



# Case Study: Relocating After Cartel Violence

Preserving Team Safety  
Without Halting the  
Mission

# Case Study: Relocating Operations After a Cartel Killing — Without Losing Staff or Shutting Down the Mission

## Executive Summary

Following the brutal, high-profile murder of a close contact of staff—executed in his vehicle in broad daylight—client operations in the area became untenable. Staff were panicked, morale collapsed, and leadership feared both physical harm and a full operational shutdown. Rather than abandon the region entirely, the client brought in Pholus to coordinate a discreet but urgent relocation. We assessed regional risks, vetted new locations and security providers, and prioritized proximity to minimize disruption. In under two weeks, operations resumed in a new, safer location. No staff were lost, the mission continued uninterrupted, and stakeholders remained confident despite the extraordinary circumstances.

## Key Results & Indicators

- All operations restored in 10 business days
- No staff resignations post-incident
- Zero further safety incidents recorded
- Cost-effective transition completed under budget

## **Introduction**

When criminal violence erupts near your operations, there's rarely time for strategy decks or slow-moving board votes. Decisions have to be made quickly, staff safety must take priority, and long-term operational impact has to be minimized. In volatile regions, the right advisory partner can mean the difference between a temporary disruption—and total organizational collapse.

Pholus was brought in by a Latin American client after a shocking event: a staff member's close friend was executed in broad daylight at a traffic light, in front of his young daughter. The killing was cartel-related, and it happened just minutes from the organization's operating hub. The psychological and operational aftershocks were immediate.

What followed was a rapid yet methodical relocation process that allowed the organization to resume operations safely, preserve institutional trust, and maintain their mission—without suffering long-term reputational or staffing damage.

## **The Trigger: Violence Hits Too Close to Home**

The client had been operating in a region increasingly marked by organized crime. While the area had once been relatively calm, cartel violence had begun to spread beyond border zones and rural trafficking corridors into urban areas where NGOs and development organizations were present.

The breaking point came when someone personally known to multiple staff members was gunned down in his car at a traffic light in front of his child, who was also wounded in the attack. Word spread quickly. Staff panicked. Field operations halted immediately. Rumors circulated that the organization's visibility made it a soft target. And without immediate clarity from leadership, anxiety only grew.

That's when Pholus was called in.

## **Our Approach: Secure the People, Then the Mission**

Pholus quickly mobilized into containment mode.

### **1. Staff Safety and Shutdown Protocols**

We advised the client to formally suspend all in-person activity for 10 business days. This gave staff time to process, de-escalate rumor cycles, and avoid additional psychological trauma. It also prevented hasty departures or public social media exposure that could signal vulnerability.

### **2. Location Analysis Under Duress**

Next, we conducted a rapid-location risk assessment focused on proximity to the existing base, allowing for minimal disruption to transport routes, logistics contracts, and staff commutes. We:

- Pulled data on recent cartel activity from local news and unofficial sources
- Interviewed trusted community stakeholders
- Vetted private security firms already familiar with the client's line of work
- Identified viable fallback sites with natural security advantages and lower visibility

### **3. Relocation Support & Vendor Optimization**

Once a secure alternative was selected, Pholus helped the organization:

- Renegotiate vendor contracts for the new location
- Establish a lower-profile security posture with enhanced private protection
- Communicate the shift to stakeholders, including donors and in-country partners, without triggering panic or reputational concern
- Create a transparent framework for relocation cost review and post-move evaluation

### **4. Stakeholder Briefing and Governance Support**

We drafted communication protocols and board briefings to ensure transparency without sensationalism. We also advised against returning to the original site—even if conditions improved—because the reputational and psychological risks had become embedded in staff perception.

## **The Outcome: Rapid Recovery, Long-Term Stability**

- Operations resumed after a 2-week suspension, with full team return
- No staff attrition occurred as a result of the incident
- The new site was accepted by staff and stakeholders as safer and more appropriate
- Pholus' due diligence framework ensured no further cartel-related incidents at the new site
- The original facility has since fallen into urban blight—reinforcing the wisdom of the decision to permanently exit
- Stakeholder trust was preserved through professional handling of crisis communications and cost transparency

While staff morale was deeply shaken in the immediate aftermath, the decisive response, transparent relocation process, and respectful handling of internal concerns restored confidence.

## **Why It Matters**

For organizations working in fragile markets, cartel violence is not theoretical. It creates fear, delays, reputational risk, and — if handled poorly — permanent institutional damage. What matters isn't just reacting. It's knowing how to assess risk quietly, protect your people, and pivot operations before trauma turns into turnover.

## **Final Thoughts**

If your team is operating in a high-threat environment, don't wait for a crisis to start planning your exit strategy. Pholus helps organizations build readiness plans, threat monitoring systems, and relocation frameworks that preserve operations and protect lives.

When violence hits close to home, we'll help you move quickly — without losing sight of your mission or your people.

## About Pholus

Pholus is a discreet advisory firm that supports founders, boards, and stakeholders in fragile or complex environments. We specialize in quiet interventions, exit planning, and operational clarity when reputations, relationships, or resources are at risk.

**Need to navigate something delicate or high-stakes?** We work behind the scenes to help you stabilize, reset, or exit — without triggering avoidable fallout.

**Visit us:** <https://www.pholus.co/> **Email:** [contact@pholus.co](mailto:contact@pholus.co) **Signal:** pholus.01

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