

The World Health Organization Emergency Humanitarian Action programme in the Eastern Mediterranean Region covers 22 countries and aims at contributing to human security and quality of life by minimizing the health impact of all forms of humanitarian crises, natural or man-made, and by addressing the health needs of affected populations. Monthly, WHO produces an information bulletin in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, intended to highlight, in a timely manner and concise way, health-related activities deployed by WHO at country level where there are humanitarian crises.

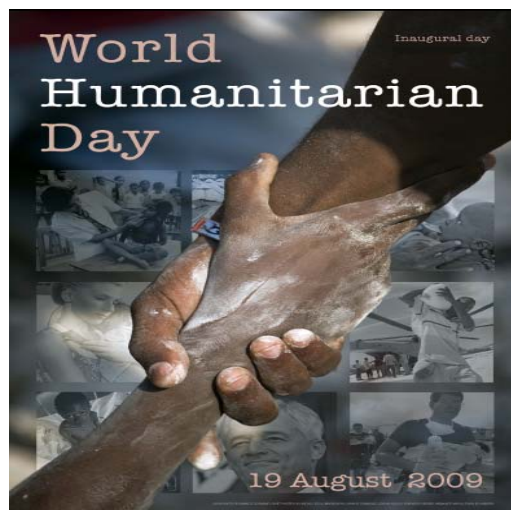
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World Humanitarian Day

The General Assembly of the United Nations decided in its plenary session on 11 December 2008 that the 19 August was to be adopted as World Humanitarian Day. The designation of this day is a way to increase public understanding of humanitarian assistance activities worldwide and to honour all humanitarian and United Nations and associated personnel who have lost their lives in the cause of duty and those who have worked in the promotion of the humanitarian cause. Six years ago, on 19 August 2003, the United Nations (UN) Office in Iraq was bombed and 22 people lost their lives. Among them was Sergio Vieira de Mello, at that time the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General to Iraq. While there have been many other fatal incidents involving humanitarian personnel the General Assembly decided to commemorate the anniversary of this incident as World Humanitarian Day. This is a major historic landmark for the humanitarian sphere. The General Assembly invites all countries, entities of the UN system and international and national nongovernmental organizations to observe the day annually in an appropriate manner.

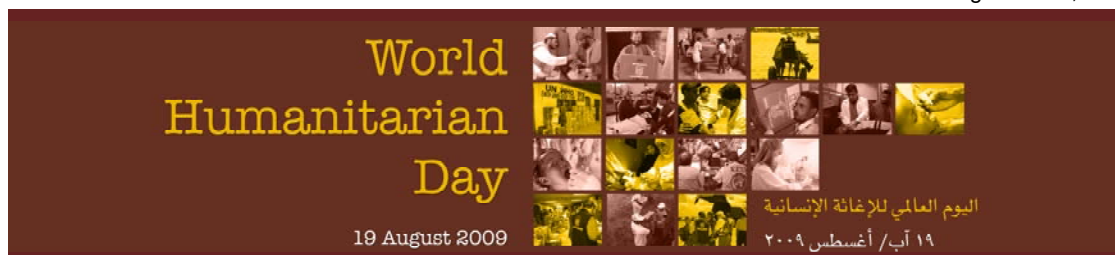
The UN Secretary-General's Ban Ki-moon summed up the purpose of World Humanitarian Day:

"World Humanitarian Day is, above all, a day on which we renew our commitment to help vulnerable, voiceless and marginalized people wherever they may be. That is the abiding mission of the humanitarian community. Let us redouble our efforts toward this goal. Let us fulfil our humanitarian imperative".



World Humanitarian Day in the Region

World Humanitarian Day was celebrated at the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean on Wednesday 19 August 2009. Attendees included representatives of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), representatives and people from the media and WHO staff members. Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, addressed the audience with a poignant speech. He acknowledged the importance of this unique event giving special recognition to all humanitarian and UN and associated personnel who have worked to promote the humanitarian cause and those who have lost their lives in the course of duty. He paid tribute to those who lost their lives on 19 August 2003, when



the UN Office in Iraq was bombed, citing the deaths of Sérgio Vieira de Mello and Nadia Younes Omar, a WHO coworker who was on loan to the UN and had dedicated over 30 years of her life to serving humanity. He also acknowledged WHO staff from the Iraq office who were seriously injured in that devastating incident, Dr Jama and Dr Omar Mekky. Dr Gezairy then went on to praise the humanitarian community's accomplishments:

"The challenges faced by millions of people around the world remain formidable, and the need for effective humanitarian action is greater than ever. The humanitarian community's ability to respond to crises has improved beyond all recognition in the past 20 years."

He ended his speech with a moving a gesture inviting all attendees to stand and observe a moment of silence in remembrance of those who have died trying to better the lives of others and those victims who were killed needlessly due to disasters—both natural and man-made.

The event line-up continued with a slide show presentation called "Comrades from the Field", which looked at the health sector's work in the humanitarian setting and a live video conference. A public service announcement was then shown highlighting the outstanding work and effort made by humanitarian workers in organizing and facilitating aid delivered to those who needed it. It also stressed the need for all people to work together to assist those who are vulnerable.

Humanitarian Day was also actively celebrated across the Eastern Mediterranean Region. In Iraq, activities for World Humanitarian Day were delayed slightly due to deadly bombings in Baghdad which took place on the morning of the 19 August, killing at least 101 and wounding at least 565. Two hours after the catastrophe a meeting was held for World Humanitarian Day as an alternative to the planned celebrations.

For further information on World Humanitarian Day and advocacy materials please go to this link: <http://www.un.org/en/events/humanitarianday/2009/>



A special tribute to those injured or killed in action

Two polio officers Dr Shams ul Haq Kakar and Dr Mamoon Tahiri and their driver Mr Azizullah Almas, who were killed in the line of duty in Afghanistan, serve as a reminder of the dangers faced by public health workers.



Dr Shams ul Haq Kakar and Dr Mamoon Tahiri

Both men gave their lives to save the children of Afghanistan from the crippling disease of polio. They were killed by a vehicle-borne suicide bomb in southern Afghanistan while on duty preparing for the planned campaign to be carried out on the UN peace day of 21 September. They were en route to prepare for a vaccination drive in the Spin Buldak district near Pakistan when their convoy was hit on 14 September. The Ministry of Public Health and Population, WHO, polio partners and the children of Afghanistan will remember their sincere efforts in polio eradication in Afghanistan.



Ms Azra Batool

Ms Azra Batool, a health worker, was on her way to vaccinate children in Toba village, Jhelum district, in the Punjab province of Pakistan during national immunization days taking place from 28 to 30 May 2009, when she was involved in an accident causing bodily injury and damage to the veins in one of her legs. There was no alternative but to amputate her leg in order to save her life. Her courage and spirit in the face of such adversity has been an inspiration to those around her and we applaud her humanitarian efforts in improving the lives and the health of the children who she has helped.

Highlights from the Region

The current situation in Yemen

The conflict between the Yemeni army and Shia Houthi rebels broke out on 12th August after a year-long truce collapsed. Since the fighting began nearly 120,000 people from various districts in Yemen's northern province of Sa'ada have fled their homes to safer areas on the border with Saudi Arabia, as renewed clashes between the

army and Houthi rebels escalated. The conflict has rapidly expanded to Daher, Razih, Saqayan, Shada, Maraan, Ghamar and Haydan districts in Sa'ada and the Harf Sufian district in the Amran governorate. According to recent reports, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are scattered in different locations, including Al Malahet and Al Hassama, Amran and Al-Jouf governorates. There are no accurate figures on the numbers of IDPs in Sa'ada city. There are some reports suggesting that there are approximately 30 000 IDPs in Baqim (bordering Saudi Arabia). A camp for IDPs will be established there. Most public health programmes have been discontinued and many health facilities have closed down or have become inaccessible to users or health staff. Outbreaks of epidemic-prone diseases, such as malaria, diarrheal diseases and measles pose a serious threat.

WHO's actions have included:

- Working with the Ministry of Public Health and Population since the beginning of the conflict.
- Delivering the first medical supplies on 17 August.
- Dispatching mobile medical teams to the field to provide medical assistance to the IDPs.
- Conducting a coordination meeting with UN staff in Haradh to share information, assess the overall situation and identify the most urgent and priority assistance needed. Shelter, safe drinking-water and sanitation, food and health services were cited as the top priorities.

WHO ensures delivery of life-saving medicines to health facilities and partners in Pakistan's conflict-affected areas

On 30 August 2009 "Many IDPs are returning to areas destroyed during the recent conflict in Swat Valley," said Ms Alia Zafar, a WHO pharmacist with the Emergency Humanitarian Action programme. "We are responding to urgent requests from the district health officer to provide life-saving medicines. It takes half a day to deliver emergency medical supplies to Swat's capital, Mingora," Zafar added, while assisting the logistics team prepare to transport the supplies.

The displacement of more than two million people in the North-West Frontier Province during the past four months of violence has increased health needs and the vulnerability of affected people. This is especially true for children aged five years and younger. The risk of infectious diseases has also risen dramatically for displaced persons.

Now with hundreds of thousands of IDPs returning home, there is a critical need to replenish supplies of life-saving medicines at functional health facilities not damaged or looted during the conflict. One of WHO's key roles in emergencies is to assist health authorities and other health providers by supplying essential life-saving medicines. These medicines often come in the form of interagency health kits, which cover the emergency health needs of 1000 people for three months, and mini emergency health kits which cover the emergency health needs for 2000 people for three months.

The procurement, storage and delivery of these medicines are handled by WHO Emergency Humanitarian Action logistics teams. The process involves using a supply chain that maintains high standards and efficiency to safely deliver life-saving medicines to hospitals, basic health units, "health corners" at IDP camps, rural health centres and mobile health clinics.

World Humanitarian Day—19th August 2009

World Humanitarian Day will be celebrated annually on 19th August, the designation of the day is a way to increase public understanding of humanitarian assistance activities worldwide and is also dedicated to the memory of all those aid and humanitarian workers who have lost their lives while assisting others in need. The humanitarian community's ability to respond to crises has improved beyond all recognition in the last 20 years. Nevertheless, the challenges that are being faced by millions of people around the world remain formidable and the need for effective humanitarian action is greater than ever.

For more information, visit: <http://www.un.org/en/events/humanitarianday/2009/>