David Harland speech: HD receives Carnegie Wateler Peace Prize

Accepting the Carnegie Wateler Peace Prize on behalf of HD, Executive Director David Harland set out the challenges and realities of conflict mediation in this powerful speech drawing on his own experiences.

HD was deeply honoured to receive the award at a ceremony on 3 November at the Peace Palace in The Hague in recognition of our work to prevent and resolve armed conflicts through mediation and discreet diplomacy.

Watch the speech **here**.

Read the release on HD's website **here**.

Many thanks. It is a great honour to receive the Carnegie Wateler Peace Prize on behalf of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue – or HD as we're also known.

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue was created by the International Committee of the Red Cross – almost quarter of a century ago – to undertake quiet, informal diplomacy in the service of peace.

It was to be a low-key organisation – not secret, but discreet. And that, for the most part, is how we have operated, ever since our first project resulted in a cessation of hostilities agreement between the government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement over 20 years ago.

Much of the time, therefore, we don't do public events.

But we couldn't resist this one. And we thank you for that, because the Peace Prize is really an inspiration to me and my colleagues.

And we will think of it – and of the values and motivation behind it – when we next find ourselves in a dark place, which is often. It will be a light for us.

I should also say that, as part of trying to keep a low profile, we try – when we do speak on the record – not to say anything too interesting. I apologise if that is also the case today, but I offer the compensation that I will at least be brief.

This prize is being conferred in The Hague, which is synonymous with the global effort to advance the cause of justice, including, or especially, in war.

I have myself come to The Hague many times, to give testimony in international criminal cases.

So, being in a city that is somehow at the intersection of peace and justice, I would like to say a word about that intersection – the intersection of peace and justice in the work of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

It's an old debate – Sophocles' Antigone was confronted with it two and a half thousand years ago. And one that remains actively disputed.

There is an easy way out, to say that there is no tension between peace and justice, no contradiction. But there often is. I have lived it myself.

Almost 30 years ago, in April 1993, Serb forces in Bosnia surrounded Srebrenica, with a population then of about 40,000 Bosnian Muslims, or Bosniacs.

Seeing the hopelessness of their situation, the Bosniac leaders in Srebrenica entered into discussions with UNHCR about the possibility of an evacuation across Serb-held territory to safety.

UNHCR then contacted the local Serb commanders, who agreed.

The first convoy of vehicles was prepared, and the first evacuees said their goodbyes, and the first vehicles began to move.

And then it was stopped. The Bosnian government in Sarajevo, as well as foreign friends, said that the evacuation deal was unacceptable.

For UNHCR to broker a deal with Serb generals and desperate Bosniacs to remove a whole population, contrary to the most basic precepts of International Humanitarian Law, was just unacceptable.

A deal like that would be nothing more than facilitating ethnic cleansing. There could not be any fair deal, or any free choice, in a situation like that. UNHCR must stop the evacuations, which they did. So the people stayed.

It was at that point, by the way, that the United Nations asked the government of The Netherlands to deploy Dutch blue helmet troops to Srebrenica to try to offer some level of protection to the people who, in the absence of this evacuation agreement, would have to stay there.

The Canadians and Swedes had both refused this role, which they believed to be militarily impossible.

And Kofi Annan, the then UN Under-Secretary-General for peacekeeping, told the Security Council that it couldn't be done without a much bigger and more heavily armed force.

And when, two years later, the Serbs finally closed the noose, in the summer of 1995, many of those people who would have been evacuated in 1993 were nowhere to be found.

Most of them were among the 30,000 people who had made it across Serb-controlled territory to safety in Bosnian government territory, either on foot, mainly at night, amid enormous fear and danger, or bussed out by the conquering Serbs in an act of ethnic cleansing.

But many thousands could not be accounted for. Nobody knew for sure how many. Maybe up to 10,000.

I was working in Sarajevo at the time, and was dispatched by the United Nations as part of the effort to find out what had happened to those unaccounted for people.

One of the places I stopped was a tiny Serb-controlled hamlet called Kravica, just outside of Srebrenica.

There I found a non-descript agricultural warehouse. It was a cement rectangle; not big – smaller than this room. There were bullet casings on the ground outside, so I went in.

It was empty. It was empty except that on all six internal surfaces of the warehouse – four walls, plus floor and ceiling – were the smeared remains of human tissue.

What hadn't been removed when the several hundred bodies had been bulldozed out, and the place hosed down. Mainly just red and brown smudges, some with bits of hair still attached. And some chips of bone and tissue in the corners.

I have had a lot of time, more than quarter of a century, to think about what I saw that day.

And one of the things I have asked myself is how many of those people would still be alive, would have escaped the crime of genocide, if the deal brokered by UNHCR had gone ahead in April 1993.

And how strange it was that those who had blocked that deal had done so in the name of justice, in the name of not being the handmaiden to the crime of ethnic cleansing.

And now I work with an organisation which is involved with similar deals, which is being honoured here today for that work.

Not theoretically involved in such deals, but actively facilitating. For example, in April 2018, which happened to be exactly 25 years after the doomed Srebrenica deal, something similar happened in Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus, but with a different outcome.

Eastern Ghouta was surrounded by forces of the Syrian regime. Much of the population was living underground, but even that didn't save them.

Sarin gas was used. Children were killed. People trapped inside wanted to escape, to save their lives. A deal was made. Three of them, in fact. HD helped with those deals.

And then, once the deals were made, an enormous number of people were evacuated – over 100,000 -- across territory held by the Syrian regime to the opposition stronghold of Idlib, where many of them remain to this day, still on the front line.

And, as in the case 25 years before, there were denunciations that outsiders had helped the attacking forces "cleanse" the area they had terrorised – in violation of the laws and customs of war.

Right or wrong? Just or unjust? Would we do it again?

I would say two things to those questions. First, there is no absolute answer. Second, the views that matter most would have to come from those being evacuated.

But that can't be an excuse not to take a position when those questions arise.

We were there when it was all unfolding, and either we had to do something, or we had to do nothing.

One question came up a lot. It was the question of informed consent, if the word “consent” can refer to something that is done as the only alternative to being killed.

Did the three groups of Ghouta negotiators, for example, know the risks of what they were getting into?

Did they know that we, as a third party, had no capacity at all to protect them if the Regime reneged on the deal?

They, of course, knew the regime better than we ever could, and they chose to take that risk, given the alternatives – or, to be precise, given the *lack* of alternatives.

And we, on the strength of their own wish to proceed, chose to continue our own role as go-between, as an enabler.

We stood with them, but simply passing responsibility to the victims was not a way out, of course.

What if the regime had stopped those buses, and started killing those on board?

Would we have said, “Well, they knew the risks, and they took the chance?”

Would that really have been enough of an answer from us? How much did we really know about the risk of that when we agreed to play our role?

Those are questions that we did ask ourselves – never arriving at perfect answers but still feeling that, despite the confusion and reason for doubt, we had an obligation to press on.

What we did not ask ourselves very explicitly, but which demands an answer in this city of peace and justice, was about the moral hazard.

That moral hazard persisted even if there was, on the side of the evacuees, something approaching informed consent, and if there was, on our side, something approaching reasonable due diligence about the level of risk.

That unasked question was the one from Srebrenica. Was our work helping the Syrian regime to complete a job that was fundamentally wrong? Could we, like UNHCR in Srebrenica a quarter of a century before, be accused of legitimating or even enabling a huge crime?

Looking back, I have tried to understand that conundrum – wherever it arises – in terms of the primacy of the right to life.

However much we might wish it weren't so, there is a hierarchy of rights. At least at desperate moments, rights do get traded off, one against others.

Because, at any given moment, the right to life surely trumps the others. Some rights can still have at least some meaning if deferred, including justice, but the right to life can't be deferred, and can't be parsed.

HD is not an organisation either of moral philosophers or of lawyers. We try above all to be practical people. But we are acutely aware that moral and legal hazard are everywhere in our work.

So we try – in every engagement, not just in this one of Eastern Ghouta, with its dark echoes of Srebrenica – to be guided by principles with which I hope the trustees of this Prize can concur.

And the first of these, from which all others flow, which is even in our name, is humanity.

Our belief, and our lived experience, is that humanity does not allow us the luxury of not acting when not all principles are aligned.

The choices in war are hardly ever the choice between good and bad. The choices are almost always between bad and worse, or even between bad and death.

So, apart from our commitment to humanity, we eschew purism.

We try to be guided by those actually engaged in war, or its victims, who seek an end to violence through negotiations.

But we do not advocate for peace at any cost.

If the parties choose to fight on – Ukraine, for example, has made it clear that it would fight to free its territory of invaders even if a ceasefire in place were offered – our role is to be ready to help when the parties themselves are ready.

We can discuss with them what negotiations might reasonably be expected to bring, but the decision to try to settle a conflict by negotiation rests with them.

Our way of working involves moral compromises. We are impartial with the parties, even when the moral equities are not the same on all sides. We maintain confidentiality, even when it's a burden to do so.

We can admire those who *don't* compromise their principles. Who are against war for any reason, for example. Or who will always side with the weak who suffer at the hands of the strong. Or always fight for the triumph of what is right.

But we are also aware of the inescapable moral hazard that pursues even the ost principled actors in the crucible of war and peace.

Insisting on perfect peace can prolong the suffering. Insisting on confidentiality – as the ICRC did with its knowledge of the Wansee conference in 1942 – can provide cover for the most terrible crimes.

So we believe that there is a role – a small but important role – for a service of last resort. For an organisation – a pragmatic, low-key organisation, acceptable to all sides – which can convene those who, for whatever reason, want to draw a line under a violent struggle, and to find a negotiated exit.

Whether it is terrorised populations surrounded by genocidal enemies – or armed groups at the end of their road, or a failed invasion, or a confrontation between great powers that has come too close to catastrophic escalation – there has to be room, we believe, whatever the rights and wrongs, for those who can offer a space, and ideas, when the time has come to talk.

We are infinitely grateful to all the governments which have supported HD's quiet work to play this role.

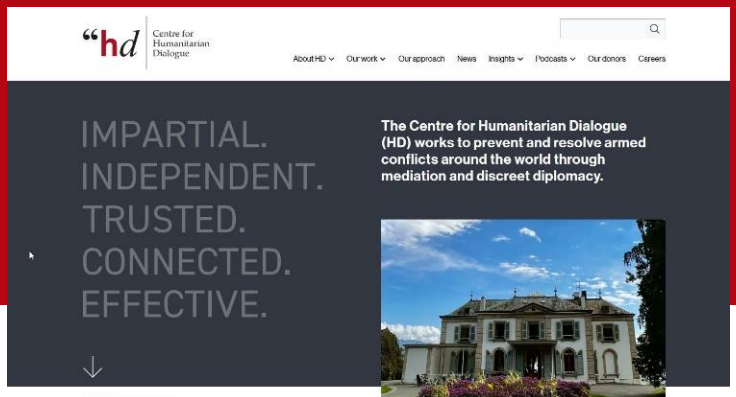
And to the trustees for the Carnegie Wateler Peace Prize.

And to our dear Dutch board members – the late ambassador Herman Schaper and the brilliant Marietje Schaake.

And to all those who have felt that in war there sometimes just has to be a way to find the lesser evil.

On behalf of all of us at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, I thank you.

For more on HD's work – and our news and insights – please visit:



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