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newsletter Europe

Special issue – World Humanitarian Day 2010

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Europe Zone newsletter
special issue - 19 August 2010

World Humanitarian Day 2010

(Detail) Voluntary nurses of the Italian Red Cross attending the Fiaccolata from Solferino to Castiglione, Italy, 20-24 June, 2007. Stephen Ryan/IFRC

"The General Assembly decides to designate 19 August as World Humanitarian Day in order to contribute to increasing public awareness about humanitarian assistance activities worldwide and the importance of international cooperation in this regard, as well as to honour all humanitarian and United Nations and associated personnel who have worked in the promotion of the humanitarian cause and those who have lost their lives in the cause of duty"

UNGA A/63/L.49
3 December 2008

Dear friends,

On 19 August, 2010, the whole international community celebrates the second edition of **World Humanitarian Day**. Designated as such by the UN General Assembly resolution of 3 December 2008, World Humanitarian Day finds its origins in the date of 19 August 2003, when the then Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General to Iraq, **Sérgio Vieira de Mello**, and 21 of his colleagues tragically lost their lives in the bombing of the UN Headquarters in Baghdad. World Humanitarian Day was thus created to pay special recognition to all humanitarian personnel who every day work to promote the humanitarian cause, as well as commemorate those who have lost their lives in the course of duty.

Today, National Red Cross Red Crescent Societies, the International Federation, the whole UN system, as well as the other international and non-governmental organisations, are united in giving tribute to the humanitarian work that all the volunteers and aid workers in the world carry out to improve the lives of the most vulnerable people.

And this year, following the killing of ten humanitarian aid workers in Afghanistan earlier this month, such day seems to assume an even stronger role in reminding governments of their responsibility to guarantee the security and protection of humanitarian personnel, who often put their life at stake while fulfilling their mission. As we know, all parties involved in armed conflicts, in compliance with their obligations under the Geneva Conventions, have the responsibility to ensure that humanitarian workers be protected. And now that, more than ever, we witness the progressive deterioration of the respect of International Humanitarian Law and the increasing targeting of aid workers, such responsibility is becoming a vital duty.
On the other hand, a similar responsibility is implied in the relationship between humanitarian workers, who accept to face the dangers of their job, and the international humanitarian organisations they work for, which must be responsible for the risks that the presence alone of their own volunteers and staff in a country can entail.

We, as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, do not want World Humanitarian Day to be an occasion to celebrate our successes. I sincerely hope that the power of such day may grow stronger and stronger every year, the power to remind all of us that along with the vulnerable people we struggle to protect, we must not forget the people who risk their lives to protect them.

Anitta Underlin
Director of Europe Zone

WORLD HUMANITARIAN DAY - 19 August 2010

THE ORIGINS OF WORLD HUMANITARIAN DAY

Seven years ago, in the afternoon of **19 August 2003**, the **UN Headquarters in Baghdad, Iraq, was bombed**. Twenty-two people lost their lives, including the United Nations' Special Representative in Iraq **Sérgio Vieira de Mello**, and over a hundred were wounded. That was an unprecedentedly violent attack to the UN, which stunned the world. Prior to that date, many other humanitarian workers lost their lives while bringing their help to those in need, and many still die every day.

It is to commemorate all of them, as well as to raise public awareness about humanitarian issues in a globalised world, that, on 3 December 2008, the United General Assembly decided to designate 19 August as World Humanitarian Day, inviting all UN Member States as well as other international organizations and NGOs to celebrate it every year.

Increased threats for humanitarian workers

Ten members of a medical team, including six Americans, were shot and killed by militants as they were returning from providing eye treatment and other health care in remote villages of northern Afghanistan [...] Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid told The Associated Press in Pakistan that they killed the foreigners because they were "spying for the Americans" and "preaching Christianity."

CBC News, 7 August, 2010

Recent years have witnessed an alarmingly increased targeting of humanitarian workers, with a growing number of them being killed or injured every year, which shows the perilous nature of carrying out humanitarian work in areas of conflict. By analyzing the circumstances of the recent dramatic happenings, we may assume that a misconception is spreading – especially in war-torn and disaster-stricken areas - that humanitarian aid, believed to be delivered exclusively by Western organizations or agencies, represents as a consequence one ideological and religious world view.

National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, whose volunteers' daily work is based on the protective power of their emblems are aware that such events are all too possible, and a serious threat to the safety of all personnel.

To visit the **official website** of World Humanitarian Day, click here.

In order to spread the message of World Humanitarian Day worldwide, the **UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)** produced the **2010 World Humanitarian Day project**, a collaborative film shot in over 40 countries in under 9 weeks, on a shoestring budget - with the goal of showing the enormous diversity of places, faces and endeavours of humanitarian aid workers in 2010.
It was filmed by over 50 humanitarian staff and freelance filmmakers from around the globe, with all time donated.
To watch the video, click here.

More importantly: such episodes lessen the ability of humanitarians to access the most vulnerable and respond to their needs. If humanitarian aid workers do not have full access to people in need, many hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people will go without lifesaving assistance.

INITIATIVES IN EUROPE

Hungary
UN agencies in Hungary, together with the Hungarian Red Cross, the Hungarian Baptist Aid, the Hungarian Maltese Charity Service and the IFRC Europe Zone Office, organized a photo exhibition in **Budapest**, illustrating the humanitarian efforts dealing with the consequences of the devastating floods in north-east Hungary earlier this year, in which the Hungarian Red Cross has played a strong role.

Finland
Finnish language Facebook page.

Ireland
All-day event in **Dublin** for members of the general public to meet humanitarian workers.

Switzerland
In **Geneva**, he Sergio Vieira del Mello Foundation, in coordination with UN agencies, NGOs and the IFRC, planned a march of staff members from all participating organisations and a ceremony to celebrate the work of humanitarian workers around the world. The IFRC Vice-President Pierre de Senarclens will give a speech on behalf of the RCRC Movement.

Belgium
The UN in **Brussels** will commemorate the Day on 2 September with a panel discussion focusing on humanitarian aid dependence and an evening CINE-ONU film screening of the documentary, "Sergio" which honors the memory of Sergio Vieira de Mello.

(Detail) A volunteer from the psychosocial support programme, Ea Akasha, talks to a traumatised and hungry boy from one of the camps while he is at the Norwegian field hospital. Jakob Dall/Danish Red Cross

That is why promoting and improving awareness and respect of the principles guiding humanitarian work – humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence – are crucial steps to ensure that humanitarian aid workers can carry out their mission.

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For more information, or to suggest an item for a future issue, click here.

Many thanks to everyone who has contributed to this issue of the EZ newsletter.