



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

MEMO

Brussels, 19 August 2012

Statement by EU Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva on World Humanitarian Day 2012

The European Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response, Kristalina Georgieva, made the following statement:

"Today is World Humanitarian Day. Nine years ago on this day the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General to Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and twenty one of his colleagues were killed in the bombing of the UN Headquarters in Baghdad. It is a day to pay solemn tribute to all humanitarian personnel who have worked in promotion of the humanitarian cause and lost their lives following that call.

The Canal Hotel bombing irreversibly changed the security situation in which humanitarian aid workers operate. Humanitarian work is one of the world's most dangerous professions. Kidnappings, shootings and death threats are all too often part of the job description in places blighted by conflict such as Sudan, Syria and Somalia. Aid workers are increasingly exposed to risk while maintaining a lifeline to the victims of conflicts and disasters around the world. It is unacceptable that they are subject to harassment, abduction or even murder while serving humanity.

Attacks on humanitarian posts have tripled in the last decade. Since 2011, 109 humanitarian workers have been killed, 143 others were wounded and 132 have been kidnapped, according to the United Nations. The overwhelming majority of these victims were not international aid workers but those serving in their own country working closest to the local population. Crimes against unarmed civilians are never justified. When these crimes are committed against people who dedicate their lives to saving others the injustice is even more apparent.

And the safety and security of aid workers is directly linked to safe access to vulnerable populations and the sustainable delivery of assistance. Thousands of vulnerable people can be left without essential support if programs are suspended or closed due to insecurity.

They also draw the world closer together by reminding us that we are one family, sharing the same dreams for a peaceful planet, where all people can live in safety, and with dignity.

So this is also a day to examine our own lives and consider what more we can do to help - to reach out to people enduring conflict, disaster and hardship. Let those we honour today inspire us to start our own journey to make the world a better place and bring our human family more closely together.

Background

On 11 December 2008, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Swedish sponsored GA Resolution A/63/L.49 on the Strengthening of the Coordination of Emergency Assistance of the United Nations which designated 19 August as World Humanitarian Day (WHD).

The Resolution gave for the first time special recognition to all United Nations and associated humanitarian personnel who have worked in the promotion of the humanitarian cause and those who have lost their lives in the line of duty. It urges all Member States, entities of the United Nations within existing resources, as well as the other International Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations to observe World Humanitarian Day annually in an appropriate way.

There are more than half a million aid workers in the world today, counting both relief and development personnel. The last detailed assessment of the sector, carried out in 2008, placed the number of humanitarians at 595,000 (including international and national employees of UN humanitarian agencies, international non-governmental organisations and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent family).

Attacks on aid workers have increased significantly over the past years, with an increasing number of these incidents being politically motivated and directly targeting aid workers. More than 800 have been killed trying to deliver aid to those in need in the last decade and another 1300 have been kidnapped or wounded. Over the same period there has been a three-fold increase in security incidents where humanitarians have been targeted.

To be able to deliver assistance, humanitarian workers need access to those in need. Access can be hard to get in the aftermath of a natural disaster or in the midst of armed conflict. Security is one of the greatest problems faced by the humanitarian community, which struggles with new and increasingly complex restrictions placed on humanitarian space.

Humanitarian principles and international legal frameworks are intended to offer a degree of formal protection but are often ignored. The conditions in which humanitarian workers operate are growing more dangerous every year. Humanitarian emblems and flags which traditionally provided a shield for humanitarian workers are now turning them into targets.

Recent examples of attacks on humanitarian workers

Afghanistan remains the most dangerous country for aid workers. Since 2011 there have been 51 incidents where 36 have been killed and more than 50 have been kidnapped, the vast majority of them Afghan nationals. Recently four workers from ECHO's partner organisation were kidnapped while travelling through the mountains of Badakhshan.

Somalia and **Kenya** are also among the countries with the highest number of incidents. In June of 2012, the Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council, Elisabeth Rasmussen was lucky to escape unharmed when the convoy she was travelling with came under fire killing a driver and leading to the kidnapping of four other aid workers.

Syria has become dangerous for humanitarian workers in the last year; despite severely limited access meaning there are very few humanitarian workers on the ground, no less than 6 have been killed there trying to deliver aid since the beginning of the year. For two of these deaths it is alleged that the humanitarian workers, both from the Syrian Red Crescent, were intentionally targeted. These incidents, as well as any other intentional attacks on humanitarian aid workers, constitute direct violations of International Humanitarian Law.

Darfur is one of the most dangerous places for humanitarian workers. In June, Patrick Noonan, a British aid worker for WFP, was released after 86 days in captivity, following his abduction by gunmen in Sudan's western Darfur region. Noonan had been working in Sudan as a logistician for about two years. Since 2009, 40 humanitarian workers have been abducted in Darfur, including Noonan and six aircrew members working with the UN Humanitarian Air Service managed by WFP.

Research conducted by the UN shows that over 50% of attacks in the last year took place while humanitarian workers were travelling by road. Despite their heightened vulnerability when travelling by road or over rough terrain in insecure areas, aid workers often refuse to be accompanied by armed escorts because of the risk that local populations will perceive them as being supported or protected by one of the parties to the conflict. As a result armed escorts can be more secure in the short term, but they can reduce humanitarian access to people in need in the long-term. This foresight on the part of humanitarians is important as many conflicts can burn on for years or even decades; long after media interest wanes.

The EU is the world's largest humanitarian donor. The Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Directorate General (ECHO) has more than 300 people working in its headquarters in Brussels and more than 400 in 44 field offices located in 38 countries around the world where humanitarian aid is needed.

The Commission collaborates with over 200 relief organisations. Its humanitarian partners include 14 United Nations agencies, 191 non-governmental organisations and three international organisations (The International Committee of the Red Cross/Red Crescent, The International Federation of the Red Cross/Red Crescent and IOM).

For more information

The European Commission's humanitarian aid:

http://ec.europa.eu/echo/index_en.htm

Website of the European Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response, Kristalina Georgieva:

http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/georgieva/index_en.htm

Weblinks on WHD:

http://ec.europa.eu/echo/news/2012/whd2012_en.htm

<http://www.unocha.org/about-us/publications/world-humanitarian-day>

<http://www.sergiovdmfoundation.org/wcms/index.php?lang=en>

<http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/world-humanitarian-day-2012>