



GENEVA CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS  
ADVANCEMENT AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE

## COMMEMORATION

### World Humanitarian Day

Baghdad and Algiers Memorials • UN Geneva • 19 August 2025



## OPENING REMARKS

**Ms. Alessandra VELLUCCI, Director, United Nations Information Service, UN Geneva**

This solemn ceremony commemorates World Humanitarian Day, held this year under the theme *'End to Attacks on Humanitarians and Civilians and the End of Impunity under International Humanitarian Law.'* On 19 August 2003, a bomb attack to the UN premises at the Baghdad Canal Hotel killed 22 of UN colleagues, humanitarian aid workers, local workers, and wounded many more. Many of the survivors are present at today's ceremony, as are the families of some fallen colleagues.

Five years later, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution designating 19 August as World Humanitarian Day. On this day, this year, like every other year, the Geneva community comes together to pay tribute to those whose lives have been destroyed in the line of duty, to honour those who work on the front lines of crisis, and to reaffirm our solidarity with the millions of people whose survival depends on humanitarian assistance.

As stressed by the UN Secretary-General, **humanitarian teams are the last lifeline for over 300 million people** impacted by conflict and disaster. However, this year's commemoration comes amidst unprecedented challenges. Humanitarian operations are increasingly under attack,



resources are stretched, and needs are escalating globally. For these reasons, it is so important for the United Nations to commemorate this day gathering together in front of the Baghdad and Algiers memorials at UN Geneva, and to express solidarity and the will to take action to defend humanitarians worldwide.

**H.E. Ms. Tatiana VALOVAYA, Director-General, UN Geneva**

On today's commemoration of World Humanitarian Day, the UN pays tribute to all its civil servants who have given their lives in the service of humanity. The UN honours their courage, their unwavering dedication, and the values they stood for. Behind the UN Director-General, the memorial plaques remind everyone of the devastating attack in Baghdad in 2003, where 22 UN staff members - including UNSG Special Representative for Iraq Sergio Vieira de Mello - were killed, and of the tragedy in Algiers in 2007, where we lost 17 more members of the United Nations family. They are no longer with us, but their legacy lives on. **Their sacrifice and commitment will stay forever in our hearts and inspire generations to come.**

Sadly, the list of names keeps growing. Humanitarian workers across the world are being killed, injured and kidnapped in unprecedented numbers, with each year tragically more deadly than the last. In **2024 alone, more than 380 humanitarian workers lost their lives**, and 2025 is on track to be even worse. These are not just numbers, they are individuals, people with families, with dreams and with an extraordinary commitment to make the world a better place.

The Director-General invites everyone to join her in a moment of silence in memory of the humanitarian colleagues the UN has lost. Deeply honoured and humbled to welcome at UN Geneva some of the survivors and family members of the victims of attacks against humanitarian workers, the Director-General extends her heartfelt gratitude to Mr. Dhafer Al-Hussini, survivor of the 19 August 2003 terrorist attack, for accepting the invitation to share his memories and reflections of the Baghdad Canal Hotel bombing.

The Director-General seizes the occasion to share her utmost concern over the increasing number of conflicts and fragile situations around the world that are placing humanitarian workers in situations of grave risk. Day after day, UN colleagues are being targeted for doing their job - protecting civilians; providing support, food, shelter and healthcare. This is unacceptable. International humanitarian law must be respected. Attacks on UN staff and humanitarian workers must stop. Their protection must be ensured. Impunity must not be tolerated.

Humanitarian workers are the face of the United Nations and the broader humanitarian community. Their **commitment is a source of hope for millions**, and their dedication strengthens our resolve to ensure that humanitarian workers everywhere are protected and supported in their vital work. Today, we recognise the importance and courage of the humanitarian community, the risks they face and the sacrifices they make.

In the face of shrinking resources, growing mistrust and an increasingly volatile world, she calls upon all to recommit to what unites us at the UN and in the wider humanitarian community a shared desire to help others and build a better world. As we remember the brave colleagues we have lost and honour those who continue their work despite immense risks, we must ensure that their sacrifices are not in vain.



**Mr. Tom FLETCHER, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency  
Relief Coordinator, OCHA**

On World Humanitarian Day, we gather to grieve and to honour those we have lost. They are the best of us. **Humanitarians carry hope where there is despair.** They are selfless in a selfish world. They seek to mend what others seek to break. **They bring humanity where there is inhumanity.** Yet from that day in Baghdad till now, **the best of us are under attack.** Last year more than 380 humanitarians were killed. Not dead, killed. The highest ever recorded. Hundreds more wounded, kidnapped, detained.

In **Gaza, 520 aid workers**, mostly UNRWA staff, killed since October 2023. The deadliest place for humanitarians for the second year running. This number doesn't even touch the hundreds of staff who have lost family members. My colleague Saed, whose wife Ola was killed in our guesthouse. In **Sudan, 60 colleagues** lost their lives. Over double the year before. These include my colleague Sadiq, killed in al-Fasha in November. Already this year, hundreds more names. Each with a family. Each with a story.

And this is more than a statistical spike, it is a stain. The normalisation of violence against this community. Each attack on a colleague is an attack on all of us. And we do not accept it. Enough. Zero accountability. **An indictment of international inaction and apathy.** The member states must not accept it. Enough. As a humanitarian movement, we demand the protection of civilians and aid workers. We demand that perpetrators are held to account.

**Humanitarians will not retreat, despite these dangers.** Last year, despite the risks, we reached more than 116 million people. Families fed, children in school, sick people cured, communities protected. We will not let down those we serve. It is our way of honouring those who died in 2003 and who have been killed since. But you, the international community, must also not let us down. So we grieve again those we lost and those we continue to lose. We honour those who defy the dangers. We demand their protection and an end to impunity. And we commit afresh to this mission, whatever the risks.

**Ms. Nada AL-NASHIF, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR**

Ms. Nada Al-Nashif is honoured to add her voice in paying tribute to those who have lost their lives in the service of others and to the thousands of colleagues who are working in difficult and dangerous circumstances around the world. On a visit to Baghdad last month, she managed to find some personal closure more than two decades after the attack. **Ms. Nada Al-Nashif retraced her steps on that fateful day**, recalling the remarkable colleagues we lost, whom we will remember and mourn always.

Attacks and killings of humanitarian workers have risen sharply over recent years in utter disregard for international law and in flagrant violation of the Geneva Conventions and the protections that are embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These violations are taking place in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Sudan, Ukraine and elsewhere. In **Yemen**, 23 United Nations staff and five NGO workers have been detained or held incommunicado for more than two years now, including eight OHCHR colleagues. Honouring them and their families, OHCHR continues to work for their immediate and unconditional release.



In **Gaza** alone, over 400 aid workers, including 340 UNRWA staff, have been killed since October 2023, and we continue to witness unspeakable daily tragedies, images that, in the words of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, constitute an **affront to our collective humanity**. The weaponization of food, in addition to restricting or preventing civilian access to life-sustaining services, constitutes a war crime. People seeking aid must be able to access it in safety and dignity. Attacks directed against civilians constitute a grave breach of international law. They must stop, and we need accountability for these crimes.

The very idea of **impartial, independent, neutral humanitarian action is being misused, undermined and attacked**. As we navigate this complex and challenging environment, there is an urgent need for all of us to come together to defend the international standards, the norms and the values that govern our work. All member states and all those responsible for adhering to the rules of war need to ensure they are upheld everywhere and at all times for everyone.

**International law is not optional, nor is it a luxury** to be discarded when times are tough. International humanitarian and human rights law were born out of horrific circumstances and sacrifices that we honour today as we stand in solidarity with all humanitarian workers and every day through our work to strengthen and renew our commitment to multilateralism and to an effective, robust and vibrant United Nations.

**H.E. Mr. H.E. Mr. Abdul-Karim HASHIM MOSTAFA, Permanent Representative of the  
Republic of Iraq, UN Geneva**

On 19 August each year, Iraq solemnly recalls a **tragedy engraved in its national memory**, under the collective conscience of the international community, the terrorist attack on the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad in 2003. This heinous act claimed the life of UNSG Special Representative Sergio de Mello, along with a number of dedicated humanitarian workers. It was a direct assault on the mission of the United Nations. Yet it also strengthened the international community's resolve to protect humanitarian personnel wherever they serve.

Six years later, Iraq endured another devastating terrorist attack on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Baghdad, which took the lives of 45 colleagues and injured nearly 600 others. Iraq pays heartfelt tribute to the resilience of those colleagues who returned to their duties with renewed determination, manifesting the Iraqi nation's resolve to resist forces of darkness and to deny violence in its society. Today, as Iraq advances along its path toward peace and sustainable development, the country places humanitarian action and the safeguarding of humanitarian personnel at the top of its priorities.

Statistics from recent years reveal the grave dangers faced by humanitarian personnel. In 2024 alone, **more than 370 humanitarian staff lost their lives worldwide**, and since the beginning of this year, 24 more have perished, most of them in conflict zones such as **Gaza and Sudan**, bringing the total number of more than 400 lives lost in less than two years, the highest toll in recent memory. Beyond these tragic figures lies a deeper reality. Persistent challenges, restriction, harassment and unfounded accusation faced by humanitarian organisations such as UNRWA in Palestine under the policies of the occupying power.

These are not only members. They are stories of lives devoted and ultimately sacrificed in service of the highest ideals, of families mourning beloved sons and daughters, of communities deprived



of compassion in their most desperate hours. They are a **call to conscience** urging us all to strengthen protection mechanisms, hold accountable those who violate international humanitarian law, ensure accountability for perpetrators, and guarantee that humanitarian assistance reaches those in need safely, swiftly and with dignity.

On this World Humanitarian Day, Iraq stands in full solidarity with all humanitarian workers. Iraq salutes their courage and dedication, thereby pledging its full support to all international efforts aimed at safeguarding their lives and enabling them to carry out their noble mission. May the souls of the **martyrs of the humanitarian service** rest in peace, and may the values of compassion and solidarity continue to guide us to build a more human and peaceful world.

**Mr. Dhafer AL-HUSSINI, Human Rights Officer, OHCHR, and Survivor of the 19 August 2003 Terrorist Attack on the UN Offices in Baghdad**

Every 19th of August casts a long-aching shadow. 20 years ago on that black day in 2003, the UN lost 22 colleagues in the bombing of the UN Office at the Canal Hotel in Baghdad. In an instance, their voices were silenced, their laughter stilled, their dreams cut short, but definitely **their memory never faded**. It beats within us in every act of justice, every moment of courage, every quiet promise to carry on.

Mr. Dhafer Al-Hussini was there, one of the few national officers who chose to stay when others, understandably, left. The fear was real, the grief crushing, but something held him - a duty, a bond, a fire inside that refused to let their memory fade into silence. He stayed, not as a hero, but as a witness, as someone who believed then - as he still does - that serving humanity is more than a job. **Serving humanity is a call, an act of faith** in the dignity of people. Even in their darkest hour.

In those days before the attack, he remembers listening to the radio, and hearing the voice that seemed to echo a sorrow and hope of the Iraqi people. It was the voice of a well-known singer called Kadim Al Sahir singing We Want Peace, broadcast across the radios in Iraq. His words were a cry from the heart of a wounded nation, a play for unity, dignity, and healing. Mr. Dhafer Al-Hussini listened to that song countless times. It gave a voice to what many felt, but could not say. Aim it to rubble, aim it to blood – it was a whisper of hope, a reminder that even when peace seemed very far, we had not given up on it.

That same year, we began to rebuild physically, emotionally, and institutionally. From the ashes of the Canal Hotel in Baghdad, they laid the foundation for the UN Human Rights Office in Iraq. That Office became more than a place of work. It became sacred ground. They gave their strength, their health, their years of exile. They gave their hearts. For persons such as Al-Hussini, this mission was personal, a promise to our fallen colleagues that they would carry their light forward.

Over two decades, he witnessed unspeakable suffering, mass displacement, sectarian violence, assassination, threaten, and terror. But he also witnessed something just as powerful, the silence. He saw a young Iraqi race for justice. Survivors rebuilt their lives, and victims became advocates. He saw his colleagues silent, steadfast, standing by those who needed them, not for prize, but because it was right.





Over all these years, he still believes in the words of Sergio de Mello when he said that **the UN at its best when it stays on the ground, when it listens, when it stands with the people**. Sergio knew that humanity is not an abstract, is not written in slogans or spoken in conference rooms. It is lived in presence, in compassion, in refusing to walk away. Let this anniversary be not only a time of mourning, but also a call for action.

Survivors like himself, those who stayed and those who left, carry responsibility and moral duty to ensure that Iraq is not forgotten, that the sacrifice of their colleagues was not in vain. **The dream of justice and dignity lives on**. Let us pay tribute not only to the fallen, but to the living, the brave colleagues who remained. The communities we served let us carry forward the principles of humanity, not in a word alone, but in heart, in memory, and in the choice we make every day. Let us not only mourn the past, let us protect the future. This is a duty.

**Ms. Laura JOHNSON, Executive Secretary, UNOG Staff Union**

Ms. Laura Johnson is not a humanitarian in her day job, and so it admits it can be hard to know what to say to adequately recognise the staff who were victims and survivors of the terrible Canal Hotel bombing, how to more broadly commemorate humanitarians around the world, especially those who end up paying the ultimate price, and how to effectively make a call for action to save the lives of humanitarians today.

2025 is probably the hardest year for humanitarians. This year, the UN Staff Federation which employs many thousands of the humanitarians who work across the UN system has issued a statement, whose main points are echoed by Ms. Laura Johnson. The theme of this year's Humanitarian Day, *#ActForHumanity*, is a **call to leaders and to the public to confront the normalisation of attacks on civilians, including humanitarians**, and the impunity that undermines international humanitarian law. It is a call to build public support, to pressure all parties to conflict, and world leaders to act to protect civilians and humanitarian workers.

UNOG Staff Union pays **special tribute to their Palestinian colleagues in Gaza**, where more than 400 UN staff have been killed since October 2023, which is the highest toll in UN history. They continue to serve under unimaginable conditions, often enduring the same loss, hunger and insecurity as the communities they assist.

At the same time, the **humanitarian space itself is under grave threat**. Severe funding cuts are forcing agencies to scale back life-saving programmes and reduce their workforce. Structural reforms and discussions of mergers raise additional fears that humanitarian action may lose its independence, becoming subordinated to political or migration management agendas. For staff on the ground, this translates into uncertainty, heavier risks and the erosion of trust.

UNOG Staff Union calls for stronger protection of humanitarian workers, accountability for attacks, adequate funding for principled action and genuine consultation of staff on reforms that affect the future of humanitarian response. **The future of humanitarian action is at stake**. To protect it, we must act for humanity.

