

Protecting aid workers ‘paramount,’ UN official stresses ahead of International Day

17 August 2017 – As conflicts around the world continue to take a massive toll on people’s lives, the top United Nations relief official stressed the importance of ensuring that the brave men and women who risk their lives to help those in need are not themselves a target.

“The protection of aid workers is paramount,” Stephen O’Brien, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, underscored in an interview with *UN News* ahead of this year’s World Humanitarian Day.

The Day, observed annually on 19 August, seeks to pay tribute to aid workers who risk their lives in humanitarian service, and rally support for people affected by crises worldwide. It was designated by the General Assembly to coincide with the date of the 2003 bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad, Iraq, in which 22 staff lost their lives.

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This year, humanitarian partners are coming together under the [#NotATarget](#) campaign to highlight the need to protect civilians caught in conflict, including humanitarian and medical workers.

“World Humanitarian Day is an opportunity for us to focus on protecting humanitarian aid workers, particularly in the medical field,” Mr. O’Brien noted.

Currently, he said, humanitarian workers are operating in 40 countries across the world, often for many years, despite insufferable difficulties.

“People put themselves at great risk to reach people in need, in some of the most dangerous environments, in protracted crises around the world,” he stated.

VIDEO: Ahead of World Humanitarian Day, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O’Brien hails the ‘extraordinary’ job done by aid workers worldwide while lamenting not being able to respond to increasing the needs. Credit: UN News

Just recently, seven Syrian volunteer rescuers, known as White Helmets, were killed. Mr. O’Brien acknowledged that such incidents are becoming too commonplace. “My heart grieves for the family and friends of those brave

people who gave the ultimate sacrifice to help others,” he said.

Despite the difficulties and dangers, Mr. O’Brien stated that humanitarian work is moving forward “at every point.”

“Member States, humanitarian aid workers, coordinators of humanitarian relief – all of us continue to supply strength, determination, courage and conviction,” he said. “There is no higher international public good than seeking to save the lives and protect the civilians caught up in crisis.”

The [#NotATarget](#) campaign follows the launch earlier this year of the UN Secretary-General’s report on protection of civilians, in which he called for enhanced respect for international humanitarian and human rights law, and protection of civilians.

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According to the report, those most in need of urgent humanitarian assistance and protection are civilians in urban areas; children; targets of sexual violence; humanitarian workers; health workers; and forcibly displaced people.

Mr. O’Brien said that making a difference on the ground requires “physical will and relationships with players in all the various places” to get the necessary access to those in need.

“We are in the business of trying to protect civilians. We are trying to put in place the right balance. To do this, we must make sure that the perpetrators of violence are held accountable for their actions,” he added.

It is important, he stressed, that everyone adhere to agreed international norms, laws and principles, “to make sure that people are held to account.”