Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O’Brien

Remarks at ‘Staff Stand Together’ event to mark World Humanitarian Day

UN Headquarters, New York, New York, 18 August 2017

As delivered

Secretary-General Guterres,

Thank you for your personal testimony and your deep commitment to all who are caught up in conflict as well as for the respect you have given for those who have sacrificed their lives for the sake of others.

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

It is truly my honour and privilege to be here with you today to mark World Humanitarian Day. On 19 August, we pay tribute to the thousands of humanitarian workers and volunteers around the world who risk their lives to deliver life-saving aid to the people caught up in crises.

As you know, this day was born from tragedy, fourteen years ago, when the UN compound in Baghdad was bombed, killing 22 people, including my predecessor in the role of Emergency Relief Coordinator, the UN Special Representative Sergio Vieira de Mello.
Since that day, many thousands of aid workers have been killed or wounded in direct or indirect attacks.

Last year, 158 attacks on aid workers killed 101, wounded 98 and kidnapped 89 people. The attacks included a mass rape of female aid workers in South Sudan. The clear majority of those killed and injured were national staff of humanitarian organizations.

And in the last three months alone, relief workers have been shelled and shot at, kidnapped and killed in many countries, including in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, South Sudan and Syria.

Just two weeks ago, six Red Cross volunteers were killed in the Central African Republic while holding a meeting at a health facility in Mbomou, an area I had just visited days before.

 Attacks on health workers working on the front lines of conflict are also on the rise, with a staggering 979 medical staff killed or injured in 2016.

On World Humanitarian Day, we salute the sacrifice and courage of each and every one of these humanitarian and health workers who have sacrificed their lives in their quest to help others.
Attacks on aid workers are attacks upon not only the global humanitarian system, but most devastatingly of all, they impact the most vulnerable in the community – people in need.

Food cannot be delivered to the starving, medicines are denied to the sick, and shelter absent to the displaced. Critical needs go unmet because humanitarians – working in many of the most challenging, most dangerous and most in-need places in the world – are prevented from doing their job.

As the Secretary-General has said, we stand in solidarity with them to send a clear message to the world: humanitarian and health workers wherever they serve, are Not A Target.

We also stand in solidarity with the millions of civilians around the world whose lives are being destroyed by conflict, their dignity obliterated, their loved ones killed, their towns reduced to rubble, their hope for the future shattered.

Conflict, violence and persecution have forced 65 million people from their homes, and together with natural disasters, have pushed 142 million people to need humanitarian assistance for their survival and protection. When humanitarian and health workers and assets are attacked, it is not only they and their loved ones who suffer, but this 142 million people who are denied the assistance they need.

International humanitarian and human rights laws were created to protect civilians in conflict. But in war zones the world over, fighting parties flout their
legal obligations, routinely killing civilians in direct and indiscriminate attacks and showing contempt for human life and dignity.

Today, on World Humanitarian Day, I invite you to sign our petition on WorldHumanitarianDay.org, which calls on world leaders to exert their diplomatic, political and economic influence on warring parties – and those supporting them - to ensure international humanitarian law is respected and civilians in conflict are protected.

Stand with us and lend your voice to our #NotATarget campaign so that, together, we can try to create a world in which civilians the world over, are protected from violence and harm.