

Staff statement - World Humanitarian Day 2017

Colleagues and Friends. Thank you for coming to today's memorial ceremony for our fallen colleagues - a list of colleagues that sadly gets bigger by the year.

A list too that leaves behind memories of generous and hard-working staff, that leaves behind legacies on the ground of jobs well-done, but that also leaves behind families that struggle to understand why those who do good should themselves become targets.

It is fitting then that the theme of this year's World Humanitarian Day is "Not a Target".

It recognizes that not only should the victims of conflict and disaster not be targets, but our colleagues too. Indeed, last year, as the statistics show, 117 UN personnel were killed and so far this year that figure is 41.

When staff unions first stated that our colleagues should not be targets, our stance was seen as controversial. So we welcome that this year's World Humanitarian Day is focused on the unnecessary sacrifice of our staff, which may sadly include some colleagues we see in the room today and assigned to conflict zones tomorrow.

And after the ceremony we will be asking you to hold up the official "not a target" signs for a photo that will be widely shared.

But saying "not a target" isn't an end in itself. As a colleague in Nairobi told me:

"We "celebrate" for one day, circulate social media photos then go back to our day jobs. Meanwhile our colleagues will continue being killed."

And he's right. So how do we turn "not a target" from an aspiration to a reality, and who can do it?

Well, first the UN itself. It needs to make sure our staff are safe, that risks are minimized and facilities secure.

This includes improving our own security. In Mali, and despite numerous attacks on our bases, staff have continued to operate in what are termed soft-shell buildings, basically portakabins. The consequences of such are all too predictable.

We also have policies that differentiate between the security provided to staff and to consultants. Yet as we saw in the DRC with the two young experts, the work they do is the same and the risks they face identical.

And let's not forget that many who die are national staff. We don't see them in Geneva or New York. And their families continue to live in conflict zones with the risk of being singled out for retaliation, simply for their connection to the UN.

Others also have a role to play in turning “not a target” into reality.

Many attacks are carried out by rebel groups, militias or terrorists. Behind these groups are political and moral support sometimes originating from governments or factions within governments, and behind them other governments. Also funding channeled through ostensibly respectable and government-regulated banking systems. Weapons whose manufacture and export has been licensed and then paid for by commodities and goods that have crossed borders under the eyes of customs officials.

Therefore the member states that employ us and send two-thirds of UN staff to the field can also help make “not a target” a reality. Statements at the Security Council and Human Rights Council are not enough. Laws and habits need to change.

But we too can make a difference. It starts by holding this sign and signing the petition on worldhumanitarianday.org. The petition will be presented to the General Assembly. Twenty-two thousand from 193 countries have already signed. It continues by your active advocacy to management and your governments.

Finally, let's not forget our colleagues who lost their lives or whose lives were irretrievably changed by such attacks, and those who were so traumatized that they had to leave the organization. Let's not forget their good work. Let's not forget the families they leave behind, the victims of terrorism. Let's not forget our colleagues in the field, who face danger every day. They all deserve our support and that of our organization.

We also hold this sign for them and hope that they too will never be forgotten.

Colleagues and Friends. Thank you for your time.