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**Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay  
On The First World Humanitarian Day, 19 August 2009**

Following is a statement by United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay on the occasion of the first World Humanitarian Day which will be commemorated on 19 August 2009:

“August 19 is a date that is etched deep in the consciousness of the United Nations and the memories of those involved in humanitarian and human rights work around the world: the day in 2003 when 22 people, mostly UN staff, were killed in cold blood by a single bomb at the Canal Hotel in Baghdad.

It was by no means the first time that humanitarian aid workers, human rights defenders, peacekeepers and others working to improve the lot of the disadvantaged had been deliberately targeted by ruthless forces determined to create instability or subvert the basic laws and norms on which civilized society depends. My own organization, OHCHR, experienced its first loss of staff on 4 February 1997, when five members of the Human Rights Field Operations were killed in Rwanda.

And sadly, since 19 August 2003, there have been numerous other assassinations of individuals and further bombs – most notably the one in Algiers on 11 December 2007 which took the lives of a further 17 UN staff members – targeting UN and NGO staff. And I have just learned that two more UN staff are among those killed on Tuesday by a suicide bomber in Kabul. I would like to offer my deepest condolences to their families and colleagues.

In the case of the Baghdad and Algiers bombs, the perpetrators of these crimes were terrorist organizations. However, in other cases, the killers have sometimes acted on behalf of a government, or for organs meant to be under the control of governments.

Killing those who are trying to help others is a particularly despicable crime, and one which all governments should join forces to prevent, and – when prevention fails – to punish. It is therefore appropriate – as a first step – that last December the global forum for all the world’s governments, the UN General Assembly, agreed to designate 19 August as World Humanitarian Day.

Humanitarian aid workers are on the frontline, trying to provide at least a minimum of material support and protection for the displaced, and for populations affected by conflict, chronic poverty, food shortages, natural disasters and other crises.

Humanitarian work and human rights are inextricably entwined. It is very often abuse of human rights that causes humanitarian crises in the first place. And without humanitarian aid, the basic human rights of millions of people – including the right to seek asylum from persecution, the right to education, and, most fundamental of all, the right to life – would be denied. Similarly, if human rights are ignored during a humanitarian crisis, the crisis will often deepen.

The Canal Hotel bombing rocked the UN system to its core. Among the dead was my predecessor as High Commissioner for Human Rights, Sergio Vieira de Mello. Several staff from the Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) had gone with him on secondment to help the effort to bring peace and stability to Iraq.

Sergio was uniquely placed to provide the synthesis between humanitarian work, human rights, and political mediation. As High Commissioner for Human Rights, and as a former top official with the UN refugee agency and OCHA, he saw with sharp clarity the essential, mutually reinforcing, connections between humanitarian work, human rights and peace-building.

The UN staff who were killed and injured alongside him in the Canal Hotel came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were experts in providing humanitarian aid, some were human rights specialists, others were experienced in peace-building and political negotiations. They were all working in the common belief that they could contribute to rebuilding Iraq after decades of massive human rights abuses by the regime of Saddam Hussein, and the destructive conflict that removed him but was threatening to plunge the country into prolonged chaos and anarchy.

Would they have succeeded, if the August 19 bomb had not exploded? Would the ensuing years of horrendous inter-ethnic strife, killing, rape and other forms of abuse that plagued Iraq have been mitigated or largely avoided? We shall never know.

But they, and all the aid workers like them around the world, past, present and future, most certainly deserve to have this day in the annual calendar devoted to their selfless, often unrewarding and sometimes dangerous efforts to improve the lives of others.”

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*For use of the information media; not an official record*