

World Humanitarian Day

A personal view from a humanitarian worker

"I stepped out into the heat and dust, the shouting and harsh rattle of gunfire. I think I hate that sound most of all."



Neil Barry, DFID humanitarian specialist, has spent the last 20 years responding to humanitarian crises in countries all across the world while working for DFID, the Red Cross and other organisations. Here he explains why we should care that today is World Humanitarian Day. The photos on the right were taken by DFID staff during crises over the last year.

5.00 am

As usual, mug of tea in hand, I am just logging onto my computer at home. It's still dark outside and wonderfully quiet here in rural Kent. My laptop hums and clicks while I wait for the first email messages of the day from Katy, my colleague in Sri Lanka. By time zone, she is four and half hours ahead of me and her day will be already in full swing - meetings with the UN and NGOs, field visits to plan, proposals to write and DFID-funded programmes to monitor. This is all part of the £12.5 million humanitarian programme we work on, for a population affected by the recent conflict in the north of the country. Sure enough, a volley of emails arrives in my inbox and I set to work on them.

Nearly twenty years ago I was working in Sri Lanka as volunteer – escorting convoys of food and relief items across a conflict zone. It was quite scary at times. Once we stumbled upon militia attacking a bus. The bus was in flames and the fleeing passengers were being massacred by men with knives. But the work was rewarding too – I felt I could achieve a thousand times more in a day than I ever could working in the UK. And so this is why I did it.

Once we took food to 6,000 people trapped in a place called the Vaharai, where no one had been for more than a year. "Now that's a good day's work", I thought. Our boss, Mr Ramamuthi, had come out from London. In his sixties then, one of his earlier memories was as a refugee standing in a queue with his mother. They stood behind an Oxfam truck where a young man was handing out sugar. When it came to the turn of his mother, there was no sugar left. And now here he was, looking at the children and grand children of that generation. It was no better. It was just the same. Hungry people standing behind a truck, where a young man handed out food parcels.

People freely volunteer their view that I must be crazy to be working at this hour – but maybe they fail to understand that humanitarian work is very different work. No one questions health workers, the Police or the Fire Service being on duty at strange hours - and our work is no different. To me this is more of a vocation I suppose, and today – World Humanitarian Day - I feel quite privileged to be able to explain a little about what we try to do.

5.35 am

I finish off a few urgent replies and shove my laptop into my rucksack. My wife and children are all still asleep. The sun is slowly coming up. I pass our two cats coming in from their night patrol as I walk to my car. Five miles later and I've not passed another vehicle when I pull into the station car park. The 6.00 am train pulls out on time. My carriage is only half full and I'm soon seated at a table to myself. I open my laptop and start working on the rest of the emails I have downloaded at home. As the countryside slips past I am quite easily distracted to consider this first World Humanitarian Day.

World Humanitarian Day is important, because humanitarian action is important. In fact, in my view, humanitarian action stands at the centre of what defines us as human beings. There is no civilisation, no religious faith and no mainstream political doctrine which does not overtly condone the importance of helping ones fellow mankind - the needy - in times of crisis. In times of natural disasters, humanitarian action is usually easier to understand and to defend as being unquestionably the right thing to do. In times of conflict though, the different parties to that conflict frequently try to challenge the notion of a

neutral, impartial actor - if it is not seen as convenient if they wish to assist the needy or to bear witness to what is being done to mankind by mankind. Humanitarian access is sometimes denied to those who seek only to bring protection and assistance to the victim. And this we will not accept.

So today we will have the opportunity to reflect on what has gone before in the great humanitarian crises that have defined our history, as well as the countless lesser ones we may barely be aware of. And we can give pause to remember for a moment those who have paid the price of their convictions to uphold the humanitarian imperative – with their lives. This is risky work at the best of times, and many humanitarian workers die in accidents and from illness. But how perverse it seems that those same people who bring assistance to the needy should also be abducted, kidnapped, maimed and killed in greater numbers than ever before. It is all those people we can remember today, along with the vast numbers of victims they sought to help.

6.45 am

I'm crossing Victoria Street and heading down Buckingham Palace Road towards DFID. London is well awake at this time, and I often wonder what all these people do. The transport workers, window cleaners, delivery drivers, postal staff and many others are easy to identify of course – what's World Humanitarian Day to them? All those office workers – whatever they do and wherever they work - does this day have any importance to them? The World seems fast and complicated these days. People are so bombarded with information and sensational stories, I can understand why they may just switch off from what are the key questions of our time – and which usually involve humanitarian need somewhere or other.

I console myself that maybe it's different if you have seen it yourself. Although it wasn't my first humanitarian mission, I clearly remember the anxiety I felt travelling to Somalia in the back of a Hercules transport 'plane in 1992. I knew that the location I was going to work in for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was little short of apocalyptic. I was not at all confident that I could cope with the reality of so much suffering. In the roar of the engines I sat alone on five miles of rolled up burial shrouds and awaited my test. Eventually we arrived to that place of death. The pilots kept the engines running for a rapid departure, and I stepped out into the heat and dust, the shouting and harsh rattle of gunfire. I think I hate that sound most of all.

Never let anyone tell you evil is not a tangible thing. I could feel it. It was all around me. Such darkness in that burning sunlight. I spotted dead bodies rotting in the sun, bones sticking through rags of clothing – but somehow easier to face than the stares of the living – gunmen, traumatised with hatred, aggression and the unspeakable things they had seen. And out of this darkness and madness stepped forward Khalil, an ICRC nurse. Bearded and smiling, he held out a hand. In a shaky voice with a Manchester accent he said "Welcome, we've really been looking forward to you coming."

6.50 am

The ever-cheerful DFID security staff are changing shifts when I walk into 1 Palace Street, the Head Office. We always exchange views on the news or the latest in sport. William is always concerned that I eat some breakfast. We joke that he ate it all before I got there. I wonder how it can be that such basic humanitarian values we can all share, can become wilfully distorted on the politics, media and rhetoric we hear.

When misunderstandings and hatred polarise views between groups far enough, then there remains no space for a third player – the neutral, impartial humanitarian intermediary. We call this space "humanitarian space". That is the space to protect and assist the victims of both natural calamities as well as those of armed conflict. It is the space in which a hand can be held out to help those who are suffering. And the space from where one day, a hand can be held out across the abyss - in the first overtures of reconciliation and of building peace. We compromise that space at our peril, and it is usually the victim and the humanitarian worker who pays the price first.

In that place of death in Somalia, as those shrouds were being unloaded, Khalil took me in the back of a pick up truck, guarded by a posse of treacherous looking gunmen, to the makeshift Red Cross hospital. A small low building around a courtyard, it was strangely calm, patients lying on mats in the shade. I saw a teenage girl, indescribably thin, with hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. I had never seen anyone like this. What suffering, and for how long makes a human being so fragile, on the very edge of death. She turned her head very slowly and smiled. The look of death left her eyes. A Red Cross nurse in operating theatre gowns came over to give her a cup of milk. That nurse is now my wife.

What humanitarian workers do

6.55 am

I plug my laptop into the console on my desk and it sends barrage of e mails back to Katy in Colombo. I'm first in the office, but then again, I think I have the best job in DFID. Humanitarian advisers like me have to secure funding, provide advice and accountability in the programming of millions of pounds, travel to disaster sites and places of conflict, make assessments and meet with governments and humanitarian organisations of the UN, the Red Cross Movement and NGOs. We also have to provide advice which goes to Ministers, and work with our colleagues in the FCO and Ministry of Defence. Occasionally I have to sit in the official's box in the House of Commons, brief ministers myself or meet a Special Envoy of the Prime Minister or Foreign Secretary. The scope of the work is quite remarkable, but still a world away from what I used to do.

Most humanitarian workers are like I was – they are out in the field, unseen and their efforts unsung. They come in all shapes and sizes. There are war surgeons and nurses, water and sanitation engineers, nutritionists and agronomists. There are those who know about livestock, shelter or construction, those who work in education and child protection. They are locals and internationals from all over the world. There are also those people in the background, who provide the support services, such as accounting, transport and logistics.

It was one such colleague, a dedicated service provider, who was shot in the head in that place of death in Somalia. He was Kurt, our administrator, a softly spoken Swiss-German, six weeks into his first overseas mission. A kind young man with a calm and easy way with the Somali people, Kurt's death was as tragic and unjust as any. We think about him often, and I think of him today. I remember travelling across Switzerland to meet his mother. She had lost her husband the year before. Kurt's sister dutifully translated my garbled testimony of Kurt's last weeks. He died doing what he had dreamed of doing, and the stakes were very high. But the difference we could make for thousands of utterly desperate people was incredible. And that will remain Kurt's legacy. On this World Humanitarian Day I remember what makes humanitarian workers different – they are prepared to risk their lives for the convictions of their work.

In natural disasters, the popular image of western "experts" flying out to a disaster zone is less and less realistic these days, and not at all an image we would want to promote today. Shipping blankets, food and tents around the world saves lives of course, but is not the answer we are looking for. In most natural disasters, the greatest humanitarian response is made by local people, as they are first on the scene and know the context best. 95% of the response to the earthquake in Pakistan three years ago was undertaken by the Pakistani Authorities themselves. Our international efforts were huge as well, but best concentrated in the places which could not be otherwise reached in time. If we can help people to help themselves, build capacity and expertise locally, then we can start to work on the root causes of vulnerability to hazards.

For this reason, 10% of all large scale DFID emergency funding is committed to Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) programmes. This is to avoid reconstructing the same risks immediately after a disaster, and to mitigate the effects of the next disaster when it happens. At the very least we can try to leave communities better prepared for the next threats they face. Many of us remember the devastating floods in Mozambique in 2000 – the image of a woman who gave birth in a tree is hard to forget. I was there too, and take some pride that investment in preparedness measures and local capacities have left that whole population much less vulnerable than they were. Whether it is early warning systems, community drainage systems, more resilient livelihoods or just better information – all these things can all contribute to reducing the risk vulnerable people face.

The predicted effects of climate change are just one aspect of this work in Disaster Risk Reduction for which we must do all we can to help populations be better prepared. In the long term, our colleagues who work quietly in this area may save more lives and livelihoods than those who work in humanitarian response could do – and without the suffering of course. But the challenges ahead are enormous.

8.00 am

I have already made some phone calls and sorted out a change in a grant agreement for drainage in an IDP camp. It's a bafflingly complex story of gully suckers and latrines, but the agreement is made and

the concerned UN agency delighted with the fast turn around, so it can get on with the work. Much of our impact seems far away until you get back to the field and see it for yourself. This makes the work much easier to relate to from London. I decide to nip to the café across the road to have some breakfast – having first checked with William that he has not eaten it all of course.

Humanitarian Action and the Law

In places of conflict it is often a more complex story. One cannot assume that the concerned authorities do have the goodwill of the population in mind. In fact they may deliberately neglect or even target them. Here we have a different set of humanitarian challenges, as we are not just concerned with civilians trapped in conflict, but those deprived of their liberty, the sick and the wounded. Here we come to the very core of Humanitarian Action, and which is enshrined in Law.

This year marks the 60th Anniversary of the Geneva Conventions. These four cornerstones of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) basically cover the protection of the wounded on the battlefield, the shipwrecked at sea, prisoners of war and civilians in conflict. IHL has developed as the nature of conflict has developed. It is to be noted that the last convention covers civilians. Today 90% of those killed and wounded in conflicts are civilians.

I think IHL is the most important body of law we have. It covers such that is basic to our very survival. IHL is unequivocal that for instance a hospital, its patients, staff and volunteers are protected at all times and in all places. They should never be exposed to the effects of indiscriminate weapons, let alone be deliberately targeted. If they are, such an act constitutes a war crime. All people, whether a civilian, a prisoner or a captured combatant are protected by IHL. In no place is it ever acceptable to torture, mistreat or publicly humiliate and make a spectacle of anybody. There is never an excuse. There is never a valid reason. When we see violations of IHL we must speak out.

And of course neutral, impartial humanitarian action is enshrined in IHL too. Humanitarian action by definition, does not have to be civilian, it does not have to be non religious, it does not even have to be neutral. But it does have to be at the very least - impartial. And by this we mean that it is given only on the basis of need, and for no other reason. Humanitarian assistance also has to be humanitarian in spirit. This means that one will not disguise as humanitarian that which really has a political or military objective.

What DFID does. And why

8.30 am

I walk across the road back into DFID. People are pouring into work now. Looking around, I am increasingly aware that most of my colleagues are considerably younger than me! And looking around DFID itself, I am reminded about how much has changed over nearly twenty years in this line of work.

People like me used to start as volunteers with small organisations, sent off to some far flung place with a lot of goodwill and a lot to learn. There were no radios, no laptops, no e mail, no mobile phones – and nothing like the same financial resources to work with. It was important to know how to repair a Land Rover with bits that came to hand, how to survive long periods of isolation and how to write a weekly situation report in a book with a carbon paper copy. I used to use a series of flags to inform an aircraft it was safe to land. Today, the work has changed out of all recognition, with masters degrees, high tech communications, security procedures, high profile organisations and budgets we could only have dreamed of. DFID has been at the forefront of this wave of humanitarian reform since its formation in 1997, striving to build a stronger more effective and more accountable humanitarian system.

DFID is not an operational agency in the sense of a UN agency, the Red Cross or an NGO. DFID is a government department, with a dedicated humanitarian capacity within it. DFID typically responds by providing rapidly disbursed funding to agencies on the ground, by providing emergency relief supplies from its own stocks held in strategic locations around the world, and by seconding technical experts to assist in the response. Humanitarian advisers like me have to be ready to deploy at a few hours notice to a natural disaster or to a conflict to support the humanitarian community and lead our DFID response – but only ever as part of the greater international effort. The work these days is very much about building

partnerships, coordination and working better together. We have longer term arrangements to help strengthen and build the long term capacity of the UN, the Red Cross and NGOs.

A Personal View

11.00 am

I'm on my way to the Foreign Office with Jo. She understands all the political side of our work, and how to work with ministers, their private offices, and other government departments. We are going to discuss the work we are supporting in the humanitarian de-mining of areas where displaced people are to return to. Land mines are terrible things, blighting vast tracts of land, and maiming and killing people years after conflict is over.

But there are other challenges now too. The safety and security considerations are profound in many operating environments today. A humanitarian worker may be specifically targeted and killed in the same area where he or she may have worked freely ten or twenty years ago. Of course there have always been risks. Ten years after Kurt's death, his mother held my arm as we attended a memorial service together in Geneva. A representative of everybody killed in service with the ICRC filed slowly into the garden of remembrance, led by two very elderly ladies walking with sticks. This vibrant, rather earnest organisation came to standstill. A thousand people stood silent in the Autumn sunshine. These two ladies leading the way, were the only living relatives of two Swiss ICRC delegates, assassinated by a Japanese firing squad in 1942, for requesting to visit British Prisoners of War. We followed them into the garden, with our different memories of different tragedies.

To my mind, the increasing risks of today are quite clear. They are directly the result of decreasing humanitarian space, the deliberate blurring of political and military objectives and the misappropriation of principled humanitarian action by those who wish to disguise their true military or political actions as something else. But however dark it may seem, there is always a glimmer of light to look for, a crack in the door, and an opportunity to hold out a hand of neutral impartial humanitarian action. Humanitarian space will return – because there is no viable alternative. The challenge is to get all sides to remember that impartial humanitarian action will not harm them, and that impartial work takes place in the light. It does not have to be hidden amongst suspicion and darkness. Denying access to humanitarian actors to assist the needy can never be acceptable when needs remain unmet.

12.30 am

We stop for a sandwich in St James' Park on the way back to the office. I look around at the tourists and office workers sitting on the grass, admiring the flower beds and enjoying a moment of sunshine. This afternoon I'd better start arranging my next visit to Sri Lanka in September.

I am always inspired when I return to the field, and as I get older I think it's an advantage to have a twenty years overview. Recently, I was able to revisit the Vaharai in eastern Sri Lanka. In the intervening years, those children who once stood behind my truck had suffered another two or three rounds of conflict, multiple displacements, a failed ceasefire and the devastating tsunami. Just like ordinary people everywhere, their personal tales were extraordinary. But now, the fighting was finally over, people were reclaiming their lives and livelihoods, the school and health centre were being rebuilt.

All the talk was of chicken rearing projects, planting rice and vegetables and of boats and fishing nets. Teenage children told me they were starting school two afternoons a week to start with. Every household now had a bank account, with start up cash deposited in it for them. Many had bus passes provided too, resulting in hundreds of people cramming themselves into the famous red buses you see in Sri Lanka, on their way into town, to do business, to go to the market. The whole horizon seemed lifted – the light seeping again into another dark place.

On the way back, we stopped at an isolated Muslim village where the elders proudly introduced a young Tamil woman to us – their "community mobiliser" I was told. A girl who would once have found it dangerous to enter this village had stepped straight across the divide. Armed only with her skill and goodwill, she had helped them turn their fearful, cowering village into a place of thriving activity and hope. Freedom from conflict is a wonderful thing. Nearly twenty years on, I wish Mr Ramamuthi was still there to see it too. But still, we somehow got there in the end. Well, for now at least.

1.00 pm

I'm back at my desk, some meetings to go to, but a steady afternoon I hope. I will be speaking on the phone with Katy out there in Colombo, at the end of her day. The recent conflict in the north of Sri Lanka has been particularly brutal, and even now, 280,000 people are held in camps unable to return home. But the conventional war is seemingly over, after 26 years. With our de-mining funds and our help with returns, I want our DFID resources to assist the people of the north restart their lives and livelihoods – just like my friends in the Vaharai have been able to do. This is my vision. This is why I am here, and how we go about this - is what Katy and I do. Anything pending I can get on with this afternoon and it will be ready for her when she starts in the morning.

3.00 pm

My colleagues are busy with all sorts of other things. Debbie is talking about health coordination, Venetia is preparing to go to Pakistan, Paul and Mary are pouring over project accounts. The logistics guys are going to set up a new shelter kit at our warehouse, Ted is doing something regarding Search and Rescue Teams. Louisa calls from the South Asia department upstairs, and I go up to look at a press release with her.

Building bridges for the future

In natural disasters too, humanitarian action, if undertaken in the right spirit, can bring peoples together and form new friendships, even internationally. Deployed to Iran in the Bam earthquake in 2002, I was astonished to the incredible capacity of the Iranians to respond to a major disaster. I was also surprised to see more than 30 international Search and Rescue Teams arriving from countries as diverse as South Africa and China, to support them. Austrian civil defence forces stood shoulder to shoulder with the Russian Ministry of Emergencies Team, all waiting for transport to the epicentre. Seconded to the UN, I worked with the representative of the Governor of the affected province in deploying each international team. A friendly incredibly helpful man, claiming to be "too fat for this kind of work", he had studied medicine in Glasgow. British and Iranian - we had made an instant team as we worked with South Africans, Russians, Chinese, and what seemed like the entire nations of the European Union. At certain moments, for all our differences, our immediate resolve and objectives are just the same.

People may think I am naive for thinking this humanitarian work can bridge political and cultural divides. Humanitarian work is often regarded as the "rough end" of the development world – sticking plasters and shutting doors after horses have bolted. The accusation of being "too emotionally involved" is usually the signal to dismiss your views or experience as nonsense. But I wouldn't be so sure about that, and experience is more valuable than conjecture.

One of the Iranian students who came to thank the British Rescue Team camped in the street, brought them dates and said to a UK Fire Officer how she "...never realised we had so many friends." Indeed, so much for the challenge of bridging political divides, and for cultural divides? As the cold evening came on, an elderly bereaved Iranian man took off his jacket. He placed it over the back of an exhausted search and rescue dog, and both of them sat together just staring at the rubble.

5.00 pm

I've had quite enough of the day and I'm on the train home. Usually I work on my laptop on the way home, but I'm tired today. I'll read the newspaper and I'll log on when I get home just to check there is nothing pending. I'll spend the evening with my family. My wife is still a nurse, running a minor injuries unit in a cottage hospital. A far cry from Somalia in a sense, but the public's view of what constitutes a "minor injury" sometimes makes you wonder what a major one might be! And the vulnerabilities in our own communities are astounding. There is also the need for the humanitarian imperative right under our noses – to help protect and assist those who require it, irrespective of other considerations.

A polarised society is not a stable society from my experience. I think that at home and abroad, we had better share more of what we have. This will be our soundest investment in the future. I suppose I view DFID as the official instrument through which the UK shares something significant with those most in need – but more importantly – encourages others to do likewise.

And as for me? Well, my approach is quite simple. I have seen terrible things and I have been to dark places. I think that we should, all of us, do the very best that we can in the time that is given to us. And doing this work is the best I can do right now.