

World Humanitarian Day - August 2010

Belgian Humanitarians in the UN World Food Programme



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in East Jerusalem

When did you become a humanitarian and where have you worked?

I started working for the UN in 1980 and since 1984 I have been part of the WFP family in countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Congo, Mauritania, Senegal, India, and in headquarters in Rome. I have also travelled on missions to many countries of West Africa, Latin America and South Asia.

What do you like about being a humanitarian?

What I like about being a humanitarian is the emergency and urgency of the operations which make one's job more thrilling and challenging every day. This combined with the satisfaction of seeing how immediate actions can help people in need, which to me it is more gratifying than development projects where the outcomes of your work come much slower. I also like the teamwork aspect of the humanitarian work.

What do you find rewarding and challenging about working with WFP?

One of the rewards of working with WFP is to see the food and assistance being delivered to those in need. It is even more rewarding to go on the field, visit people and see how they have been helped. Contribution is not huge but helps a lot; people are happy and their lives have improved. However, the security issues we face, access problems (capacities for a fair distribution) administrative and political bottlenecks are major challenging elements.

Tell me what a normal day is like...

A typical day for me is long, filled with different tasks, and lots of office work; there are lots of deadlines and pressure. Most of the days are taken up by meetings to ensure coordination and efficient delivery of WFP food assistance. A significant part of meetings involves Palestinian counterparts and NGO partners, on regular if not daily basis. However beyond the office work, there is the gratification of guiding a team of dynamic staff and to be able to design and implement effective projects.

What motivates and sustains you to continuing in this field of work?

Daily I'm faced with challenges to which solutions must be found to ensure work is carried out properly in the name of the most vulnerable; this is what sustains me. After years in this field of work, you get used to a certain dynamic; I might be bored if I worked outside of humanitarian aid sector, and the motivation may not be the same.

What impact—both positive and negative—has your work had on friendship and family relationships?

The biggest sacrifice for humanitarians is being away from their families and, to some extent, from their country, especially when they work in isolated areas. One needs to be ready for difficult security conditions, difficult working conditions, and different cultural situations.

What is one meaningful/funny/challenging interaction you've had with someone this week/month?

Recently, I recall of a very rewarding interaction during a visit to a Beduin family living in extreme poverty, behind East Jerusalem near a large settlement. They were very thankful for WFP's assistance; the only assistance they had ever received. It gives them hope and trust in a better world and though they didn't have much, they offered us food, tea and a great company. WFP really reaches the poorest of the poorest and can make a difference.