



Message of United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes on World Humanitarian Day



Today is World Humanitarian Day, a day to remember the millions of people affected by war, natural disasters, sickness, and malnutrition, and those who are working to relieve their suffering. Those in need desperately require our help, but our ability to reach them is, sadly, increasingly at risk.

Humanitarian aid workers strive to ensure that all those who have experienced a traumatic event and need life-saving assistance receive it, regardless of where they are in the world, and regardless of their religion, race or social group. We have no other agenda than saving lives and delivering the basics of life--food, water, shelter, medical care, protection for the most vulnerable. Yet in too many places where humanitarians work, whereas once we were respected, today we are targeted.

Violent attacks on humanitarian personnel are increasingly frequent and brutal. Over 100 humanitarian workers were killed in both 2008 and 2009 – more than three times the number killed a decade ago and twice the number killed in 2005. 2009 was, statistically and by common consent, the deadliest year yet for humanitarian staff. Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia, where humanitarians are too often deliberately targeted, lead the way in the numbers of deaths, kidnappings and attacks, but Sudan, Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, where banditry is more the problem, are becoming increasingly dangerous too. So far in 2010, at least 30 humanitarian workers have been killed while carrying out their work.

We face a future in which more humanitarian aid will be needed to cope with the impact of climate change and natural hazards, and the rising numbers of civilian victims of internal conflicts. There are currently more than 27 million internally displaced people and 10 million refugees as a result of conflict. One out of every six people is chronically hungry. If humanitarian aid workers do not have full and free access, many hundreds of thousands of the people they need to reach will not receive the quantity or quality of assistance they require.

We therefore need to improve awareness of and respect for the principles according to which this work is conducted: humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. Over many years, and across many--though not all--situations of armed conflict, humanitarian actors have had a generally high level of acceptance and respect by parties to conflict. We have been protected by the UN flag and the distinct humanitarian emblems and profiles of our organizations. However, we can no longer count on this to be the case. A perception is spreading that humanitarian aid is delivered exclusively by Western organizations or agencies, or somehow represents one ideological or world view. This perception is entirely wrong, yet increasingly widespread in some areas.

Those who propagate the kind of suspicion of humanitarians that has made our work so much more deadly in recent years are often those who have the most obvious political reasons to do so to justify their own behavior, or in some cases those who have the most to hide.

But in any case better acceptance of humanitarian work by state and non-state actors alike is desperately needed. The vast majority of aid workers come from the countries in which they work. Most of the victims of attacks on aid workers are these same national staff. National and international, male and female, aid workers reflect all cultures, ideologies and backgrounds. These brave individuals are united by their shared commitment to humanitarianism, which is a universal value and responsibility. They work on behalf of everyone. Preventing them from doing their work harms no-one more than the most vulnerable. Today is a good time for a renewed commitment to humanitarian principles by all concerned.

John Holmes is the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator

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World Humanitarian Day film can be downloaded from OCHA Online at: <http://ochaonline.un.org/whd/>