

**INSIDE FORDHAM
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**Diploma Program Meets Needs of
More Complex, Dangerous
Humanitarian Assistance Environment**

IDHA head Kevin M. Cahill, M.D. (left), and Mark Malloch Brown, deputy secretary-general of the United Nations, discussing the program following graduation.

Photo by Bruce Gilbert

In June, Mark Malloch Brown, deputy secretary-general of the United Nations, told the 19th graduating class of the International Diploma in Humanitarian Assistance (IDHA) program that humanitarian aid work had become much more lethal since his days in the field.

“When I started all I had to do on a very dangerous place on the Thai-Cambodian border was to make sure that the car I was traveling in had a big U.N. painted on the roof and a blue U.N. flag on its front,” he said. “That was enough, people didn’t target me.”

Brown wondered how many IDHA graduates had been killed in the course of humanitarian missions. “I certainly know that in the U.N. it is our development and humanitarian workers, not our peacekeepers in general who bear the brunt of loss of life in many years,” Brown said. “But in many years it is just the one or two at a time of humanitarian workers picked off in different conflicts who in the end of the year provide the bulk of tragic deaths in the United Nations. It’s getting to be a dangerous job and of course one reason why it is getting to be so dangerous, is this reckless character of modern intrastate war.”

June’s IDHA class of 42 aid professionals came from 29 countries around the world. The month-long IDHA program is offered three times a year and rotates between Fordham University in New York, and humanitarian aid hubs abroad such as Cairo, Geneva and Nairobi. Since its inception in 1997, nearly 800 humanitarian workers have graduated from the IDHA program, which is run by the Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs (IIHA), directed by Kevin M. Cahill, M.D., University Professor at Fordham.

The need for humanitarian aid training is undeniable, according to Dr. Cahill, a specialist in tropical medicine who for the past 47 years has taken part in humanitarian efforts in wars and disasters around the globe. He addressed the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland on relief work in February.

“One cannot embark on a career in law, or teaching, or plumbing, or even hair dressing, without appropriate training and passing a qualifying exam,” Dr. Cahill said. “Yet in

humanitarian crises virtually anyone could—and did—go into the most troubled areas of the world, almost arrogantly believing that their mere presence would somehow automatically help alleviate suffering. In fact, an inordinate percentage of time in international relief work, especially in complex humanitarian crises, is spent dealing with problems caused by volunteers searching for their own salvation.”

Lorena Nieto Padilla, a native of Bogota, Colombia, who graduated from this year’s IDHA program, couldn’t agree more. “One of the challenges facing humanitarian workers is the professionalization of what we do,” Nieto Padilla said. “There are no academic programs in the world for Humanitarian Assistance besides IDHA... And one of the most significant aspects of [IDHA] is that what we do in the field comes from the experience and not from our academic backgrounds. We, as humanitarian workers have to be prepared to do what we do, is not only about beliefs or interests, its about quality and professionalism.”

Nieto Padilla, who has a master’s degree in education and human development, also has first-hand experience with the dangers of humanitarian aid work. As a volunteer with the Jesuit Refugee Service, she saw the results of Colombia’s ongoing battle between the government, paramilitaries and guerrilla groups.

“In a city up north called Barrancabermeja, I was working in a primary school controlled by the guerrillas,” Nieto Padilla said. “I was teaching kids from 4th and 5th grade how to use a video camera and write TV scripts. One day after I finished class I was about to leave the school and combat between the army and the guerrillas started. Everybody started to run, and since it was my first combat I did not know what to do. One of the teachers grabbed my arm and took me into one of the classrooms. The toughest thing for me at that point was not the combat. What really hit me was the scene: all the kids knew exactly what to do, they just got into the classroom with their back packs and lay on the floor. Some of them were laughing; others just had a lost look in their eyes. There were kids from four years up to 11 years old, and they all knew the procedure as if it was part of their lives.”

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Dr. Cahill began his career in tropical medicine as a young U.S. Navy doctor in Cairo in 1963, as director of epidemiology and chief of clinical tropical medicine, positions he said in his book, *To Bear Witness* (Fordham University Press, 2005), were “wonderful for a young doctor to study major epidemics all over the Middle East and Africa.” Since then he has learned that sometimes medical expertise is the least of the skills one requires in humanitarian emergencies.

“Many times [in managing complex emergencies] I discovered that I needed tentmakers and truck drivers, sanitary engineers, canal and well diggers, security forces and laborers to dispose of the dead, more than additional doctors or nurses,” Dr. Cahill told newly minted physicians at Lenox Hill Hospital in June. “...In those complex humanitarian crises that have become the common, tragic interface between the developed and developing worlds, between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ on this Earth, we must broaden the definition of our discipline, or, as physicians, we will inevitably fail to fulfill our most basic obligations.”

One reason Yuri Chakalall, a senior development officer with the Canadian International Development Agency, signed up for the IDHA program was that he believed humanitarian organizations were spending too little time and effort preparing for complex emergencies. He said the month-long intensive course requires participants to work in teams, responding to simulated humanitarian crises that duplicate the stress and complexity of the real thing—to the extent of being “taken hostage” for a day by U.S. Army trainers.

“You find out how you would likely react, and find out whether you’re in the right profession,” said Chakalall. “Non-governmental organizations should invest more in that kind of exposure and training. Humanitarians are do-gooders, and are soft targets. Even though I knew it was an exercise, while it was going on it felt real.”

Chakalall grew up in Guyana and Barbados, and graduated from the University of the West Indies with a bachelor’s degree in natural sciences in 1993 and a master’s degree in environmental planning in 1995. He lives and works in Barbados with his wife of two years, Ginger Chakalall, and their dachshund-Jack Russell cross, Desi Arnaz Chakalall III.

Chakalall said warfare and violence aren’t the only impediments to humanitarian aid, however: sometimes political or economic instability exacerbate emergency conditions.

“Caribbean Commonwealth governments focus on natural disasters and preparation,” said Chakalall. “I’m not so sure they factor in that a natural disaster can precipitate civil chaos and internally displaced persons. We should pay more attention to complex emergencies. First humanitarian response is food, shelter, and water, but for me the issue is that transitional countries, countries in transition to more democratic governments, are highly indebted and their economies are fragile. One exogenous shock—a hurricane or a bad tourist season—can make a country backslide.”

Sometimes, too, the very act of offering humanitarian assistance provokes resistance and greater chaos from governments, according to Deputy Secretary-General Brown. In his address to the IDHA graduates, Brown said, “We should never expect to be loved and respected for our work, and if we are, we should ask ourselves if we’re doing it right.” He noted that aid work takes place in so many countries with corrupt and brutal governments. “Humanitarian work is political; it is stepping in on behalf of the poor and vulnerable. That is political in the best sense of the word.”

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