

Foreword

António Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

The ability of humanitarian organisations to provide protection, food, water, shelter and other forms of basic assistance to millions of vulnerable people each year is increasingly at risk. Indeed, while the need for emergency aid continues to grow, the safe space that is required to reach people who are in need of support has been steadily shrinking.

This disturbing situation is the result of several interrelated trends. As we have seen in places as varied as Afghanistan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Somalia and the Darfur region of Sudan, armed conflicts now involve a multiplicity of state and non-state actors, some of whom have little or no respect for humanitarian law and principles.

Small arms and banditry are proliferating. Peacekeepers are increasingly sent to places where there is no peace to keep. At the same time, states are adopting an increasingly assertive approach to the defence of their sovereignty and security, a development that has in certain situations blurred the traditional distinction between humanitarian and military action.

Attacks on humanitarian workers, both local and international, have increased nearly threefold in a little more than a decade. In each of the past four years, more than 200 killings, injuries and kidnappings have been recorded. In the space of six months last year, my own organisation, UNHCR, lost three colleagues who were killed in separate attacks in Pakistan.

Humanitarian organisations and personnel are also increasingly obliged to work in countries with very weak forms of governance, high levels of insecurity and a physical, economic and legal infrastructure that makes the protection of civilians and the delivery of assistance an extremely demanding task.

UNHCR is certainly not the only organisation to be confronted with such challenges. In January 2010, for example, the World Food Programme was forced to take the almost unprecedented step of withdrawing from Somalia in the face of intimidation and extortion from militant groups, a decision that rendered up to a million people vulnerable to even higher levels of malnutrition than they were already experiencing.

While safeguarding humanitarian space is a current preoccupation, it is by no means the only issue that is changing, challenging and complicating the work of aid organizations.

Humanitarians are increasingly working in urban rather than rural areas. More and more, the people we seek to assist live among and alongside other poor people in overcrowded cities, often in slums and shanty towns which lack the most basic of facilities. New thinking, approaches and partnerships will be needed if we are to work effectively and equitably in such contexts.

Migration and mobility are rapidly growing in scale, with people moving from one country and continent to another in order to improve the security and opportunities available to them. Climate change, environmental degradation, as well as the growing frequency and intensity of natural disasters seem certain to reinforce this trend in the years to come.

Finally, many communities around the world are confronted with growing levels of food, water and energy insecurity, as well as volatile movements in the price of essential goods and services. There is a serious risk that these circumstances will contribute to the growth of tensions and conflicts both within and between states, thereby placing additional demands on the humanitarian community.

If we are to enhance the quality and impact of humanitarian action, to support the prevention of man-made and natural disasters, and to promote international stability and development, a number of steps must be taken.

First, we must pursue a vigorous and uncompromising campaign to preserve and expand humanitarian space, arguing the case for such outcomes with all of those actors who have the ability to threaten the principles on which our work is founded.

Second, I believe that UNHCR and other organisations that are engaged in the provision of protection and assistance must strengthen the way in which they evaluate their operations and enhance their efficiency, not least because of the very real risk that humanitarian funding will decline in the current economic climate.

Innovation is a key challenge in this respect. In a world that has been revolutionized in recent years by technical, social and intellectual change, we must ask ourselves whether the humanitarian community has been too content to adopt a 'business as usual' approach. Is there a potential for us to develop new and 'smarter' ways of operating, especially in insecure environments?

Third and finally, while humanitarian action has certainly become a more professional enterprise in the past two decades, we must ask if there is a risk that these professionals will speak increasingly to each other, rather than with the individuals and communities that they are supposed to serve? In that respect, I share the vision of DARA, which has wisely stated that "affected populations should be placed at the centre of efforts to improve their own situation."