



Sergio Vieira de Mello Foundation

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World Humanitarian Day

Ms. Ponomareva-Piquier announced that on 19 August they would celebrate the first World Humanitarian Day. Established by the General Assembly, World Humanitarian Day was in part dedicated to all those humanitarian workers who had lost their lives while trying to assist communities in distress, many of whom came from those very communities. Among those dedicated professionals was one of the great humanitarians, Sergio Vieira de Mello, killed along with 21 other colleagues in a bomb attack on United Nations headquarters at the Hotel Canal in Baghdad on 19 August 2003. Colleagues and humanitarian workers should be inspired by his example, as their efforts to try and deliver humanitarian assistance continued to be limited in many places by ever more frequent and violent attacks, of which they were increasingly the targets.

Elisabeth Byrs of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) observed that in 10 years 700 humanitarian workers had lost their lives, in attacks, in kidnappings, during robberies, during rapes and other situations. There would be commemorative ceremonies in each country. In Switzerland, in Geneva, there would be a ceremony at the Parc des Bastions starting at 5 p.m., in which UNOG Director-General Sergei Ordzhonikidze would participate, as well as a number of other Swiss dignitaries. There would also be concerts and exhibits. All the information about the Day could be found on <http://ochaonline.un.org>.

Ms. Byrs underscored the fact that humanitarian workers were increasingly the targets of attacks, and it was the vulnerable that suffered. There were certain countries that had been of particular concern in 2009. In Pakistan, humanitarian workers were continuing to deliver assistance at the risk of their own lives: four United Nations personnel had been killed there this year. Other countries and regions of serious concern were Sierra Leone, the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, the Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Iraq.

Veronique Taveau of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said just a few weeks ago, UNICEF had lost another colleague – the head of its education programme in Pakistan – in an attack on a hotel in Peshawar. UNICEF estimated that each year 175 million children were affected by humanitarian catastrophes, and UNICEF, along with its partners, were committed to coming to the assistance of those children, whatever the difficulties, so as to provide them with health services, protection and education. That was why World Humanitarian Day was so important.



Emilia Casella of the World Food Programme (WFP) said that WFP had 12,000 staff and more than 90 per cent of them were in the field. This year they were working in 74 countries, helping to feed 108 million people. WFP had been noticing each year an increase in the danger their colleagues were facing. It was important to get the message out that what their colleagues were doing, at the risk of their own lives and their own life, was to work for humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence. WFP had lost two staff so far this year – two of their food monitors were murdered in Somalia in January – and last year they had seen a really alarming rate of deaths, kidnappings and injuries. Journalists should speak with workers in the field to talk about why they were compelled to do the work they did. She had left a list with numbers of field staff that could be interviewed at the back of the room.

Responding to a question on the actual impact of such violence, Ms. Casella said that if one went to the Sudan OCHA page it was possible to look at maps which showed increasing red “no go” areas in Darfur, where it was no longer possible for humanitarian workers to go. That translated into human beings that were not getting health care, water and sanitation or food. They had been talking about the impact on their colleagues, but the real impact was on children and on women who were in need.

Christiane Berthiaume of the Sergio Vieira de Mello Foundation, explaining the origin of the Day, said that following the 19 August 2003 bombing the relatives and friends of Sergio Vieira de Mello had created a foundation to honour humanitarians like him, working throughout the world. One of the first tasks of the Foundation had been to establish a day on which to pay tribute to those often invisible heroes, the humanitarian workers. Working together with the public in Switzerland, France, Sweden and Brazil, they had launched the initiative to name 19 August World Humanitarian Day. It was a time to remember that there was no humanitarian assistance without humanitarian workers.

Providing some numbers to show the increasing violence, Ms. Berthiaume said that in 1998, 36 humanitarian workers had been killed while carrying out their work, whereas in 2008 some 122 had lost their lives. In total, in 2008, 260 humanitarian workers had been either killed, kidnapped, seriously hurt or raped. Particularly disturbing had been the increasing number of kidnappings of humanitarian workers, with 62 kidnappings last year as compared with 18, 10 years ago. Starting next year, the Foundation would award a prize on the occasion of World Humanitarian Day to recognize exceptional efforts undertaken in the humanitarian sphere.

Andrej Mahecic of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said that this year had been a tragic one so far for UNHCR. In Pakistan alone they had lost three colleagues. The list of their colleagues killed while carrying out their work was long. It was crucial that the world’s attention was drawn to what some had called “shrinking humanitarian space”, particularly in areas where the needs were huge, such as in countries like Somalia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Paul Garwood World Health Organization (WHO) said WHO planned to use this day to underscore the neutrality of health staff, hospitals and staff, and those who used those facilities.