

8-19-2013

Just Who Are Humanitarian Workers?

Jennifer Moore

University of New Mexico - School of Law

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/law_facultyscholarship



Part of the [Human Rights Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jennifer Moore, *Just Who Are Humanitarian Workers?*, Oxford University Press Blog (2013).

Available at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/law_facultyscholarship/364

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the UNM School of Law at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.

<http://blog.oup.com/2013/08/world-humanitarian-day-workers-principles-pil/>

Just who are humanitarian workers?

By Jennifer Moore

OUP Blog
August 19, 2013



On the 19th of August, [World Humanitarian Day](#), we honor the contributions of humanitarian workers around the world, especially those who have lost their lives helping people in war-torn societies. This day was first marked in 2008 through a Swedish-sponsored resolution in the United Nations General Assembly to commemorate 19 August 2003, when nearly two dozen humanitarian workers were killed in a suicide car bomb blast at the Canal Hotel in Baghdad, Iraq. Their number included Brazilian diplomat Sergio Vieira de Mello, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; Egyptian Nadia Younes, his chief of staff; American refugee advocate Arthur Helton, of the Council on Foreign Relations; Iraqi chauffeur Ihsan Taha Hussein, of the United Nations Humanitarian Information Center; and 18 others — a total of 22 humanitarian workers of 12 different nationalities.

Not all incidents of violence in which aid workers are killed, wounded, or kidnapped lead to high-profile media attention. According to the Aid Worker Security Database, over 50 humanitarian aid workers have been killed per year since 2003, from a high of 127 in 2008 to a low of 54 in 2005. Already [upwards of 72 humanitarian workers have died this year](#), with 117 more wounded or kidnapped, including 40 staff of international agencies and 149 nationals of the countries in which they served.

In acknowledging the sacrifice of those wounded or killed in the line of duty, we should not forget the thousands of people around the world for whom humanitarian service is their life's calling. Researchers [Peter Walker and Catherine Russ caution](#) that “we simply do not know how many humanitarian aid workers there are in the world,” but estimate that “there are, at any one time, tens of thousands of humanitarian aid workers, performing a professional service, saving lives and livelihoods in-extremis.”

In honoring the work and sacrifice of humanitarian aid workers, we have the opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to humanitarian action and humanitarian principles.

Just what are humanitarian principles? They are at once legal, philosophical, and operational rules for responding to human suffering caused by war. At the most basic level, humanitarianism is rooted in four simple and elegant customary rules of armed conflict that underlie the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional

Protocols. The principle of *humanity* responds to the existential needs of human beings to shelter, food, clean water, medical care, human contact and community, and seeks to alleviate the suffering caused by war. The principle of *distinction* demands that civilians, their homes, hospitals, places of work, commerce, and worship not be treated as military targets. The principle of *necessity* requires that military force be used only against military targets in response to military threat. The principle of *proportionality* holds that responsive force should not exceed the violence to which it responds, and only when justified in the first instance by the principle of necessity.

Just who are humanitarian workers? They are diplomats, drivers, public health officers, lawyers, cleaners, social workers, and public servants. They work for the International Committee of the Red Cross, for national Red Cross and Red Crescent organizations, for UN agencies, and a myriad of grass roots, international philanthropic, and advocacy organizations. They work in booming metropolises and tiny border communities. They attend to the needs of war-affected populations, providing clean water and medical care, helping in the search for lost family members, and visiting POWs and people detained in various places. They appeal to and cajole, coordinate with and extol, and on rare instances even expose military, security, and civilian authorities. They speak truth to power and facilitate non-violent dialogue between armed and political groups. On a daily basis they improve the quality of life for war survivors and contribute to the cause of conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction.

Humanitarian workers carry out their daily jobs in situations of armed conflict where civilians are targeted, in violation of the Geneva Conventions and the tenets of international humanitarian law. The reality remains that humanitarian law and humanitarian principles are too often honored in the breach, and it is the humanitarian workers who jump into that breach to lessen the suffering of armed conflict. They put the principle of humanity to work, in the very circumstances that the principles of necessity, proportionality, and distinction have been violated. On the 19th of August we honor them and their work.

Jennifer Moore is on the faculty of the University of New Mexico School of Law. She is the author of [Humanitarian Law in Action within Africa](#) (Oxford University Press 2012).

Oxford University Press is a leading publisher in Public International Law, including the [Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law](#), latest titles from [thought leaders](#) in the field, and a wide range of [law journals](#) and [online products](#). We publish original works across key areas of study, from humanitarian to international economic to environmental law, developing outstanding resources to support students, scholars, and practitioners worldwide.

Image credit: World Humanitarian Day 2013 logo via un.org. Used for the purposes of illustration.

Copyright © Oxford University Press 2017