



WORLD HUMANITARIAN DAY

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Geneva International Centre *for* Justice

(GICJ)



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August 19th – World Humanitarian Day



GICJ Calls for Protection of Civilians

When bombs are falling from the sky, houses collapsing, dams breaking, and crops dying, humanitarian aid workers rush to the frontlines of war and disaster to deliver assistance to those who direly need it. Operating in the perilous and violent realities the affected live, humanitarian personnel face tremendous obstacles and dangers. Yet, they continue their work. World Humanitarian Day (WHD), which is marked every year on 19 August, expresses recognition to the aid workers risking and having lost their lives in the service of humanity and encourages people to take humanitarian action. With its resolution [A/RES/63/139](#), the General Assembly selected this day in commemoration of the 2003 bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, Iraq – in which the then Special Representative of the Secretary-General to Iraq, Sérgio Vieira de Mello and 21 of his colleagues were killed.

Under the slogan of *#NotATarget: Protection of Civilians*, this year's World Humanitarian Day is dedicated to the promotion of the protection of civilians, aid workers, and all people affected by conflict. In this context, Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ) would like to emphasize the utmost importance of this matter, particularly by focusing on the most destructive humanitarian crises of our times.

Background

On 19 August 2003, a brutal attack was carried out on UN headquarters in Baghdad, killing 22 people, including UN envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello.



UN envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello

The Brazilian national had dedicated a lifetime of thirty years in the UN and had served in midst of some of the most protracted humanitarian situations, to support and raise awareness about the victims of armed conflict. His death signified a great loss to those affected by humanitarian catastrophes. Nonetheless, his legacy is carried on by younger generations – and this day honors his memory, the memory of others having lost their lives, and the commitment of all those fighting for humanity today.

Humanitarian aid workers strive to save lives and bring about rehabilitation in disaster-struck communities across the world, indiscriminate of nationality, race, religion, social status, gender, and other characteristics. Their work builds on the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. Not “only” do humanitarian workers respond to emergencies, they also assist communities to rebuild lives, practice resilience, raise awareness, and foster sustainable peace.

The world is ridden by conflict and disaster, with the poorest and most marginalized being hit hardest. Life under such conditions becomes unbearable and inflicts immense suffering. Still, those affected by catastrophes are often the first to deliver vital assistance to those around them. Many of them, however, face immense barriers to their work and become target of attacks.

On this occasion, GICJ would like to draw attention to current devastating humanitarian situations havocking lives, with the aim of encouraging international cooperation in meeting the urgent needs of those affected.

Today's Humanitarian Crises

Palestine

The humanitarian context of occupied Palestine is unique amongst the world's humanitarian crises in that it is a direct consequence of Israel's half-a-century old illegal occupation. Under occupation, Palestinians have been deprived of any control over the basic aspects of their daily lives and robbed of their most fundamental human rights. With the Palestinian economy, the movement of goods and people, the natural resources and the allocation of water resources, and the development of infrastructure rigidly subjected to the control of the Occupying Power, which additionally imposes curfews and launches operations, it is difficult to imagine the realization of the most basic rights.

These factors are compounded by further region-specific policies and practices: In Gaza, the longstanding blockade, recurrent large-scale military operations in Gaza, and the electricity crisis suffocate the population. While children suffer from anemia and chronic malnutrition as well as from psychological illnesses, hospitals are short on essential medications, radiotherapy, chemotherapy, as well as on imaging and dialysis machines, neonatal incubators, and other live-saving equipment – many of which even break down due to power outages.



While many are forced to seek treatment outside Gaza, medical referral is severely restricted. Women suffering from breast cancer are often treated with mastectomy due to lacking facilities and are dying at two to three times the rates of women receiving appropriate treatment. Humanitarian assistance is usually inadequate given the chronic shortage of medical supplies and equipment, the extensive need resulting from the overwhelming number

of injuries, and the high level of food insecurity. With the blockade firmly in place, the reconstruction and recovery of Gaza are severely hampered and humanitarian conditions, with high unemployment and food insecurity, are unprecedented.



A Palestinian woman during a blackout in the southern Gaza Strip in June 2017.

In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the discriminatory zoning and planning regime entails land confiscation, house demolitions, and destruction of agriculture and prevents Palestinians from accessing their own lands and natural resources. In East Jerusalem, the refusal or revocation of residency rights and denial of equal access to basic services and the provision of vital infrastructure are decisive. Inside Israel, the land and development model discriminates against and displaces Palestinian citizens. The Israeli imposed siege over Gaza and recurrent military operations have resulted in, *inter alia*, the complete collapse of Gaza's economy and acute shortage of basic goods and essential services, catapulting the population into a protracted humanitarian crisis.

Regardless of their residence, Palestinians are deeply affected by the occupation, are submitted to excessive violence, and see the most fundamental human rights violated on a daily basis, *inter alia*, their right to life and liberty, property, family life, education, and an adequate standard of living. At the end of 2016, 2 million Palestinians were in need of humanitarian assistance and protection.



A little boy playing in the rubble of his demolished house in the South Hebronite village of Halaweh, Palestine. 6 February 2016. [Photo by Misha Pook]

The perpetuation of grave injustices against the Palestinian people in Israel's legal system are not only manifestations of Israel's complete disregard for international law and human rights, they also undermine any prospect for peace in the region. The perilous humanitarian situation in Palestine is inherently manmade and is a consequence of the persistent violations by the Occupying Power. To finally end the hardship and suffering, the international community along with all relevant local and regional actors must take all required measures to cease the half-a-century-old occupation of Palestine and fulfill Palestinians' right to national self-determination, which involves the end of all annexationist and settlement activity and the destructive blockade on Gaza, the lifting of all closures within the framework of Security Council resolution 1860 (2009), and the guarantee of the unrestricted movement of persons and goods between the West Bank and Gaza. Israel must moreover be compelled to guarantee the unimpeded provision of humanitarian assistance, including electricity, fuel, food, and medical treatment, to the occupied Gaza Strip.

Yemen

Yemen has sunk into a deep manmade protection and humanitarian crisis that is creeping to every corner of the country. The country's has been fundamentally shaken by two years of relentless conflict, during which military activity devastated the already impoverished and weak Yemen socially, economically, and institutionally. This is reflected in a collapsing economy, skyrocketing food insecurity and famine, loss of livelihoods and depletion of savings, complete breakdown of public and private services, and large-scale displacement. Almost two thirds of the population (about 19 million people) is aid dependent, while more than 10 million are in dire need of assistance to sustain their lives.

Yemen, which is facing the world's largest food security crisis, has also plunged into the worst cholera outbreak that has quickly spread to every corner of the country (except for Socotra island). By 22 July, WHO had reported a cumulative 377,894 suspected cholera cases and 1,847 related deaths in only three months. At the end of June, cases were increasing at an average of 5,000 each day, with one person dying nearly every hour. Every ten minutes, a child under the age of 5 dies of preventable causes. An alarming 4.5 million children and pregnant or lactating women are suffering from acute malnourishment.



Millions of Yemenis faced hunger during Ramadan.

The health system is incapable of responding to the needs of the population, with only 45 percent of health facilities remaining largely dysfunctional, with vital equipment lacking, and with only two laboratories being authorized to confirm suspected cholera cases. The most vulnerable Yemenis are the ones falling victim to cholera, particularly children and elderly. Malnourished children, pregnant women, and chronically ill people are submitted to the “triple threat” of conflict, famine and cholera and are at tremendous risk of dying.



Hostilities have gravely impacted civilian infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, water systems, markets, and ports – thereby further depriving around 15.7 Yemenis of essential services such as clean water and sanitation and crippling medical supplies and lifesaving equipment in hospitals. The national health system cannot withstand the magnitude of the outbreak and the epidemic is therefore rapidly spreading. Nearly half of all health facilities are nonfunctional, leaving around 14.8 million people without basic healthcare. Shelter needs are vast as civilians face widespread displacement. Millions of children cannot attend school, while many teachers go unpaid.



In the meantime, humanitarian organizations have to overcome substantial restrictions on the movement of basic goods and people as well as extensive damage to key infrastructure in seeking to deliver vital assistance.

While civil society actors and organizations, local authorities, and public institutions in coordination with the UN and INGOs are racing tirelessly to address urgent humanitarian needs and prevent cholera from spreading, the response lags behind. Hospitals and treatment centers are crumbling under the immense number of patients – less than half of currently needed beds and less than a third of rehydration points are available; cholera partners are missing in the vast majority of affected districts; and vital medicines and equipment are running out. Urgent action is needed – including the full funding for the Humanitarian Response Plan, commitment by the parties to end the war and to IHL, especially by guaranteeing movement of food, medical supplies, and other vital goods into Yemen and by

providing for the unrestricted movement of humanitarian actors to reach those in need of assistance.

Iraq

Iraq is engulfed in a protracted and growing protection and humanitarian crisis. The escalation in violence between armed groups and government forces in Iraq has caused forced displacement of 3.3 million people, 2.5 million of whom live outside IDP camps, and has left more than 11 million in need of humanitarian assistance. Life-saving assistance often fails to reach the most vulnerable Iraqis and displacement and the exhaustion of incomes and assets robs people of access to basic services. Iraqi families see their rights to healthcare, emergency shelter, education, and water and sanitation diminish and are losing options to cope.



IDPs from Ramadi/Al Anbar province (May 2015) at and around Bzbiz Bridge are among 20,000 persons who were prevented from entering Baghdad, and were left in a harsh situation for a long time.

In midst of the brutal ISIS insurgency, people have been subjected to mass executions, systematic rape and torture; children have been employed as suicide bombers and human shields, and sold at markets; women and girls have been enslaved and submitted to sexual violence and are left with traumata and depression. While civilians who remain in ISIL areas face violent reprisal and retribution by combatants, people returning to areas under Government control are subjected to arbitrary arrests, destruction of property, and ill-treatment and torture especially by al-Hashd al-Sha’bi militias and the Federal Police. Many people, especially children, fall victim to statelessness as they lost or lack access to identification documents, and are thus often exposed to abuse and exploitation.



Iraqis flee from the Zanjili neighbourhood in west Mosul on June 3, 2017.



Woman and child carry their belongings as they flee fighting between Iraqi security forces and ISIS in the Al-Mamoon neighborhood, west Mosul (March 2017). UNICEF/Romenzi

Across Iraq, a lack of protection and grave violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, including targeted attacks on civilians, restricted access to safety, and denial of property rights, deprived people of their most fundamental rights. Explosive remnants of war, improvised explosive devices and landmines causes civilian injuries and death.



In many cases, like this woman and her child, IDPs in Iraq were left in the desert in very harsh weather situations and without any help from the government

Food insecurity imperils the lives of millions of people, who struggle to access food and markets. The health system is collapsing amidst conflict, displacement, and disease, which is compounded by mismanagement by the Iraqi government. Few medical professionals, insufficient equipment, and scant pharmaceutical supplies deprive Iraqis of their right to healthcare. Public health and dignity is also gravely affected by a lack of access to safe water, sanitation facilities, and critical hygiene – which have shattered during the crisis. Shelters for displaced people are lacking and millions of children are losing months or years of education, particularly due to neglect and mismanagement on the part of the government.

While large-scale fighting may be over in Mosul, the humanitarian crisis and life-threatening risks most certainly are not. Rather, they become more diversified. Most people have lost everything and are in dire need of shelter, healthcare, food, and water. Neighborhoods, towns and cities lie in ruins, leaving millions of people homeless. The levels of trauma are immense. 2 million returnees are confronted with insecurity, community distrust and lacking employment. Widespread contamination through explosive devices and pockets of volatility and violence as well as retributive acts, including forced disappearance, ill-treatment and torture, puts people's lives at risk and obstructs their capacity to return home and restart their lives.



IDPs arrive at Uruba mustering point in western Mosul in early 2017. OCHA/ Themba Linden

Iraqi and international humanitarian workers make intrepid efforts to provide assistance to the millions having lost their homes and belongings, seeking safety, and suffering from traumata, injuries, and malnutrition. The lack of basic services and substandard living conditions faced by large parts of Iraqi society cannot be associated with a lack of funding. Instead, billions of dollars have disappeared in the pockets of government officials or wasted on fictitious contracts and projects. To pull the population out of the protracted humanitarian crisis, the international community must first take all necessary measures to ensure that Iraq complies with its international obligations and ends its human rights abuses and that allegations of corruption, abuse of authority, or breach of professional standards by the judiciary are effectively investigated and terminated.

Syria

The devastating Syrian crisis, the largest protection crisis of our time, is entering its seventh year. Civilians continue to carry the heaviest burden of a conflict that brought unprecedented suffering, destruction, and disregard for human life – with all actors of the conflict committing violations of international humanitarian and human rights law with impunity. 13.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, including 4.6 million people trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, where they face life-threatening circumstances. Over half of the Syrian population has been forced from their homes, with many having experienced multiple displacements. Children and youth are particularly affected by forced displacement and humanitarian needs.

With neighboring countries having restricted the admission of refugees, hundreds of thousands of Syrians are stuck on their borders, where they face miserable conditions and are often beyond the reach of humanitarian actors. Civilians staying in besieged locations and in dire need of humanitarian support see their most fundamental rights dwindle, including freedom of movement and access to healthcare, water, and food. The suffering is exacerbated due to frequent denial of access by humanitarian assistance and hindrance of urgent medical evacuations.



The destructive conflict has been marked by breaches of IHL rules, indiscriminate attacks, and direct targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure, and has left hundreds of thousands of people dead. An immeasurable number of Syrians suffer conflict-related trauma injuries, with around 30 percent developing permanent disabilities. Persistent and extreme violence; mass displacement; forced disappearance; family separation; and arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment and torture have become the order of the day. ISIS and affiliated groups employ suicide bombs in civilian areas outside their control and execute public beheadings, physical mutilation, sexual enslavement of women and girls, and indoctrinate and forcibly recruit children into their ranks. Impoverishment and escalating food insecurity have depleted coping mechanisms and shatter lives and livelihoods. Every day has become a struggle for survival for millions of Syrians. Around 67 percent of people live in extreme poverty, seek to support their families on less than US\$2 per day, and are severely deprived of basic food essential for survival. Access to vital services such as healthcare, safe water, and education has been rattled. Amidst the struggle for survival, forced and/or early marriage, child labor, child recruitment, and survival sex have mounted.



In spite of seemingly unsurmountable challenges, humanitarian actors alongside the UN continue to deliver lifesaving assistance to millions of Syrians every month. In the absence of a political solution to the conflict, the appalling situation will further strip Syrians of their homes, livelihoods, loved ones, and lives. The Syrian government must comply with human rights and humanitarian law standards, particularly by ending illicit trials, torture and summary executions. Inclusive and comprehensive Syrian-led negotiations must be supported and adequate Transitional Justice mechanisms are needed to pave the way for a peaceful and inclusive society.

GICJ's Call to Action

GICJ would like to reiterate the urgent need for international cooperation to take effective action and alleviate the immense suffering of civilian populations affected by conflict and to support the intrepid work performed by humanitarian aid workers. GICJ calls on all Member States to mobilize for public awareness on the issues and to respect humanitarian aid workers and grant them access so they can provide direly needed assistance.

The so-called war on terror, predominantly conducted in heavily populated areas, has deepened misery and despair and has heightened the death toll among civilians. The rise of ISIS has been utilized by states, particularly the Syrian and Iraqi governments, to authorize arbitrary arrests; enforced disappearances; the curtailing of fundamental rights

such as freedom of assembly and expression; torture; as well as large-scale arbitrary killings and summary executions by governmental forces in detention facilities, where prisoners – both alleged terrorists and innocent civilians – are subjected to inhuman conditions. The most prolific violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law of this century have been conducted under the pretext of “fighting terror”. With the entailed massive destruction of vital civilian infrastructure; restrictions on access to essential services such as healthcare, food, and water; and forced displacement and annihilation of livelihoods, humanitarian crises deteriorate as the “war on terror” is carried on.

Failure by the international community and all relevant actors to solve conflicts by peaceful means according to the standards set by the UN Charter, and failure by relevant parties to abide by international humanitarian and human rights law will continue to aggravate humanitarian crises to unimaginable levels, marked by loss of lives, destruction of lifeworlds, and unequalled suffering and deprivation. It is therefore paramount for the international community and all relevant actors to abide by the standards set forth in the UN Charter and adhere to their international obligations, including by ensuring the safe and unhindered access of humanitarian personnel to crisis affected areas. We would like to commend civil society actors and other stakeholders for their intrepid work towards achieving justice and rendering life more livable.

CIVILIANS ARE
#NOTATARGET

Every day, millions of people are trapped in wars that aren't of their own making. Meanwhile, the world isn't doing enough to stop their suffering. This World Humanitarian Day, we demand world leaders do everything in their power to protect the millions of civilians caught in armed conflict.

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Geneva International Centre *for* Justice (GICJ)

Postal address:

P.O. Box: GICJ 598 CH-1214
Vernier, Geneva – Switzerland.



+41 22 788 19 71



info@gicj.org



+41 79 536 58 66



facebook.com/GIC4J

Office address:

150 Route de Ferney, CH 1211
Geneva 2 - Switzerland



@Geneva4Justice



geneva4justice