

**The Fritz Institute Lecture on Humanitarian Relief
Georgetown University - 28 April 2004**

**Address by the Honorable Jan Egeland
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It is an honour to deliver the second annual Fritz Institute Lecture on Humanitarian Relief. Georgetown is the ideal place for today's discussion – thanks to its global reputation as a centre for reflection and analysis on international issues.

This event has special personal significance for me. We are honouring the memory of my friend over many years, Sergio Vieira de Mello. He and many other colleagues have lost their lives on the front lines of humanitarianism. As we remember fallen colleagues, I think back to the day I arrived in Newark airport to take up my post as Emergency Relief Coordinator, and seeing on the television screens that Sergio was first missing, then identified under the rubble, and then confirmed as dead. We lost 25 colleagues to that one bomb in Baghdad, with 150 wounded. OCHA itself lost four staff, and my own personal assistant – Lyn – was thought initially also to have died. While her family was holding her wake, they received a call from Lyn saying she was alive, but wounded.

The Baghdad bombing suggested that the UN has entered a new era, with new threats to our work. I remember vividly standing in the rubble of Sergio's former office in the Canal Hotel in Baghdad last October. The magnitude of the destruction and loss was

nearly overwhelming. But as much as we should mourn and grieve for the colleagues lost there, in East Timor, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Somalia; we must understand that our ability to provide humanitarian aid in conflict situations around the world is a challenge to everyone. The best example of someone who would look at it this way was Sergio.

Humanitarian action today faces tremendous challenges. Some even argue that contemporary challenges are so serious that they are leading to a fundamental change in the basic nature of our work - that a paradigm shift is occurring. Many argue that there is a war of civilizations, with no space for the principles and operations of humanitarian aid. Perhaps too many challenge us – you're either for or against us – that there is no room for independence and impartiality.

Some things have changed. Baghdad was the first time that humanitarian workers have been so deliberately targeted, on such a large scale. Yes, before we have been caught in crossfire, adult and child soldiers have attacked our staff in other countries. Even if our staff were targeted before, this was normally for very specific, local reasons. But the Iraq bombing was the subject of detailed plotting months ahead of time – the bomb was 1000 to 2000 pounds of high explosive, aimed specifically at Sergio and other UN staff.

And indeed today, our independence as humanitarians may perhaps be less clear cut than before. Or so it seems for much of the humanitarian community. I can say this because just last month I convened a meeting of more than 40 Chief Executives from the

humanitarian world – UN, NGO, Red Cross and Red Crescent leaders, from the north and the south. They are concerned about the challenges to impartial and independent humanitarian action in a world where armies or contractors blur the line between their own objectives and international humanitarian principles. But bringing this group together also made it clear that maintaining independence was not the only challenge we face; and that there were other issues, each with significant global impact, that also merit serious consideration.

The worsening security of humanitarian workers leads us to the issue of access to people that need humanitarian assistance. The inability to reach people in need continues to be one of the major impediments to our work as humanitarians. The best example of this is now in West Sudan. In Darfur, one million people under threat may live, if we are able to assist them, or may die, if we are not. There are at least 20 more countries where access difficulties prevent us from assisting millions of vulnerable people. By access difficulties I mean that we are targeted or threatened, or governments refuse to help. Roads may be mined or impassable. We can even lack access because of a lack of funds – we simply don't have the support to establish an aid operation. Yet vulnerable people have a right to humanitarian assistance and humanitarians have an obligation to provide it. We must find a way to overcome these obstacles.

Funding inequities are also limiting our efforts to meet humanitarian needs. Over the last ten years, the top one or two crises in every year get more than all the others combined. I feel it is vital to concentrate less on these one or two high profile emergencies, and focus

much more on situations like Northern Uganda. There you have ten thousand children kidnapped and turned into ruthless killers, where 1.5 million people have been driven out of their homes by fear.

I referred earlier to the argument that there has been a paradigm shift for humanitarian agencies and workers. Overall, I do not believe this to be the case. There is nothing new in insecurity faced by humanitarian workers. I recall the terrible difficulties humanitarian agencies had in bringing in assistance to needy people in Bosnia.

There is nothing new in funding inequities either. Allocating assistance based on political agendas, as much as on magnitude of needs, was the hallmark of the cold war. A shortage of humanitarian funds today for Darfur, because of the priority given to Iraq, is a serious problem, but it does not represent a major shift of donor government philosophies. Major funding allocations just tend to be driven by national interest.

So many problems are not new. But they do evolve and re-emerge at different times and with different levels of intensity. That is what is happening now, most probably as a result of events after 9/11 and in connection to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. And of these resurgent challenges I think the most complicated is related to humanitarians' identity. Although the situation is a little different this time. Today the need for humanitarians to maintain a clear identity has passed from a challenge to a crisis, and it is a crisis of perceptions.

I say this because increasingly and particularly in Afghanistan, Iraq and the “greater Middle East,” the stated intentions of humanitarians have been challenged or rejected by those actively involved in conflict. Our claim to neutral, impartial and independent work is not accepted. Perhaps the clearest example of this came from the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, when he declared in late 2002 that all international aid organisations were colluding with the coalition attacking the Taliban. This was a chilling moment for relief organisations. And these fears were confirmed by the subsequent targeted and politically motivated murder of an ICRC staff member by a man who had been fitted with a Red Cross prosthesis. Suddenly it seemed as though no amount of consistent, transparent humanitarian action could protect organizations from violence.

By some groups, we are seen as soft-skinned, high yield targets. We know that we cannot change the minds and perceptions of terrorists in these groups. But we can work with cultural and religious partners in the most problematic areas of the world. There are ancient and universal principles that we can draw upon that are not linked only to the tradition of Christian countries. We must reach out to local leaders and actively win their support for what we do.

As we do this outreach, we as humanitarians must also be more careful. Our relationship with the military in the countries that we work may be especially problematic, as military actors carry out activities they call ‘humanitarian’. For example, in Afghanistan, Provincial Reconstruction Teams made up mostly of soldiers are deployed throughout the country. These teams, or PRTs, include civilian staff, and get involved in reconstruction

and other assistance work in support of a broader political and military stabilization plan. What colleagues based in Afghanistan tell us is that the armed presence of the PRTs in villages at times confuse civilians, who then assume that other aid providers as well will be armed during this period of conflict. This again makes them less willing to receive humanitarians in their communities. The impact on international aid organisations is clear: there is now another high-visibility aid-giving presence in provincial Afghanistan, often in white vehicles, often carrying guns, and neither neutral nor independent. It falls to humanitarians to explain to sceptical communities that they are different from PRTs and have not and will not change the way they work.

In conclusion, there has been a revolution in the tools, logistics and technology used by humanitarians to respond to human suffering. These tools allowed us to respond on the day of the Bam, Iran earthquake. We have been able to improve our capacity to go and work effectively anywhere in the world.

But we also need a moral, ethical and security revolution. We must increase the support for our work from the people in the countries that we have to work. By concentrating now on this, I hope we can be better able to respond to need, to be able to use our tools and capacity more effectively, to satisfy the rights of civilians to receive assistance.