

INTERVIEW: Preventing conflict key to relieving suffering, stresses outgoing UN humanitarian chief

28 August 2017 – Preventing conflicts from breaking out in the first place, and holding perpetrators accountable for their actions once they do, is vital to relieving the suffering seen in many parts of the world, according to the top United Nations humanitarian official, Stephen O'Brien.

"That's the issue about conflict, it's man-made, and, therefore, it's capable of being unmade by man and the humanitarian suffering that is brought about by it can be reduced and eliminated over time," Mr. O'Brien, who has served for over two years as Under-Secretary-General and UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, said in an interview with *UN News*.

For the past two years, the British national has witnessed some of that suffering first hand, meeting some of the millions affected by conflict and crises in, among others, Iraq, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

As he prepares to wrap up his assignment with the UN, Mr. O'Brien discussed what he will remember most about being the UN humanitarian chief, some of his frustrations, UN reform efforts and how to avoid a sense of hopelessness from setting in given the numerous crises around the world and the ever increasing needs.

UN News: When you look back at the past two years, what is the one encounter that will stay with you the most, that encapsulates what the job's been about for you?

Stephen O'Brien: In Yemen, when I visited a school that was occupied by internally displaced persons (IDPs) – there are millions in Yemen because of the terrible conflict – there was a girl called Marie, who was looking after eight of her siblings in the absence of any parents and they were struggling to get food. They had at last become registered so they were getting supplies from the very brave aid workers, from the UN and other NGO partners. But it was not possible as yet to give them schooling so they brought home to me more than anything else, that they should not be victims in other people's wars, and also that the international community was doing an amazing job in giving them the lifesaving as well as the protection they needed.

VIDEO: Under-Secretary-General Stephen O'Brien hails the extraordinary work of aid workers around the world and urges the international community to do a better job to prevent conflict and relieve the suffering of people. Credit: UN News

UN News: Where do you think you have been most effective in the job, and what has been your biggest frustration?

Stephen O'Brien: I look at the extraordinary work of all of these humanitarian workers around the world in these very tough spots in the two years that I've been in the post and I've been really inspired by the courage, persistence and determination of these people who want to make sure that the people affected by the crisis, through no fault of their own, are given the lifesaving and protection that they need.

The frustration is that we are simply not able to raise our ability to respond at the same pace that the needs are arising.

While that has been rewarding, the job itself is extraordinarily challenging because the rise in humanitarian needs around the world has been exponential, and notwithstanding that we have managed to secure record amounts of funding in that period, the gap has grown wider.

The frustration is that we are simply not able to raise our ability to respond at the same pace that the needs are arising. And in that period, we haven't had – thank goodness, but it's not to say that we will not have in the future – a very large humanitarian need as a result of natural hazards, so our primary focus has been on the humanitarian needs out of conflict.

UN News: Your time in office has been dominated by some of the worst conflicts and humanitarian crises of the modern era. Is there any more that the UN could be doing in Syria, or is it really all up to the Security Council to act, as you've often said in your briefings?

Stephen O'Brien: One of the great privileges that the Emergency Relief Coordinator has is that here in New York you get to speak to the Security Council on a fairly regular basis about the challenges that are arising as a result of conflict and other disasters and emergencies. It has been very clear to me that it is a duty, an obligation and, indeed, expected by General Assembly resolution 46/182, that I raise very difficult issues and often speak truth to power.



USG O'Brien during a visit to Homs, Syria, in August 2015. He has repeatedly called on the Security Council to do more to ensure humanitarian access, allowing aid agencies to reach those in need in the strife-torn nation.
Photo: OCHA/Emmanuel Barges

It can be a little uncomfortable, it can be challenging, but it is very important that the facts are before all of the Member States, here at the United Nations, the highest body in the world, which has the capacity, diplomatically and politically, to find a resolution and to prevent conflicts that result in producing humanitarian needs, which could be avoided.

That's the issue about conflict, it's man-made, and, therefore, it's capable of being unmade by man and the humanitarian suffering that is brought about by it can be reduced and eliminated over time.

UN News: As Syria and Yemen stand out, do you worry that some of these complex conflicts will prove to be unsolvable?

Stephen O'Brien: I never accept that these are unsolvable because with a will, when people come together, when we put our fellow human beings around the planet first, rather than [focusing on] the dispute for power or competition for resources...the issues can be solved. As long as we put a huge premium on our ability to talk through our differences. At the same time, we must recognize that we have the highest possible public duty internationally to relieve the suffering of our fellow human beings, wherever that arises, be that for their protection in conflicts where innocent civilians are put at risk, or for their lifesaving in natural hazards and the terrible risks that happen because of that.



Briefing the Security Council in May 2017, USG O'Brien said the people of Yemen are being subjected to deprivation, disease and death as the world watches. He added that this a direct consequence of actions of the parties, and is also "a result of inaction – whether due to inability or indifference – by the international community". UN Photo/Evan Schneider

UN News: What will you miss most about being UN relief chief?

Stephen O'Brien: I'm certainly not shy of putting in a hard day's work, but what I will miss most is working with extraordinary people doing an extraordinary job. I mean that both within my own team in the [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) here and across about 40 countries. These are extraordinarily dedicated, skilled, committed and very brave people who are often serving in what we call non-family duty stations.

I shall be extremely sorry to miss the inspiring context of being able to do something about the suffering through the people we have here at the UN and through our partners in the international NGOs or through the many local people we work with to get that last mile.

I will also miss the relationships and the professional approach with Member States and their representatives here, in Geneva and across the world because it's only by harnessing all these energies that we can make that difference and we can try and make the world a better place.

The protection of aid workers is paramount. People put themselves at great risk to reach people in need in some of the most dangerous environments in protracted crises around the world.

UN News: Is the problem that you can only do as much as the Security Council allows, in a way?

Stephen O'Brien: I don't think the Security Council is the complete constraint. I do think it is a very, very important part of the peace and

security make-up, but the General Assembly, which includes all the 193 recognized Member States of the UN and some very important observers as well, engage in passing resolutions, which are intended to bind the world.

It really matters to all of us here, and certainly has mattered to me, that we do our very best to live out the values that are encapsulated in the Charter of the United Nations and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which are our founding documents that have stood the test of time for 72 years.

While yes, there are disputes around the world and there are things that are causing terrible humanitarian suffering that should be relieved, we are in a better place to meet the suffering of people when emergencies strike. Now we need to continue to commit to doing a better job to prevent conflict and relieve the suffering of people.

UN News: Looking back, is there anything that you would have done differently, any crisis that you might have handled in a different way?

Stephen O'Brien: We can always, with the benefit of hindsight, think of ways to improve. We can see by the massive and widening gap there is between the needs and the resources. The inefficiency of our response is something that hurts and is clearly part of our inability to be fully accountable to affected people. So in looking back, I wish I'd found a better way to raise more resources.



In South Sudan, in July 2015, USG O'Brien saw first-hand the devastating humanitarian consequences of the conflict as well as efforts by aid organizations to respond to escalating needs. UN Photo/JC McIlwaine

UN News: What advice do you have for your successor?

Stephen O'Brien: Above all, go out and meet the people to whom we are ultimately accountable, the people who need us most.

As I have sought to do, make sure all you do is rooted in the principles of international humanitarian law, human rights law and refugee law.

Make sure that we call people to account so that there is a better deterrent to those causing humanitarian suffering today.

UN News: The Secretary-General has made UN reform a priority. Do you have any constructive advice as to how that can be managed in the humanitarian field?

Stephen O'Brien: The Secretary-General's emphasis on prevention as core to policy and the ability for the UN in the world that we face today, and looking ahead and particularly to be relevant to the vast number of younger generations. We need to make sure it is reformed to reflect that world.

If you leave humanitarian need or poverty unaddressed, it has the potential to be exploited by those of malign intent.

That needs much better resolution of conflict, prevention in the first place, a greater participation of stakeholders, recognizing that so many of the world's problems, particularly humanitarian, but also for enabling development and the equality of women's rights, all need to come together in a way that is relevant to today's generation.

The reforms that the Secretary-General is pushing are all to be welcomed and supported. I am pleased that in OCHA, we have been doing this over the last two years. We have somewhat blazed a trail with our own reforms and put us in a fitter and better position to make sure that we are strategically aligned, nimble and adaptable.

UN News: What is the key message you relayed for your last World Humanitarian Day?

Stephen O'Brien: We should make sure to put a real focus on how humanitarian aid workers around the world are #NotATarget. This was articulated at the 2016 [World Humanitarian Summit](#) in Istanbul. The protection of aid workers is paramount. People put themselves at great risk to reach people in need in some of the most dangerous environments in protracted crises around the world.

Humanitarian workers are operating across the world, often in countries for many years, despite insufferable difficulties. World Humanitarian Day is an opportunity for us to focus on protecting these humanitarian aid workers, particularly in the medical field.