

**SPEECH BY RT HON DAVID MILIBAND
PRESIDENT AND CEO, INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE
STOCKHOLM HUMAN RIGHTS AWARD
STOCKHOLM, 4 NOVEMBER 2019**

I am delighted to accept this award, with humility and gratitude, on behalf of 13,000 IRC staff and 15,000 volunteers working in more than 40 countries and 190 field sites around the world. The nutrition worker in Juba, South Sudan; the child protection worker in Raqqa, Syria; the gender-based violence responder in Helmand, Afghanistan; the refugee resettlement specialist in Dallas, Texas. It is their work providing life-saving and life-changing aid – upholding the most basic of human rights - to people whose lives have been shattered by conflict and disaster who have earned this award and in whose name I speak tonight. We are truly honored by the decision of the Swedish Bar Association, the International Bar Association and the International Legal Assistance Consortium to award the Stockholm Human Rights Award to the International Rescue Committee.

These staff are the modern face of an organization born in the mind of a great European, Albert Einstein, in the 1930s. They are the diverse face of an organization founded to rescue Jews from Europe now working in half of our field sites in Muslim majority countries. They are the professional face of an organization that hires locally to make a sustainable difference. They are the human face of an organization that brings out the best of humanity, and depends on the best of humanity, from taxpayers who fund us through their governments, philanthropists who fund us through their foundations, businesses who fund us through their charitable efforts, and private citizens who fund us through their donation.

We are proud of our long term relationship with the Swedish government through our partnership with SIDA, which is bringing help to people facing emergency around the world. We have shown, together, how commitments to impact, to innovation, to gender equality, can be put into practice. This award, alongside our new office in Stockholm, led by our new Executive Director, the brilliant Swedish change-maker Therese Engstrom, launches our engagement with civil society. Therese is here tonight and looks forward to working with you in the future.

There is something especially appropriate about the recognition by the legal community of the need to uphold the rights of civilians caught up in war, the internally displaced forced from their homes and refugees forced from their country – the people served by the International Rescue Committee. The great ambition of the post-World War II pioneers was to use international law as a lever to improve the lives of the most vulnerable – and who could be more vulnerable than civilians facing the might of state power or refugees without a state of their own at all. This legal regime – international humanitarian law, the international conventions on human rights and on refugees, the conventions on the rights of the child – is, however, in retreat in the places where we work.

My message tonight is that we need your help to defend and uphold the regime of human rights that defined the ambitions of the second half of the 20th century. Today we face a triple emergency around the world, and that makes tonight's award all the more poignant and important. It is not just an honor. It needs to serve as a rallying call.

The first emergency is the sheer scale of the displacement and humanitarian crisis. The figures are striking. 70.8 million people displaced by conflict, persecution, or disaster – more than at any point since World War II. 29 million of them are refugees or asylum seekers, crossing from their own country to another state.

Nearly 90 per cent of those people are now in poor or lower middle-income countries like Jordan, Bangladesh, Kenya or Pakistan – not in high-income countries like the US, UK, or Sweden. Most of these individuals live in cities, not refugee camps, and most will be displaced for more than a decade.

This is more than a human tragedy. It does not just reflect a crisis of diplomacy. It is a source of instability.

The second emergency is blame game politics. Isolationist, beggar-my-neighbor, it plays the oldest card of all: blame the victim and blame the foreigner. It has neither the heart to show empathy to human beings in desperate need nor the head to consider the long-term ramifications of turning away and letting the problems fester. In the US this has led the Trump Administration to slash the successful, bipartisan, refugee resettlement program. That harms America, and starts a race to the bottom.

This fuels what I call the “Age of Impunity” – the sense that anything goes. This is the chilling new normal in war zones around the world where civilians are seen as fair game for armed combatants, humanitarians are viewed as an impediment to military tactics and therefore unfortunate but expendable collateral, and investigations of and accountability for war crimes are considered optional extra for state as well as non-state actors.

Over the past decade we’ve seen a six-fold increase in annual civilian battle deaths, growing numbers of children at risk, a doubling in the number of aid workers killed each year, a 150% increase in the number of landmine-related casualties, and a significant rise in the cases of “ethnic cleansing”.

As our staff work in North East Syria, in Myanmar, in Yemen, this is their daily concern.

The third emergency is the failure of the development and humanitarian sectors to rise to the challenge that is being presented. Systems are still based on what happens in refugee camps, when most refugees are not in camps. Education is an add-on, when half of those in humanitarian need are children. Grants are still short term when the problems are long term. Funding neglects gender when it is inequalities of power which puts women and girls most at risk. Adherence to legal rights is honored in the breach not the observance.

This award is important in highlighting these challenges. I believe it also reflects IRC’s work to tackle them. Our work to grow to meet the scale of the crisis. To bear witness what we see through powerful advocacy. And to innovate so that we are modern day problem solvers, tackling the resignation that fuels populism, with ideas that can inspire major change.

Visit our education programs in Lebanon and you will be inspired by the ability of our staff to tackle toxic stress among refugee children.

Visit our business loan programs in Nairobi and you will see how refugees can become positive contributors.

Visit our labour market programs in Germany, where we are partnering with companies like Intel to support refugees, using our US experience to European benefit, and you will see how we support integration.

Visit our women's empowerment programs in Cameroon and you will understand why we believe that removing the structural barriers to the dignity and equality of women can change the world. We say we cannot be a truly successful humanitarian organization unless we are also a feminist organization.

Visit our legal assistance programs in Iraq, where we have recruited Iraqi lawyers to help people displaced by Isis regain identity papers and get out of detention camps, or in Somalia where we have SIDA funding for our legal work, and you see how legal work becomes a true liberator.

The instincts that drove Einstein to establish the IRC in the 1930s – the value of transatlantic cooperation, the need to use both the head and the heart to save lives, and the importance of innovation and entrepreneurship to tackle seemingly insurmountable global challenges – are still at the core of everything we do, from South Sudan to Syria, and now, I'm proud to say, to Sweden.

Visit **RESCUE-SE.org** and you will see, in Swedish, what we are doing.

So: Följ med oss på vår resa. [*Furli merd, oss por - vore re-essa*]. Join us on our journey!

Because every member of our staff, from the doctor fighting Ebola in the DRC to the case worker greeting a newly resettled family at the airport in Los Angeles, is stronger when people like you are standing behind them.

We need the principled voice of the Swedish government to continue standing up against the age of impunity.

We need the innovative spirit of Swedish businesses to help us transform the humanitarian sector into an effective, modern system that works for the problems of 2019, not the problems of 1945.

And we need the engaged, internationalist attention of the Swedish people to help show the world that indifference, cynicism, and pessimism in the face of such a massive global challenge is neither smart nor worthy.

The world is more interdependent than ever. And we have more resources than ever before to tackle the problems we face. We believe we are in the solutions business. So thank you for recognizing our work. And join us going forward.