Who are the real-life heroes in the time of COVID-19?

By Gustavo Gonzalez

On World Humanitarian Day (WHD), 19 August, we celebrate and honor frontline workers, who, despite the risks, continue to provide life-saving support and protection to people most in need. On this day, we also commemorate humanitarians killed, harassed, and injured while performing their duty. This year’s theme is “Real-Life Heroes”.

But, what does it mean to be a hero? What does it take to help those in need, the poor and at-risk communities, those who are most vulnerable when a disaster strike? Why should we hold up as heroic the deeds of those who everyday continue to extend a helping hand?

As I write this, I am mourning the death of a UN colleague. He died last Friday, struck down by COVID-19, at the age of 32. As a team member of the UN’s Migration Agency, he showed exemplary dedication and commitment to the situation of migrants amidst this pandemic.

He was a true frontline hero, and he is not alone.

In these extraordinary times, and despite the very real danger to themselves, Filipino front line workers, like my fallen colleague, everyday put their own safety and well-being aside to provide life-saving support and protection to people most in need.

In the Philippines, every day since the beginning of the year, humanitarian workers have stood on the front lines dealing with the challenges arising from COVID-19 and other disaster events, like the displacement from the Taal Volcano eruption, the damage wrought by Typhoon Ambo, as well as continuing relief efforts in Marawi City and responding to those affected by the Cotabato and Davao Del Sur earthquakes. Despite the many risks, humanitarians continue to do their work, diligently and selflessly providing assistance to those who need it most.

Through years of responding to various emergencies and capitalizing on national expertise and capacity, the humanitarian community in the country has embraced a truly localized approach by recognizing what at-risk communities themselves can do in these challenging times. The private sector in the Philippines has also stepped up in sharing its resources and capabilities, joining with other humanitarian actors to support affected local governments and communities.

As we give recognition to local real-life heroes, we also need to protect and keep them free from harassment, threats, intimidation and violence. Since 2003, some 4,961 humanitarians around the world have been killed, wounded or abducted while carrying out their life-saving duties. In 2019 alone, the World Health Organization reported 1,009 attacks against health-care workers and facilities, resulting in 199 deaths and 628 injuries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has unveiled an important number of vulnerabilities as well as exposed our weaknesses in preventing shocks. It has also shown that the magnitude of the challenge is exceeding the response capacity of any single partner or country. It represents, in fact, one of the most dramatic calls to work together. The success of this battle will greatly rely
on our capacity to learn from experience and remain committed to the highest humanitarian values. Our real-life heroes are already giving the example.

On 4 August, a revised version of the largest international humanitarian response plan in the country since Typhoon Yolanda in 2013 was released by the United Nations and humanitarian partners in the Philippines. Some 50 country-based UN and non-governmental partners are contributing to the response, bringing together national and international NGOs, faith-based organizations as well as the private sector.

COVID-19 might be today’s super-villain, but it does not deter our real-life heroes from doing their job and tirelessly working to find ways to combat the threat and eventually beat the invisible nemesis. We mourn the thousands who have lost their lives to the virus across the globe, including my colleague whom I have spoken of.

At the same time, we join Filipinos in upholding—in the midst of great adversity— the tradition of celebrating the best of human kindness, generosity, social justice, human rights, solidarity and Bayanihan spirit. We celebrate what makes our frontliners and humanitarian real-life heroes. We salute them for continuously putting their lives on the line, despite the risks and uncertainties. Their efforts must not be overlooked or forgotten.

Mabuhay ang Real-life Heroes! Happy World Humanitarian Day!

_Gustavo Gonzalez is the United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator in the Philippines_