



S e r g i o V i e i r a d e M e l l o
F o u n d a t i o n

19 August 2009
World Humanitarian Day

***Remarks by Mr. Sergei A. Ordzhonikidze
United Nations Under-Secretary-General
Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva***

World Humanitarian Day

***Parc des Bastions, Geneva
Wednesday, 19 August 2009***

Distinguished speakers
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen
Dear Friends:

It is a pleasure, on behalf of the United Nations family, to welcome you to the first World Humanitarian Day, which we are celebrating in Geneva – the world's capital of humanitarian action – and worldwide.

Allow me, at the outset, to thank our Host Country for their contribution to this Day. It is another illustration of Switzerland's strong humanitarian tradition.

It is very appropriate that we mark our inaugural World Humanitarian Day only a week after the 60th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions, which continue to play such an important role in the protection of human life and dignity in armed conflict. Both of these events are opportunities to commend the efforts of humanitarian workers across the world and to reflect on the significant challenges before us. These are challenges that we can only meet when all stakeholders work together – Governments, international organizations and civil society – and I am glad to see so many representatives of all these communities here.

Today, we also – with great sadness – honour the memory of the 22 outstanding colleagues who lost their lives in the bombing of the United Nations office in Baghdad six years ago. And we pay tribute to the victims and brave survivors of this and other attacks on our common humanity. We salute their contributions to our work for people in need, and we promise to continue to support them. All of them are heroes to the humanitarian cause and embody the spirit of the United Nations.

It is now my privilege to read to you the Secretary-General's message for this Day, which goes as follows:

“Today is the first World Humanitarian Day, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly. It is, above all, a day on which we renew our commitment to help vulnerable, voiceless and marginalized people wherever they may be. That is the abiding mission of the humanitarian community.



This is also a day on which we pay tribute to the legions of heroic humanitarian personnel. These men and women come from many backgrounds. But they share a conviction that one person's suffering is everyone's responsibility.

The date of this observance marks the anniversary of the attack on UN Headquarters in Baghdad which killed 22 dedicated men and women, including the great humanitarian Sergio Vieira de Mello.

We continue to draw inspiration from their legacy, and remain determined to carry it forward. The Sergio Vieira de Mello Foundation is doing just that by establishing an annual prize in his name that will recognize outstanding achievements in the peaceful reconciliation of conflict.

Like Sergio and the other brave colleagues who lost their lives that terrible day, humanitarian personnel venture to troubled regions to help others. For them, there can be no such thing as a forgotten conflict.

But to do that noble work -- to face down threats amid disaster and war -- they need our help. They need us to work tirelessly for their safety, security and independence.

World Humanitarian Day is meant to shine a spotlight on people in need, to ensure they receive the assistance they deserve. Let us redouble our efforts toward this goal. Let us fulfill our humanitarian imperative."

That was the end of the Secretary-General's message.

As the Secretary-General said, we all draw inspiration from our humanitarians, and I am glad that many of them are with us today, so we can show them our appreciation and gratitude.

Regrettably, the need for their remarkable commitment and compassion continues to grow faster than our ability to respond effectively. Climate change threatens to increase the frequency and magnitude of droughts, storms and heat waves, putting our poorest and most vulnerable fellow human beings further at risk. The effects of the economic and financial crisis, high food prices and the spread of infectious diseases also fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable. This amplifies the scale of humanitarian needs, while resources become scarcer.

Long-running and new conflicts take an unacceptable toll on civilian populations. As we celebrate also the International Year of Reconciliation, this is an occasion to reaffirm our commitment to bridging divides in war-torn societies for lasting peace. I have no doubt that the prize instituted in Sergio's name will help to take forward such efforts. We must constantly strive to improve our emergency response, without losing sight of the fact that prevention at all levels has an even higher pay-off.

Today, we pledge to continue our humanitarian work for all those in need, and to do everything in our power to protect the courageous women and men who provide them with relief. And we vow to redouble our collective efforts to build a world free of poverty and war.

Thank you very much.