

World Humanitarian Day: Holding onto hope

By Martin Griffiths

United Nations' Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator

When the merchant vessel Razoni sailed from Ukraine's Black Sea port of Odesa earlier this month with more than 26,000 tons of corn for global markets, she was rightly the subject of intense attention.

Her passage was the result of months of negotiations between Russia, Turkey, Ukraine and the United Nations, including UN humanitarian staff, logisticians and legal experts.

For the first time since the war in Ukraine began five months earlier, sea exports of Ukrainian crops were to resume, giving much-needed hope to millions of people beaten down by rising food prices and declining supplies, pushing many into hunger and even famine conditions.

And hope is so rare these days.

Conflicts. Hunger. The climate crisis. Droughts. Poverty. A pandemic. In more than 40 years of aid work, I don't remember the

world being so overwhelmed with problems and in such urgent need of action to solve them. Right now, a record 303 million people need humanitarian aid.

But despite this grim picture, I still hold on to hope. Why? Because over the years, I have seen that while conflicts and other crises bring out the worst, they also inspire the very best in humanity.

Even in the depths of despair and division, there are glimmers of hope—from new solutions to seemingly intractable problems, to acts of generosity and kindness that bring solace to the suffering.

Delivering hope and standing in solidarity are at the very heart of humanitarian action. Today, on World Humanitarian Day, we want to celebrate this spirit, for in some of the bleakest situations it

may be all that people have.

There is a phrase "It takes a village to raise a child." Likewise, it takes a village to help a community in crisis. This village is made up of affected communities themselves, who are always first to respond when crisis strikes, backed up by a support system of national emergency services, local businesses and civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), UN agencies, and the Red Cross and Red Crescent family.

Many are international aid workers, but the vast majority of humanitarians are from the crisis-affected countries themselves.

Every hour of every day, this humanitarian 'village' steps up to organize relief deliveries, distribute cash, set up mobile health

clinics and schools, build water pumps, airlift nutrition supplies, provide counselling support and so much more, supporting millions of people balancing on the edge of survival.

This village is populated by aid workers like Zuhra Wardak, a champion of girls' education and gender issues, who was one of the first to return to work in Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover.

And Andrii, a driver with Ukrainian NGO Proliska, who risks his life to evacuate people from areas under bombardment.

And Amina Haji Elmi, a women's rights champion in Somalia, who realized helping women was her mission after she and her family were displaced by conflict in that country.

There are also glimmers of hope at the wider level.

For instance, amid the relentless violence in Ukraine, we have seen thousands of volunteers assisting people trapped in war

zones, and the generosity of communities that have welcomed Ukrainian refugees, echoing a long tradition of neighborly support that is evident from Bangladesh to Colombia, from Jordan to Uganda.

We can draw inspiration from political progress made in brutal and bloody crises like Yemen, where the truce has held, dissipating some of the constant fear of violence.

From improved access to people in need in Ethiopia's Tigray Region, which, thanks to persistent and painstaking negotiations, has enabled aid convoys to reach people who desperately need food.

From the passing of Security Council resolution 2642 allowing cross-border aid to continue into north-west Syria, extending a lifeline for millions of people at least for the next few months.

And from the Navi Star, Polar-net, Razoni, Rojen and many other ships that carried Ukrainian

crops to the rest of the world, offering a grain of hope to some of the 345 million people suffering from food shortages.

On World Humanitarian Day, let us take a moment to recognize all those who work tirelessly, day and night, to enact solidarity often at great personal sacrifice. They save lives in places that the world too often chooses to forget and where the risks are real: 461 aid workers were attacked last year while responding to humanitarian crises—141 of them were killed, all but a few of them national staff.

The courage and conviction of these aid workers, always pushing for ways to reach people even in the worst of the worst of crises, inspire us to never give up hope.

As we mark this year's World Humanitarian Day we commemorate those we have lost. And we celebrate all humanitarians who carry on this noble mission together.

After all, it takes a village.

Counter-terrorism strategy that reduces violent extremism

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After the recent drone killing of 71-year-old Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's leader, we are still left with more questions than answers. Countless articles have been written about why, how, where, when and what this means for the next in rank for al-Qaeda, and the relative influence of ISIS/ISIL, al-Shabab and other faction groups in their regions of operations.

Unfortunately, while scholars opine and speculate about "what's next," we continue to live in "elevated" fear of another terrorist attack or retaliatory strikes and tighter restrictions at airports for us regular travelers—a price we are all still paying 22 years post-9/11.

While the death of al-Zawahiri, and his predecessor Osama bin Laden, serves as an immediate (political) win in the short-term, in the long term, the strategy lacks sustainability, as al-Qaeda can be likened to Hydra, illustrating that it is futile to decapitate one head while two could grow back, and truly questioning these military or "hard" interventions to countering terrorism.

The bigger issue we are encountering with the current counter-terrorism strategy is: it does not manage to kill the *zeitgeist* or spirit of the violent extremism movement; it fuels it by killing the head and enraging its followers.

In any business, and probably applicable to al-Qaeda and other violent extremist organizations, if an organizational reshuffle occurs, it only means that the organization needs revising which takes a few months, but the idea behind the business usually continues to transpire, we saw Apple undergo a structural change after the death of Steve Jobs and that certainly did not weaken Apple's operations nor appeal; and this is why most scholars have noted a new leader will emerge for al-Qaeda after al-Zawahiri's death.

As a Counter-Terrorism and Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) expert working in development over the years, our boots on the ground approach transitioned from "hard" military means to softer approaches to countering terrorism by encouraging governments, civil societies and local communities affected by violence to consider peace through reintegration, deradicalization and dialogue, thus choosing a softer approach to reduce violent extremism. In development programs, we aim to disengage from violence and reduce recruitment to violent extremist groups, and this is best achieved through soft counter terrorism.

It has allowed us to learn from reformers/ex-combatants and provided more insights into persuading extremists to abandon their radical views. Applying this type of intel from reformers/ex-combatants, helps in understanding the ideology, institutional structure, propaganda, social implications, mindsets and associated tools used by violent extremist organizations and enables better planning to guide development

programs in counter narratives in deterring violent extremism.

Our programs are imbedded with objectives and outputs that are monitored and evaluated (M&E) to ensure efficiency of project outcomes and through these procedures we yield results on the ground that are measurable indicating that a softer counter-terrorism strategy reduces violent extremism.

For example, I managed USAID's Voices for Peace (V4P) project in Northern Cameroon, which is a community led radio program that aims to reduce vulnerability to violent extremism by amplifying local voices and encouraging dialogue to strengthen communities' social resilience and mitigate the threat of violent extremism, through climate change adaptation/mitigation measures, faith-based and citizen engagement, local governance, youth and women empowerment activities, et cetera at the community level. V4P operates throughout the Lake Chad Basin region, using 16 partner radio stations in Cameroon and broadcasting in 26 local languages.

In Cameroon, V4P created a reconciliation edutainment soap opera series to help communities accept and reintegrate former Boko Haram combatants by empowering local communities to identify drivers of conflict by leveraging communities' historical and cultural traditions of tolerance and moderation.

The M&E mechanism built into the program is a content advisory group, which served as a feedback loop to better understand the effectiveness of the project and perceptions of change within the communities, indicating that a softer approach to counter-terrorism and preventing violent extremism works and yields results.

The existing "cowboy justice" removes impartiality, does not prevent future horrific terrorist acts, as we know, and emboldens violence by perpetrating a cycle of vengeance. It does not clearly define the endpoint, it may increase recruitment for empathizers, who may perceive al-Zawahiri's death as martyrdom, and unfortunately, it killed any answers we could have sought from al-Zawahiri himself—and this is where the issue lies. The existing approach relies too heavily on force, and therefore is begging for a softer counter-terrorism strategy.

Without bringing terrorists to justice using the rule of law, we may never get *real* justice for victims and their families, we run the risk of losing diplomatic ties and credibility with state governments, civil societies and local communities in combatting violent extremism through development programs and we still do not know, if we are enabling the extremist cause by successfully chopping off another of Hydra's head, while others spring forth. Through the existing practices, the burning question still remains: what has been achieved by killing al-Qaeda's chiefs in command?

NEWS OF THE FUTURE

JANUARY 2023: THE SECOND SEARCH OF THE FBI AT MAR-A-LAGO IS A SUCCESS WITH THE RECOVERY OF THE ROSWELL CRASH UFO WHICH MYSTERIOUSLY DISAPPEARED FROM AREA 51 AT THE END OF DONALD TRUMP'S TERM...



Asia's uneasy e-commerce boom: Integration, interoperability and inclusion

East Asia is in the midst of a historic e-commerce boom. Online transactions of goods and services grew rapidly during COVID-19 lockdowns, at 58 percent per annum in the Southeast Asian region alone in 2020.

In 2022, the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam are expected to rank among the top five fastest growing e-commerce markets in the world. China remains the region's largest business-to-consumer e-commerce market, with more than 50 percent of retail sales made online.

East Asia's online buyers and sellers are buoyed by a vibrant ecosystem of digital trade services, such as e-commerce marketplaces, digital payment and fintech services, logistics platforms and so-called "super-apps" that provide users with services including delivery, shopping and ride hailing.

Businesses are realizing the opportunity that e-commerce presents, mounting online stores and onboarding marketplaces to reach hundreds of millions of global buyers. In ASEAN countries two-thirds of micro and small firms use the online shopping platform Shopee, about half use Lazada, and over a quarter use Amazon. Midsize and larger firms are widely using global marketplaces like Amazon and Alibaba as well as direct-to-consumer platforms such as Shopify.

This has translated to cross-border e-commerce and digital trade. More than 60 percent of microenterprises that sell on global online marketplaces now export, with half of them commencing export because of e-commerce. Online seller-exporters are also more likely than offline sellers to export to multiple ASEAN and extra-regional markets.

The surge in business-to-consumer e-commerce is paralleled by the strong growth of cross-border business-to-business e-commerce as business-sellers seek to create omnichannel experiences



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for business purchasing managers. Digitally deliverable business-to-business services exports are also growing, at 16 percent per annum between 2007 and 2020 in the ASEAN region alone, far exceeding the robust growth of the commercial services trade. As a result, the region's digital service providers are more deeply integrated in Asian and global value chains.

The adoption of policies and practices by regional governments that are conducive to e-commerce—such as e-payment laws, e-export promotion programs and financing for online small and medium-sized enterprises—have further bolstered the e-commerce surge. Governments in the region have long pursued regional e-commerce workstreams in the context of ASEAN and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) alongside pathbreaking free trade agreements that unite regional economies with extra regional partners to promote digital trade.

Some of these include the US-Japan Digital Trade Agreement, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Singapore-Australia Digital Economy Agreement and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement.

Governments across East Asia, however, have much work ahead of them to translate this wave of e-commerce adoption into digital trade opportunities for regional firms and economies. Over a third of Southeast Asian sellers report struggling with the region's fragmented digital regulatory landscape.

The complexity of national data privacy, consumer protection and other digital regulations are daunting to meet in just one market, let alone in multiple

markets. Firms also worry about potential data localization undermining cross-border e-commerce. This is unsurprising with online seller-exporters widely using data on foreign customers and operations to upgrade services and streamline sales.

These obstacles point to the need for a clear regional policy agenda to promote digital trade. Regional economies need to promote greater convergence among national digital regulations to facilitate smaller firms' compliance with national regulations in online markets.

Further accessions of regional economies to the CPTPP and other trade agreements with binding e-commerce rules can promote regulatory convergence and lock each economy into standardized rules for digital trade.

The intention of ASEAN economies to negotiate a Digital Economy Framework Agreement is a potentially positive step towards robust and binding rules that promote e-commerce.

East Asia's prolific payments innovation is yet to be matched by payment system interoperability. About one-third of regional firms report losing online export sales as they are unable to accept payments from foreign customers. Elevated cross-border logistics costs, the orchestration of business-to-business logistics, accompanying paper-based trade documents and end to end payments also present significant challenges to firms.

East Asian firms engaging in digital trade will also require fluid access to data on their operations and customers and the ability to store, process and analyze data cost-effectively. Yet, the United States Trade Representative's 2022 report on foreign trade bar-

riers highlights several practices in countries such as Indonesia and China that run counter to aspirations for free data flows.

ASEAN's Model Contractual Clauses for Cross Border Data Flows is a step in the right direction to promoting orderly cross-border data transfer. East Asian economies can consider joining the APEC Cross-Border Privacy Rules System, which balances the objectives of data accessibility with data security and privacy.

Promoting the broad-based use of privacy-preserving encryption and confidential computing technologies can complement these policies and help avert draconian data privacy and transfer laws.

Ongoing efforts to promote payments and logistics interoperability must be continued and regionalized further. Robust bilateral and multiparty real-time payment interoperability pilots already exist in the region.

Payment interoperability initiatives and the ongoing adoption of ISO 20022 standards aim to streamline communications among national payment systems. Project Dunbar, a multi-central bank digital currency pilot, may herald a new era for low-cost and efficient cross-border payments.

In trade logistics, consortia that leverage blockchain ledgers to promote interoperability and lower end-to-end shipments times and costs can facilitate efficient, cost-effective and greener trade transactions. But this must be in parallel to accelerated government adoption of paperless trade practices.

Deeper integration of markets, implementation of digital trade commitments, and improved interoperability of payments and logistics services will all help East Asian online sellers to expand sales. Integrating small firms, remote sellers and a growing army of creators into new markets will enable more inclusive trade—and produce the greatest gains from digital commerce.