

First Anniversary of the killing of ACF staff in Muttur  
6 August 2007

Speech delivered by Mr. John Holmes, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I stand here this afternoon, not only as the Emergency Relief Coordinator, but also in a sense as a representative of the global humanitarian community. I am here to pay my own respects and those of that wider community to the lives and to the sacrifice of the 17 humanitarian workers of Action Contre la Faim, who were murdered so brutally one year ago today. I also want to take this opportunity to demand once more of all concerned to do everything possible to prevent such a tragedy from happening again. That would be the biggest tribute to the memory of those who lost their lives last year.

But the first and most important thing I want to do today is to offer my deepest condolences to you, the families, loved ones and colleagues of those who died, and to pay tribute to your courage and endurance. Your suffering has been the greatest and your pain the most intense for the last year. I am honoured that you allow me, a stranger to you, to speak on this anniversary.

The Muttur massacre was probably the single worst crime committed against humanitarian workers in recent history. Other humanitarians have paid the ultimate price for their commitment and calling in many other countries, in incidents involving both armed violence and natural hazards. But I cannot think of another incident where so many members of a single humanitarian agency were murdered at the same time in such a dreadfully deliberate and calculating way. That is why I repeat the call of the Secretary-General to the Government of Sri Lanka to investigate this murder with the full weight and force of the justice system. This needs energy and a determination to find the truth. What all of us today here want – the families of the victims, UN, Government, NGOs – is to see those concerned brought to justice and to understand what happened on that dreadful day.

A full year has passed since this crime. No one has been apprehended or charged, and in many ways we seem little nearer to the truth. What we need to know is who did this and why if we are to have any chance of preventing a repeat in the future. Revealing the truth about this crime is not only important for its own sake, but because the massacre was a terrible assault on the key principles of humanitarian action throughout the world. Humanitarian assistance is neutral and impartial. We help people regardless of ethnicity and religious background, and try to help them solely on the basis of their needs in their hour of distress.

The killers should remember what these humanitarian agencies did for Sri Lanka in one of its darkest hours – in the hours, weeks and months after the Tsunami struck. Humanitarian organizations, staffed overwhelmingly by Sri Lankans, provided food and shelter, rebuilt homes, helped people restart their livelihoods. Political beliefs did not matter, nor did race or religion. These *same principles and beliefs* were what were

guiding our fallen colleagues, as they helped those most affected by the continuing conflict in this country.

For humanitarian workers, the choice of profession – to help the most vulnerable – is not just a job. It is a question of commitment and devotion to a noble cause. Humanitarian workers are aware of the significant risks that they run in conflict areas, and have always run, here and elsewhere. But when 17 brave humanitarians are forced to lie face down on the ground and are killed in cold blood, we must together say “enough”. Enough of the murder of humanitarian workers, wherever they take place. Enough of the idea that they should ever be a legitimate target for any side in a conflict. Enough of denying them the protection and support that every side should provide, no matter how intense the conflict.

As I said at the beginning, we are here today to remember those who died, and the families they left behind. This was a dreadful human tragedy, with many victims, not only those who died. It will leave scars and shattered lives for many years to come. The sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, and the coworkers of those who died were proud of what they were doing. They rightly thought that this work was vital to alleviate the suffering of their countrymen and women.

They should have been protected, because of the work they were doing, by international humanitarian law, as well as by respect for the laws of Sri Lanka, rather than targeted because of it. They were not the first humanitarian aid workers to die in this country. They have, sadly, not been the last. But I hope that this first anniversary of their death will finally serve as a wake-up call to all those who take too lightly the unique role of humanitarian workers, and the obligation not only to allow them the access and the space they need to do their work but also the obligation to keep them, as unarmed, neutral humanitarians, as safe from harm as possible. Their sacrifice must not be in vain.

So we owe it to them and to their memory to continue this work, to keep helping those in need in Sri Lanka. We must go on upholding the principles to which they dedicated their lives. Sri Lankans, with the international community, must continue to strive to help and heal, rather than divide and destroy. The devotion of these seventeen humanitarians, and the price they paid for it, demand no less.