

OCHA on Message: World Humanitarian Day

What is World Humanitarian Day?

World Humanitarian Day focuses on humanitarian aid workers and the humanitarian cause. In December 2008, the General Assembly determined that World Humanitarian Day should be marked on 19 August every year to:

1. Contribute to increasing public awareness about humanitarian work and the importance of international cooperation.
2. Commemorate all humanitarian and United Nations and associated personnel who have worked in the promotion of the humanitarian cause.
3. Remember those who have lost their lives in the course of duty.

Canal Hotel bombing in Baghdad, Iraq, 19 August 2003

Twenty-two humanitarian aid workers, including the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Sergio Vieira de Mello, died as a result of a bomb attack on the Canal Hotel in Baghdad on 19 August 2003. Five years later, the Sergio Vieira de Mello Foundation prepared draft resolution A-63-L.49 to be adopted by the General Assembly, proposing the designation of 19 August as World Humanitarian Day.

The Canal Hotel bombing irreversibly changed the security situation in which humanitarian aid workers operate. In the past, aid workers were respected, not targeted. The politicization of humanitarian aid and the perception that it is delivered exclusively by Western organizations or agencies has resulted in an increase of targeted attacks on humanitarian personnel. This affects the quantity or quality of assistance that beneficiaries receive.

What is OCHA's role?

The principal promoter of World Humanitarian Day is the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which requested that OCHA take the lead in the preparations for the event. The day is not about individual agencies but humanitarian work.

OCHA's promotion activities for World Humanitarian Day include:

- Chairing the World Humanitarian Day Working Group, formed by the IASC principals.
- Developing and disseminating all publicity materials including leaflets, a questions-and-answers sheet, a security trends fact sheet, key

messages, posters, a media advisory, a filmed statement by the Secretary-General and a promotional film.

Wherever possible, humanitarian aid workers are encouraged to advocate World Humanitarian Day. The working group counts on their support to mobilize the media and others in their respective countries. OCHA staff members are invited to organize local initiatives and events with local humanitarian partners in their countries on World Humanitarian Day. On a more individual level, staff members also play an

important role in disseminating news of relevant events via professional and personal networks including Twitter and Facebook. Resources to support this work can be found on the World Humanitarian Day website.



“People who have lived through terrible events are often left with nothing. ... Humanitarian workers help them get back on their feet to restart their lives. Aid workers are the envoys we send to show our solidarity with suffering. They represent what is best in human nature. But their work is dangerous. Often, they venture to some of the most perilous places on earth. And often, they pay a heavy price. ... On World Humanitarian Day, let us remember those in need. ... Those who have fallen while trying to help them.”

- Ban Ki-moon,
United Nations
Secretary-General,
Message on World
Humanitarian Day,
19 August 2010

What does OCHA say?

- 1.** World Humanitarian Day is about humanitarian work: the collective work and partnerships, and the humanitarian principles behind it.
- 2.** 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 religious/social group or nationality.
- 3.** Humanitarian aid workers are national and international, male and female, and reflect all cultures, ideologies and backgrounds. Their motivations for humanitarian work are diverse, but all aid workers are united by their commitment to humanitarianism.
- 4.** The best way to ensure humanitarian aid workers can fulfill their mission is by improving awareness of and respect for the principles on which aid work is conducted: humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.

Case Study

Earthquake, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 12 January 2010

The Haiti earthquake was the worst in the Caribbean in more than 200 years. Almost immediately after the earthquake, aid workers on the ground began delivering relief. This was despite rubble blocking the streets, the collapse of most United Nations headquarters buildings, and a complete lack of electricity and telecommunications. Within one week of the earthquake, more than 1,700 search-and-rescue experts were on the ground in Haiti, with coordination and support provided by the United Nations. One hundred and one United Nations staff members lost their lives in the earthquake and during its aftermath. These individuals were from all levels of the organization. They included drivers, election experts, interpreters and seven of the mission's 10 political officers. The President of the General Assembly, Ali Abdussalam Treki of Libya, remarked in his eulogy on 9 March 2010: “In the midst of such suffering, the tragedy in Haiti did not spare those who had volunteered and had come from so many different countries to help the people and Government of Haiti.”¹ Nonetheless, in the days and weeks after the earthquake, the relief effort reached many of the 3 million Haitians in need of assistance. The Haiti operation was one of the largest and most complex launched in recent years.

¹www.nytimes.com/2010/03/10/world/americas/10nations.html

To find out more

Contact:

David Ohana,
Film and Special
Projects Unit
ohana@un.org

- www.worldhumanitarianaday.info
- General Assembly resolution A-63-L.49

Mar 2012