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Just who are humanitarian workers?

By Jennifer Moore

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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 metropoles and tiny border communities. They attend to the needs of war-effected 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).

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