

19 August 2009

**Message of Mr. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann,
President of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly,
on World Humanitarian Day**

We mark World Humanitarian Day in commemoration of the horrendous truck bomb attack on the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad in 2003. An extraordinary UN humanitarian worker, Sergio Vieira de Mello, then the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights and special representative of the Secretary-General in Iraq, was intentionally murdered in that attack together with 21 other UN colleagues. The attackers wanted to send a clear message: humanitarian workers, helping the most vulnerable civilian populations suffering from conflicts and natural disasters, are now prime targets in conflicts that increasingly respect no rules.

Just two days ago, two more United Nations personnel, members of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, were killed in a car bombing in Kabul. As we reflect on the increasingly central role that humanitarian work plays in our societies, we must press back against those who want to disrupt the work of governments, of non-governmental organizations and the United Nations as we attempt to mobilize assistance for those most in need. We denounce the escalating attacks on humanitarian workers and demand that those responsible are brought to justice. We demand that States fulfill their obligations under international law to protect humanitarian workers and UN personnel, too many of whom continue to be harmed and even murdered, often with impunity.

If there is any message that I have tried to send during my presidency of the General Assembly, it is the essential and enormously powerful human dimension of the problems that we face and of the solutions we must find. We are all brothers and sisters and must care for each other accordingly. This, I believe, is the essence of humanitarianism.

Over the past year, the General Assembly has highlighted the essential humanitarian aspects of the crises the world is facing. Sometimes, in the hurry to find solutions, we forget that these crises are about people.

Currently we are focused on the economic and financial turmoil that has tipped tens of millions of people back into extreme poverty. And climate change, which is causing enormous hardships for people facing floods and desertification.

Slowly, however, we are coming to grips with the understanding that our problems are people-centered problems. We are seeing that our life styles and disregard for the Earth and for each other have created ongoing humanitarian crises, costing million of lives each year. We also see that, until we can find solutions, we must tirelessly mobilize our efforts to address emergencies and come to the aid of their victims.

Our challenge is to respond to natural and man-made emergencies – from Taiwan to Chad, from Gaza to Darfur, from Northern Pakistan to the Democratic Republic of Congo – while sustaining longer-term development efforts. Even as resources are strained and compassion fatigue overshadows donor response, we must step up both efforts. Humanitarian workers are essential to this work.

For these reasons I felt it was very important to appoint a special adviser for humanitarian issues in my cabinet, a first for this office. Among other assignments, I asked him to visit Gaza last February as I am particularly concerned about the ongoing humanitarian crisis that the people of Gaza continue to face in the aftermath of the Israeli devastating invasion earlier this year.

It is crucial that the international community continue to support the work of the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which remains the central humanitarian effort that protects 1.3 million people from the appalling threats of disease and starvation. Despite international demands, the economic blockade has not been lessened to any significant degree and the Palestinian population faces a winter of deprivation and hunger amidst a crippled economy. This cannot continue.

We as an international community, including the United Nations, failed to protect the Palestinians trapped in Gaza and unable to escape from the overwhelming onslaught last December and January. We must not compound this collective punishment further by now failing to provide the humanitarian relief and reconstruction materials that residents in Gaza so desperately need. There should be no conditionalities. This mediaeval blockade must be lifted; and Gazans must be given the means to rebuild their shattered lives and stand, once again, on their own feet. For their part, UN Member States should demonstrate their resolve and commitment by supporting the efforts of UNRWA and other parts of the UN humanitarian family, ensuring they have the human and material resources needed to effectively carry out their noble and vitally needed mandates.

Unfortunately, these responsibilities and obligations are replicated each day in many other countries around the world as well. Let us remain determined to support and protect our noble humanitarian workers everywhere so that assistance to afflicted civilian populations is reliable, timely and effective. Let us, the United Nations and Member States especially, be accountable for these obligations.