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UN urges renewed support for relief workers on World Humanitarian Day



UN aid worker distributes blankets to survivors displaced by cyclone Nargis, Myanmar

19 August 2010 – Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon marked **World Humanitarian Day** today by leading a chorus of United Nations officials in lauding aid workers – including some who have paid with their lives – for their tireless efforts to help those who have lived through wars, catastrophes and other terrible events.

The world body is observing the second-ever Day at its many offices and peacekeeping missions, also spotlighting the needs of the people that aid workers try to help – such as the 10 million refugees and the nearly 30 million others uprooted within their own borders, as well as the one in every six people in the world who are chronically hungry.

“On World Humanitarian Day, we renew our commitment to life-saving relief efforts – and remember those who died while serving this noble cause,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in a **message**.

Last year, 102 humanitarian workers lost their lives, compared with 30 deaths among aid workers in 1999. In addition, nearly 280 aid workers were victims of security incidents, more the quadruple the number one decade ago.

In the past 12 months, humanitarian workers have lost lives in both violent attacks in which they were targeted in several parts of the world, and in natural disasters, notably Haiti where many lost their lives in the earthquake in January. In Afghanistan last October, five UN staff were killed when armed assailants attacked the guest house in Kabul where they were staying.

The General Assembly proclaimed 19 August as World Humanitarian Day two years ago to commemorate the 2003 Canal Hotel bombing in Baghdad, which claimed the lives of 22 UN staff members, including the world body's top envoy in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and wounded more than 150 people.

Mr. Ban laid a wreath at UN Headquarters in New York this morning in remembrance of the world body's personnel killed seven years ago.

He also pointed out that those who survive horrifying ordeals are often left with nothing.

"Humanitarian workers help them get back on their feet. They help restart their lives," the Secretary-General [said](#) at today's ceremony. They are the face of the best that is within us, acting in solidarity with those who are suffering."

Outgoing UN Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes said at the ceremony that while there are many worldwide in need of aid, relief workers' ability to reach them is increasingly at risk.

"We have no other agenda than saving lives and delivering the basics of life – food, water, shelter, medical care, protection for the most vulnerable," he said. "Yet in too many places where humanitarians work, whereas once we were respected, today we are targeted."

The UN human rights chief Navi Pillay [spotlighted](#) how the efforts of humanitarians "represent the international community's commitment to maintaining, in the most practical sense, a fundamental respect for human rights and dignity."

The High Commissioner noted that the global support for relief work is underpinned by the conviction that the principles enshrined in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) apply to all people and must be upheld in all situations, especially following disasters or man-made calamities.

For his part, Eric Laroche, Assistant Director-General for Health Action in Crises for the UN World Health Organization ([WHO](#)), paid tribute to the dedication and commitment of the many aid workers worldwide who toil in difficult and often dangerous situations.

"I have witnessed first-hand the awe-inspiring humanitarian spirit demonstrated by efforts at the community, national and international levels to help affected populations in such situations," he said in a [statement](#).

Mr. Laroche pointed to the current catastrophe in Pakistan, which has been inundated by deadly flooding that has affected many millions of people. That crisis, he said, "demonstrates the important work of humanitarians who are working around the clock to fight disease and reduce suffering."

Somalia is the scene of one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, where 12 aid workers have been killed since the start of last year and 10 others abducted and still unaccounted for. More than 1.4 million people are internally displaced in the

Horn of Africa country, while 600,000 Somalis live as refugees in neighbouring countries.

The death toll for Somalia in the first seven months of this year is higher than for the same period last year, with reports of nearly 1,000 civilians killed and more than 2,500 others injured. Most casualties resulted from shelling by warring groups in the capital, Mogadishu.

In the past year, said Mark Bowden, UN Humanitarian and Resident Coordinator for Somalia, in his message for World Humanitarian Day, "working in the humanitarian field has become ever more challenging." Access to those in need is on the wane, especially in the south-central region, where the offices of several aid agencies have been occupied, their workers harassed and their operations halted.

"Somalia is one of far too many places in the world where humanitarian workers were once respected, and today are targeted," he underlined. "It is a place where we have seen our ability to reach populations shrink due to threats and insecurity, so that ensuring who gets assistance is that times determined by where we can reach, rather than where we ought to reach."

Despite obstacles, relief workers in Somalia have ensured the delivery of food to 340,000 people in the capital, home to many of the country's most vulnerable, while in the rest of the country, 1.8 million people have received some form of food aid in the first half of this year.

The work of humanitarian personnel can also take a heavy emotional toll. Anas al-Qaed, 25, a community service worker in the Damascus, Syria, office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), recalled a particularly difficult case regarding a 14-year-old boy from Afghanistan that left him depleted.

It took four months for Mr. al-Qaed to gain the trust of the boy, who was traumatized by the loss of his family and being repeatedly raped.

"One of the most difficult aspects of the job is trying to maintain a distance from the daily horrors that we are exposed to, but it I enjoy this work because it allows me to make a difference in people's lives," Mr. al-Qaed [said](#).

Fellow UNHCR staffer Elias Shalhoub, a psychologist and protection officer in Lebanon, works closely with refugees and asylum-seekers in detention centers, helping those in need of international protection apply for resettlement in third countries.

"I reach the point of banging my head against the wall when I see sick people in need of protection who are kept behind bars and our efforts to free them fail," he said.

But there are also times he is overwhelmed by joy at successfully being able to free detainees and ensure that they can begin their lives anew in another country.

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