones.

To stay as safe as possible some humanitarian aid teams are considering body armour. The initial question is, if you need body armour then should you be in that location/situation. However, if you are considering body armour then with so many different types available on today's market, how do you know which is right for you?

Understanding Body Armour and the Risks you Face

In recent years, body armour has become more lightweight, comfortable, and streamlined than ever: even the toughest bulletproof vests are now far, far from the cumbersome designs of old. Thanks to bullet proof vest manufacturers like safeguardarmour.co.uk now have covert bullet/stab proof vests available for civilians and the security sector. With the majority of humanitarian aid teams working in locations with extreme heat and dryness, body armour must be suitable for long-term wear without a risk of overheating. Modern temperature-control technologies allow for a more comfortable fit, with vests able to help the skin breathe and absorb sweat from the body to reduce damp patches and distracting discomfort.



Three types of protection are available: ballistic, edged blade, and spike. Each of these is designed to defend against a specific threat – bullets, blades, spiked-tipped weapons – with various levels within each category, based on the amount of protection they provide.

Ballistic Armour

When considering the threat, you should try to determine the most common forms of weaponry local criminals/gangs/fighters use: with ballistic armour, there are five levels available, and choosing the right one for the ammunition you expect to face is essential.

Ballistic vests are rated at levels IIA, II, IIIA, III, and IV – these are regulated by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), a US-based organisation, following stringent testing. These protect against most bullets, from the more common, lower-velocity handgun ammunition right through to high-velocity armour-piercing rounds.

The more protection a bulletproof vest provides, the heavier it will be, though manufacturers now produce ballistic armour thin enough to be concealed underneath other layers (this helps you to remain as discreet and inconspicuous as possible). Vests at levels IIA, II, and IIIA are all softer and more flexible than those at III and IV, due to their Kevlar-only manufacture – vests at the latter levels also feature ballistic plates, strong enough to stop the most lethal bullets.

Kevlar is a tightly-woven fibre, strong enough to absorb a bullet's energy on impact, distributing it throughout the materials as passes through the top layers (of many); bruising and swelling can still occur at the impact-point, however.

Edged Blade Armour

For areas with a low rate of gun-related incidents, stab vests (otherwise known as edged blade armour) may be more suitable: these are a popular precaution across the security industry, designed with a tight Kevlar weave which creates friction against blades.

With multiple layers placed on top of each other, stab vests resist both slashing and stabbing attacks. These are available in three levels – I, II, III – to defend against different amounts of energy used in an assault. The higher the level the more the protection.

In many cases, stab protection can be added to ballistic armour, for more comprehensive defence. This ensures you remain protected whether fired upon or threatened with knives.

Spike Protection

As with stab vests, spike protection is made with a tight Kevlar weave, though this leaves only gaps narrow enough to trap pointed-tips between, stopping the weapon. In poorer areas, or those where guns and engineered blades aren't easily available, people may use needles or sharpened objects as weapons – spike protection will defend you from such attacks.

Size, Fit, and Visibility: Key Considerations

When wearing body armour, the right fit for your shape is essential: the wrong size can still leave you exposed to danger. As a protective vest's purpose is to defend the vital organs from harm, it should keep your torso covered at all times – if it's the wrong size, it can prove inadequate. A vest which is too big may hang away from the body, and shift position, possibly pushing up into the throat (a frustrating distraction when you need it least); a vest which is too small can feel tight and restrictive, leaving you unable to move as freely as you may need to when facing gunfire or physical assault.

The ideal vest should sit against your torso comfortably. If you need to maintain a discreet profile, try covert armour with breathable materials, to keep you cool in warm climates. If keeping a low-profile is unnecessary, choose overt armour, but be sure to take the additional layers worn underneath into consideration when measuring yourself up for sizes.

If you are considering body armour, and have done your risk assessments accordingly, do seek expert advice if in any doubt.