

Kelly Brownell:

Welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. The news from Syria is discouraging, lingering Civil War, chemical attacks, bombs, and civilians in great danger. In 2011, the Arab Spring launched Syria, which was led by Bashar al-Assad, into Civil War. The United Nations estimates that more than 400,000 people have lost their lives, and millions more have had to leave their homes and the country. Today, we'll get a firsthand look at how humanitarian aid is being delivered in Syria. My guest is Cynthia Viveros-Cano. Cynthia is stationed in Syria, in the capital city of Damascus. She is a Humanitarian Affairs Officer for the United Nations. Welcome, Cynthia, to Policy 360.

Cynthia Viveros-Cano:

Hello, it's an honor to be here.

Kelly Brownell:

So, it's your role to analyze the military and political situation, and determine the measures needed to get aid to civilians in hard to reach or besieged regions of the country. What does that actually look like in practice? How do you determine where the aid is most needed?

Cynthia Viveros-Cano:

Humanitarian aid is delivered to those most in need, regardless of the areas where they are based. They can be in government control areas, in besieged areas, in hard to reach areas by either of the parties to these conflict. It is a very challenging operation that requires help from different points within Syria and outside of Syria. We, as humanitarians, have to keep the dialogue going with all the parties, to ensure that we get the guarantees for safe passage, and even getting information about the hard to reach or besieged areas is very difficult because of the restrictions on access. So, we have to resort to creative methods of data collection and delivery in these areas, such as inter-agency convoys, airdrops and, ideally, one day, humanitarian assistance will not be required.

Kelly Brownell:

So it sounds like you're prepared to help all parties in need, irrespective of where they are on the political spectrum, or what side they're on in the different areas of strife that occurs. Is that correct?

Cynthia Viveros-Cano:

That's correct. Humanitarian assistance is guided by four principles, humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and operational independence. We go to great lengths to ensure that we're working within these principles to assist people who need it the most.

Kelly Brownell:

So very often, when people think of aid, they think of food as an important part of that. But I know there are other things that you deliver as well as food. Can you tell us more about the total picture?

Cynthia Viveros-Cano:

Of course. We have different sectors. We deliver sometimes nutrition supplies, educational supplies for the children, to try to minimize the impact of conflict in their development. We also deliver non-food items, depending on the season and the specific needs. Of course, the people who have suffered

displacement would require things that people who are still living in their areas of origin would not require, like kitchen sets, blankets, clothing for children. Now that we're going into summer, some areas require mosquito nets, for instance. Health is also a very important sector that needs to be covered. And when it comes to health, it's not only about the delivery of medical materials, equipment, treatments, but also about getting access to health care to people who need it. And of course, there are intangible things that are not materials, such as psychological services, protection.

Kelly Brownell:

I imagine that the people who were taking part in the convoys are undertaking a good bit of risk themselves. Do you go with the convoys?

Cynthia Viveros-Cano:

Yeah. I've had the privilege of joining inter-agency convoys, and as humanitarians, our best defense is to have good communication with the communities, and to ensure that the parties who are in control are aware of our movements, and we have mechanisms in place, and you have to trust that people will uphold their responsibilities within war.

Kelly Brownell:

And what's the most memorable situation you've experienced?

Cynthia Viveros-Cano:

I've been taken by surprise on several occasions, being in Syria. I think one of the greatest lessons for me is that when there is a will, there is a way. The last time we reached a very hard location, Douma, the willingness of different parties aligned. And to me, it was impressive how that common perspective on the need to reach this particular area, surmounted all obstacles. So, I keep that with me. Like if we manage to align, the interest and be good advocates for the needs, things are possible. Things can change.

Kelly Brownell:

When people hear about refugees and humanitarian aid crises, they very often hear numbers like, this many tens of thousands of people are displaced or need aid and things like that. And it's hard for people to get their mind on the individual stories of people's lives being so severely affected. Do you think that's important for the world to hear those stories and to know what the impact is, say, on children or generations of people who've been refugees, and what impact that has? And I wonder if that might help increase the willingness of people to give money for international aid?

Cynthia Viveros-Cano:

Absolutely. These are not just numbers. These are families and children. I haven't been able to go to [Marea 00:06:00], but I know from my colleagues, the story of a little girl who, at the beginning of 2016, was facing severe malnutrition. And this girl managed to receive treatments, and three or four months later, it was clear the improvement in her body, but also in her mind. People like boys and girls, who are seven or six, and who are living in these conditions, have no other experience but what war and deprivation, and these will be the people who make decisions in the future for this country. So it's very important to create an environment that, in spite all the hardships, allows them to develop and to trust the other.

Kelly Brownell:

So in making these decisions about where aid needs to go and how it's going to get there, you have to make decisions with little information, in some circumstances, and under intense time constraints. How do you deal with this?

Cynthia Viveros-Cano:

In the countries where the United Nations is playing a role in supporting the humanitarian response, we have a process, a yearly process whereby we, as the humanitarian community, it's not only about the UN, but also the NGOs who are equal partners in the implementation of humanitarian assistance, make a common assessment of what the humanitarian needs. Last December, the Humanitarian Needs Overview was finalized, and it contains information in the case of Syria, at community level on the needs, based on the information provided by more than 70 partners. And based on these map of the needs, it's a snapshot, of course, things are constantly changing. The humanitarian community, agreed on a response plan. And that's our roadmap. We need to be flexible and respond to the changes on the ground, but we already have a path laid in front of us.

Kelly Brownell:

So has doing this kind of work changed you?

Cynthia Viveros-Cano:

Oh, absolutely. First of all, it has made me aware of how privileged I am. And it also shows me that human beings, we're all looking for the same thing, for security, to meet our basic needs and to explore the limitless possibilities of life. Unfortunately, we do not always have the same access to these freedom, and I'm humbled. I'm humbled when I see people become resilient in the hardest of circumstances and become a lesson to me.

Kelly Brownell:

So it wasn't that long ago that you were a student here at Duke, studying International Development Policy. What advice would you have for others who are considering pursuing a path in this field?

Cynthia Viveros-Cano:

I mean, I would always say, stay curious. Use all the resources that you have at your disposal, and be humble. Listen, and trust your conclusions and defend them, but with humility.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, thank you very much for joining me today, and please stay safe.

Cynthia Viveros-Cano:

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Kelly Brownell:

So my guest has been Cynthia Viveros-Cano. Cynthia received a Master's Degree in International Development Policy from Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy in 2007. She has been on campus to deliver Sanford's commencement address. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.

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