



The spirit of humanity shines bright in Palestine
By James W. Rawley, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator
Published at Al-Quds newspaper in Arabic on 19 August

Today marks World Humanitarian Day, an annual occasion dedicated by the United Nations General Assembly to raising public awareness of the millions of people who risk their lives in order to provide food, water and other assistance to people in desperate need in conflicts, in natural disasters and other emergencies. Around the world, violence against humanitarian workers is at an all-time high. The number of aid workers killed, kidnapped and seriously wounded globally has reached the highest number ever recorded. This is simply unacceptable and entirely unjustified. New research shows that in 2013, 155 aid workers were killed, 134 were kidnapped and over 170 were seriously wounded.

The recent conflict in the Gaza Strip has demonstrated, in the most tragic way, the risks that humanitarian workers take every day. In the last six weeks, at least 30 Palestinian colleagues have been killed, including 11 UNRWA personnel, 11 medical staff and eight firefighters - many in the line of duty. Seven technicians were also killed while trying to repair vital water and sanitation infrastructure. Over 70 aid workers have been injured. In addition, 98 UN premises, including schools where displaced Palestinians had sought shelter, and 58 hospitals and clinics were damaged and destroyed in the fighting — some apparently targeted.

One aid worker killed in the line of duty is one too many. Over 30 is intolerable. We must insist on accountability for those killed and injured, for the damage and destruction to schools, hospitals and other humanitarian facilities. This is a vital component of broader efforts to ensure accountability for the lives lost, homes destroyed and damage wrought during this conflict.

The men and women killed were not only our colleagues, they were also fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, trusted friends and good neighbors, all of whom were killed while pursuing the most basic human instinct: to help others in need of assistance. On World Humanitarian Day, we mourn the loss of these colleagues and commemorate their bravery, their compassion, and their commitment to humanity.

World Humanitarian Day is also about paying tribute to those among us who continue to embody this spirit of humanity. We need look no further than Palestine to see this in action. They have so generously shared their food, water and shelter — despite often being in a desperate situation themselves. We have seen Palestinians across the West Bank mobilize resources and donate much needed supplies, such as clothes, bedding, mattresses and diapers. These efforts evidence the sense of community service, of helping others, of compassion, that is so strong in Palestinian society and culture. This spirit of humanity shines bright against increasing attempts to dehumanize Palestinians and reduce them to stereotypes or nameless, faceless casualties.

As we move forward, the role of Palestinians in responding to urgent humanitarian needs generated by the conflict will continue to be critical. The scale of devastation, of death and destruction is unprecedented in the Gaza Strip. We, the United Nations and partners, remain steadfast in our commitment to helping the people of Gaza, to ensure, at this most difficult time, that they receive the help that they so desperately need. We are on the ground, scaling up our responses, providing food, water, shelter and healthcare to families across the Gaza Strip. We have appealed to the international community for an initial US\$ 367 million to carry out immediate, life-saving responses related to protection, food security, health, water and sanitation as well as shelter and items such as mattresses, blankets and hygiene kits. Our efforts will continue in the weeks and months ahead.

However, these efforts can only continue if the violence stops and stops permanently. Humanitarian workers on the ground, the majority Palestinians, continue to risk their lives to deliver assistance; they face many challenges including the dangers posed by the thousands of unexploded weapons that are littered in residential and rural areas across Gaza. Just last week, three specialized Palestinian police officers, along with three other civilians, lost their lives when an unexploded weapon was accidentally detonated during efforts to remove it.

In paying tribute to our colleagues who lost their lives and to the tens of thousands of Palestinians who are working to help others affected by the devastating conflict, we must also shout loud and clear that enough is enough - that this endless cycle of violence must stop. We must demand that the parties to the conflict agree a permanent ceasefire and ensure the blockade is lifted in a manner that ensures the rights of Palestinians and addresses Israel's legitimate security concerns.

In commemorating our colleagues and the almost two thousand others who lost their lives during this conflict, we must seize the opportunity to bring about transformational change — from death and despair to hope and opportunity. We must demand that Palestinians, like Israelis, are able to live free from fear, in dignity and with equality. The spirit of humanity demands no less.