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Unsung Heroes of the Battlefields

By Laurent Vieira de Mello Wednesday, August 19, 2009

Six years ago today, my father, Sergio Vieira de Mello, was killed in a tragic attack in Baghdad that changed the face of the humanitarian world. A truck filled with bombs exploded in the United Nations compound, killing 22 humanitarian workers and wounding many more. Some who were not physically hurt were psychologically wounded. Even years later, many remain vulnerable.

My father headed the U.N. team in Baghdad. A few days before he was killed, he wrote: "The situation is indeed difficult. But we will succeed, because we will do it with the Iraqi people."

His dedication to serving people in need is shared by thousands of humanitarian workers around the world who sacrifice their time, their energy and, too often, their lives to help those in need in places where wars kill and maim and throw innocent victims into refugee camps or exile. Darfur, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda are just a few of these areas.

In recognition of their commitment, my family sought to have Aug. 19 -- the date my father and his fellow workers died while helping destitute people -- designated as World Humanitarian Day. After discussions with our foundation, Brazil, France, Japan, Sweden and Switzerland sponsored a U.N. resolution that was adopted by the General Assembly on Dec. 11, 2008. So for the first time, today is officially an occasion to reflect on the situation for humanitarians deployed in the field.

Sadly, already poor conditions for humanitarian workers in many places are deteriorating. Since 2006, attacks on aid workers have increased sharply, the Overseas Development Institute reports. The Darfur region in Sudan, Afghanistan and Somalia are the most dangerous places, accounting for more than 60 percent of violence against aid workers.

Last year was the worst in 12 years, with 260 humanitarian aid workers killed, kidnapped or seriously injured in violent attacks, according to the institute. This toll exceeds the number of victims among U.N. peacekeeping troops.

The Baghdad bomb attack that killed my father dramatically underscored a fact that humanitarian workers had dealt with since the early 1990s: The U.N. flag had ceased to be bulletproof. It no longer protected U.N. humanitarian workers as well as the staffs of nongovernmental organizations.

Before the 1990s, most wars in the developed world were proxy wars. There was a kind of tacit gentleman's agreement whereby superpowers respected as much as possible the rights and the work of humanitarian personnel.

Now, this did not prevent the deaths of many humanitarians. But most casualties were those who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, caught in the crossfire. Rarely were aid workers targeted.

The situation, though, has changed dramatically. With the rise of nationalism since the fall of communism and the end of the proxy wars, humanitarian workers no longer benefit from protection, flimsy as it may have been before. Victims nowadays are often targeted.

We're talking about the people who are serving on the front line for those of us who weep when we see children on TV crying beside mothers who have been killed by mortar fire -- and believe that something must be done to help these

victims and others like them.

Humanitarian workers are the unsung heroes of our time. They are not recognized as such. Yet consider their efforts, seeking to persuade warlords to let them help innocent civilians who are facing heat, cold, disease and other threats.

They never have the money and staff to fully respond to demands. They get up every morning knowing the enormousness of the task ahead of them, carrying on despite the gnawing feeling that whatever they attempt will always be a drop in the ocean. They *can* help, their efforts can and *do* save lives, but these workers are aware that their actions amount to little more than a Band-Aid on some of the world's worst problems.

The reality of their tasks would make any of us despair. Not them.

As a humanitarian worker once told me: "We have no right to despair when we see that people who have lost everything, even their family, still have hope."

It is high time for the international community to face its responsibilities and stop hiding behind humanitarian action. The world must stop using humanitarian efforts as a fig leaf. It can no longer avoid action while putting its conscience at rest by sending humanitarian actors into the killing fields. There are lives at risk.

And on this day, because of their courage, dedication, generosity and humility, humanitarian workers deserve our respect. We should not only praise their work but also remind the world that we must protect them, that we must impress on warlords that if they have any humanity left, they should protect and assist these workers. We must remind the world that humanitarian workers are neutral and help those in need, whatever their color, race, religion or political beliefs. They deserve our efforts and our thanks.

The writer is president of the Sergio Vieira de Mello Foundation.