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Humanitarians are dying. Why doesn't the world care?

Aid workers are dedicated to saving lives. But the death toll among those on the frontline is rising

In February I met a man. Three hours later, he was dead.

Mohammed Al-Omari was a paramedic with the Palestine Red Crescent Society; we met in southern Gaza. As the president of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, I've been one of very few people able to visit there this year. Mohammed smiled; we shook hands and had a brief conversation. That afternoon, while rushing to give medical aid to those in need, Mohammed was killed. He is one of 21 Palestine Red Crescent volunteers to have lost their lives while on duty in the conflict in Gaza so far.

It's not just in Gaza where humanitarian aid workers are in peril. Since the beginning of 2024, the Aid Worker Security Database has recorded 224 humanitarian deaths worldwide. This year is on track to be the deadliest on record.

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Long-established norms that protect humanitarians don't seem as recognised today as they once were. Misinformation, whether inadvertent or deliberate, can suggest humanitarians are taking sides or participating in conflict or conspiracy. That can fuel local resentment and hostility, putting them at greater risk. The attention paid to protecting humanitarians is also insufficient. Some deaths, like those of the international World Central Kitchen workers in Gaza in April, make headlines. But in general, it seems the world has hardly noticed the extent to which humanitarian workers are dying. When civilians, including humanitarians, are being killed in unacceptable numbers, all –

particularly those in governments – must ask why and address it.

Every death is a profound loss for the communities we serve, leaving fewer trained hands to care for those in need. From wildfires in California and landslides in India to earthquakes in Turkey and Syria and droughts in Lesotho, our teams respond without hesitation. Every humanitarian death makes our ability to respond that much harder.

Many people on our teams live in the communities we serve and provide comfort and care immediately after disaster hits, whether that's with a warm blanket, water, a meal or psychological support. In the long term, they can coordinate recovery and financial assistance to help the most vulnerable people get back their futures. Our local focus allows us to help our neighbours and friends. It also makes us vulnerable when geopolitical conflicts escalate. When discussing the Sudanese Red Crescent, which has lost seven humanitarian workers this year, a volunteer recently told me that with each humanitarian killed 'our hearts break just a little bit more, and a piece of the community is torn apart each time.'

Since the attacks of 7 October 2023 and the escalation of the conflict in Gaza, the violence against our volunteers and staff in both Israel and the Palestinian territories has been like nothing we've seen before. Among the dead are ambulance drivers, medical personnel and staffers who worked with young people. The paramedic volunteer Amit Man was tending to wounded patients in her community when she was killed. She was one of six staffers and volunteers from Magen David Adom (the name of our national society in Israel) to die in the line of duty. Recently, her boyfriend shared with me the psychological trauma he has experienced since her death. 'All she wanted was to help others', he said. 'It doesn't make sense.'

Glimmers of hope

For the past year, my colleagues and I at the I.F.R.C. (as well as at the International Committee of the Red Cross, which leads conflict responses as part of our movement) have called for the international community to protect humanitarians. But our pleas remain unanswered.

I propose three concrete actions for world leaders, governments and other stakeholders to protect those of us who serve others. First, all parties must ensure unrestricted and safe access for humanitarians to reach those in need. In over 100 years of doing this work alongside many partners, our group has found again and again that open communication with all sides saves lives. While safety can never be guaranteed, it can be

increased through good transport, communication tools such as radios and telephones and proper visibility for people, vehicles and buildings. This is an area where donor support helps.

Society as a whole must invest in long-term solutions that address the root causes of these complex crises.

Second, these parties must prioritise the safety and security of humanitarians. In most cases, the only protection our volunteers have is the emblems on their vests. As the situations in Gaza, Israel and Sudan show, more training in international humanitarian law is needed. When you see our emblems, it should be widely understood that the Red Cross and the Red Crescent do not take sides in a conflict. We maintain neutrality. To further guarantee safety, we continue to encourage open communication between governments and others involved in conflict.

There are glimmers of hope. When deadly protests erupted in Bangladesh this summer, people recognised our teams' neutrality as they provided lifesaving assistance. A robust presence within the community and the continued advocacy to protect the emblem contributed to the positive outcome.

Third, society as a whole must invest in long-term solutions that address the root causes of these complex crises. Every day, our teams support community resilience before disasters and conflict strike. But sustainable development, climate adaptation and conflict resolution initiatives can address the underlying issues and help communities reduce their dependency on aid.

Mohammed and Amit are gone, but their deaths don't have to be in vain. Let's honour their memory with action.

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