

Duty Calls

For almost 30 years, as Chief Executive of GOAL, John O'Shea has been at the forefront of Irish-based efforts to provide relief and aid to the world's most destitute. He has seen the worst and the best of humanity. From the lawlessness of Somalia in the early nineties to the madness of genocide in Rwanda in the mid-nineties he worked closely with Defence Forces personnel. Today, once again, he is seeking assistance as GOAL faces up to the aftermath of the Asian Tsunami and the reality of Africa as a continent of failed or failing states, leaving vast numbers of people vulnerable and desperate. By *Ruairi Kavanagh*.

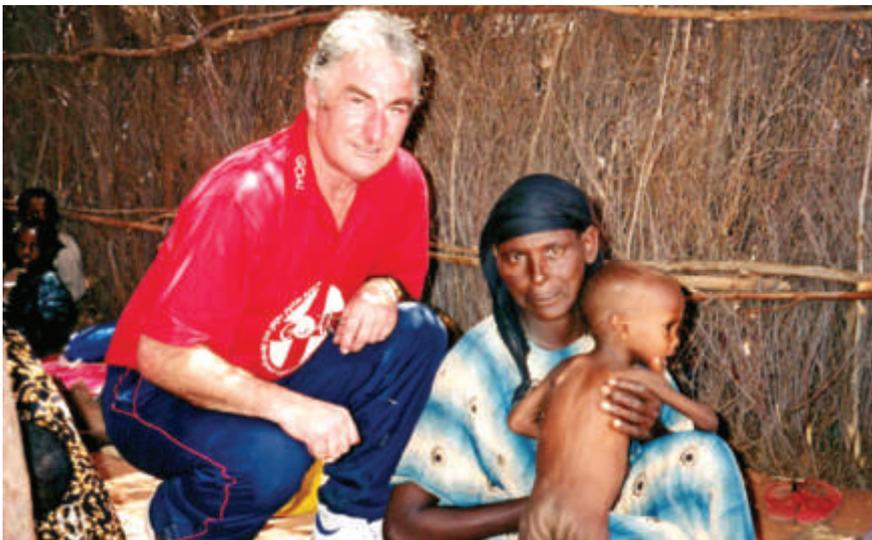
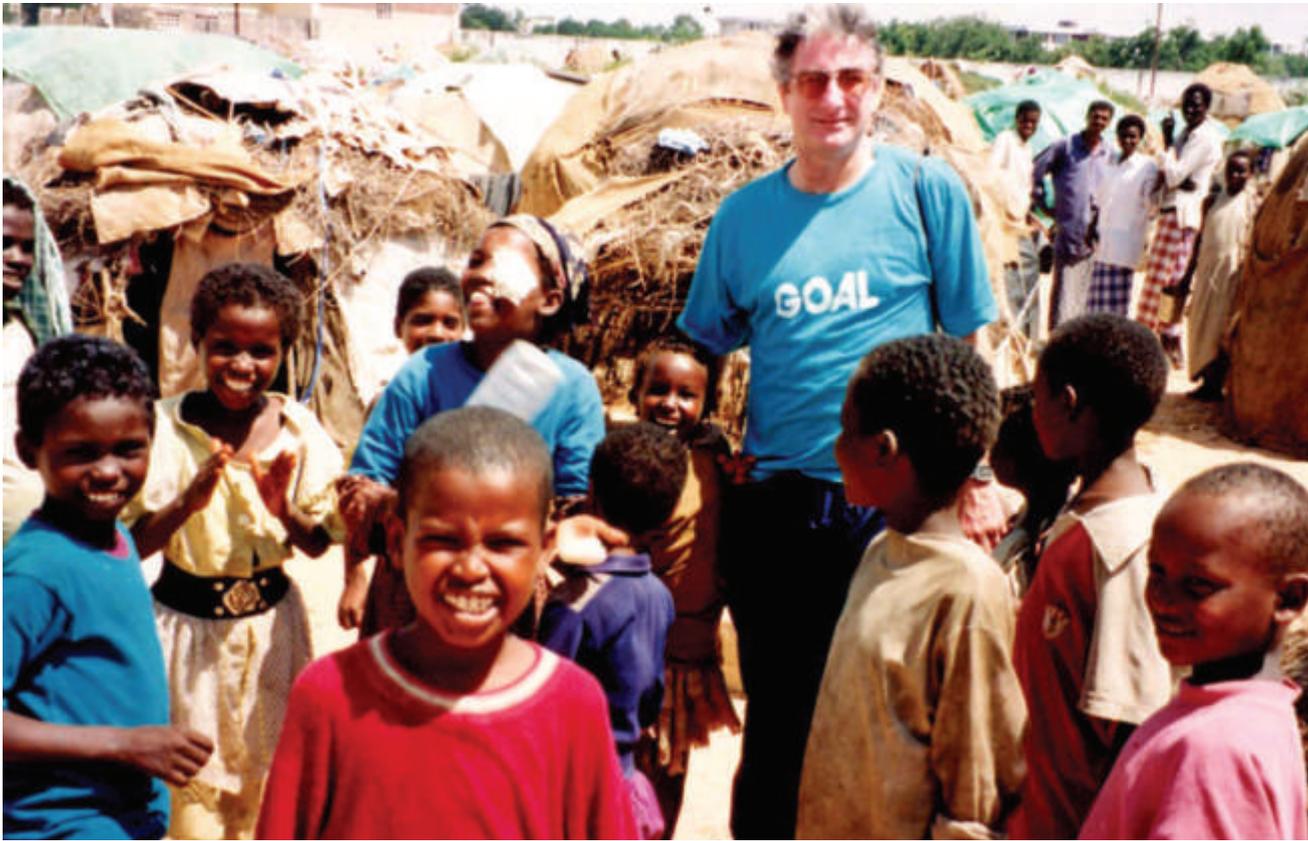
John O'Shea does not talk about the world in overly pleasant terms. In fact, from his modest office in GOAL HQ in Dun Laoghaire, he paints a picture of a world in almost complete disarray. Of course, he still thinks that helping those in desperate need is a duty that humanity can never shirk, even when politics, war and human greed conspire to make delivering that aid ever more difficult. "Getting aid to the people of the third world is one of the hardest things to do," he says.

"The situation in terms of logistics is extremely difficult and equally important is having the right people to do the job. Finding those people is a massive challenge. There is a huge difference between people who want to help and the small percentage of quality people who have the skills that we really need as an aid agency." On a general level, O'Shea compares the situation of his and other aid agencies to that of today's dwindling Christian missionaries. "The number of people willing and able to do this work has

dropped dramatically while the world has an increasing number of trouble spots which we need to get help to. It's getting to an impossible situation and as an organisation; GOAL will almost certainly have to reduce its presence in certain countries as a result."

Defence Forces & GOAL

One of these places is Darfur, the troubled region of Western Sudan which, in O'Shea's view, the world has effectively closed its eyes and ears to. It is a region beset by



GOAL responded to severe food shortages in Ethiopia in 2000 by setting up feeding camps.

tribal violence, militia atrocities and massive government corruption. There have been recent movements on a global level, mirrored here, to respond to the situation but as GOAL's chief executive has said many times, the overall response has been pitiful. "Because there is no effective global military or logistics force to stabilise places like Darfur, it's left to aid workers to effectively become front line respondents. If the UN were doing their job, then our jobs would be much more defined and effective. We shouldn't have to worry about security

for our people, but we do at the moment." According to John O'Shea, what is really needed in order for aid agencies to be able to do their work properly are people like those in the Irish Defence Forces. "I need people with real common sense and expertise in the security area. People with levels of security and military intelligence who can help aid workers do their job."

Of course, the notion of deploying Irish troops as a backup to aid workers in the world's dark corners is a noble and welcome one. However, the reality of the triple-lock

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makes it a difficult and protracted process in reality. John O'Shea however, doesn't go around problems when he can go through them instead. "If we could get officers, we would have them dressed as aid workers, not in uniform. We've done it very successfully in Somalia and Rwanda. I don't know any other country which has done it, but Ireland has." O'Shea has positive professional memories of his work with the Defence Forces in Somalia, even if his personal descriptions there depict chaos and human misery on a biblical scale.



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Above: John O'Shea visits GOAL's programme in Sri Lanka in May 2005.

“It was a warlord culture, every street was a battleground. Violence was everywhere. Such as they were, these warlords ran the country and if we had to go somewhere then we would need protection from a certain warlord. The same guys protecting you one day could be firing on you the next. As such, having Defence Forces' personnel there was important as they could advise our aid workers. They went as aid-workers themselves, they weren't in uniform but they obviously had the knowledge and intelligence that we needed. It was the same in Rwanda in '94. We needed logistics experience and the people we had from the Defence Forces, again not in uniform, were expert in those tasks. Military personnel have the specialised skills that we need. Unfortunately, at the moment, none are

being put at our disposal.” O'Shea sees the Defence Forces as one of the only outlets for providing these specialised personnel in the absence of an effective global military/logistics army. He is highly critical of the UN and their lack of direct action. “I realise it's hard to find people like those that we need because these people would be taking on huge responsibilities and problems. If we don't have these quality people in charge of aid work in regions like Darfur, Angola or the Congo, then we can't provide the services that we want to, simple as that.”

Ireland's history of giving aid is a good one and an aid agency such as GOAL appreciates every donation. “Now if someone walks in my door with skills that I need I'm not just going to put him on a plane. For instance, take Darfur. If I had someone here who wanted to go there to

help, I would have to tell him the extreme dangers that exist in Darfur. I would have to tell him that the government backed Arab militia has issued a statement recently saying that all foreign workers are targets. GOAL could be in a situation where we may have to pull out of there. I would also tell him that he would be in a country where the actual government in Khartoum is the aggressors in this scenario. That's a nasty situation for any person to go into. That's why we need people with security and military knowledge.”

Corruption

Although his zeal for the cause seems undimmed, John O'Shea's perception of the world is not pleasant to listen to. He constantly refers to Africa as a 'basket-case.' As a man who hates clichés, it's



When Disaster Struck

Lieutenant Colonel John Egan talks about his experience in Sri Lanka.

The Indian Ocean Tsunami which struck on December 26th last year was perhaps the worst natural disaster in living memory. With 200,000 to 310,000 people thought to have died across a huge geographical area, aiding the survivors and beginning reconstruction was a massive task.

In the aftermath of the disaster, a team of experts were dispatched to Sri Lanka by the Irish government to recommend how we could contribute. One of its recommendations was that military volunteers could aid in reconstruction efforts by working for the United Nations Joint Logistics Centre (UNJLC).

Lt Col John Egan was one member of a four man team that was dispatched to the island. He and Colonel Der Conway were there for their expertise in transport and logistics. They were accompanied by engineers Commandant Damien McEvoy and Captain Shane Phelan. The engineer contingent was charged with formulating a plan for rebuilding the island's fragile road network. The transport team had to plan the reconstruction of Sri Lanka's transport infrastructure. After seven and a half weeks on the island, the team had completed its task by drawing up a report for implementation by the Sri Lankan government.

"We were selected because of our previous overseas experience. While in Sri Lanka we worked alongside the UN and NGOs on the ground in formulating a multi-agency response to the Tsunami," said Lt Col Egan.

strange to hear him use one, but listening to him you realise that he's using phrases like that because he has been watching that continent struggle to stabilise itself in any form for almost three decades. He knows the endemic corruption; he knows the reality of the multitude of dirty wars which are prolonged to satisfy human greed. He knows why, for the foreseeable future, there is no road to sanity for Africa. "The biggest problem is corruption, and it's rife in Africa. As long as it stays like it is, there can be no hope at all." He angers when talk turns to the world's perception of Africa, the misplaced perception that world's wealthier nations are actually helping. John O'Shea knows that first world wealth is helping cement third world poverty and it's all down to corruption. When we talk about death in Africa, the

numbers frequently reach into the millions. "Massively corrupt governments waging dirty, vicious wars and all the while the west keeps pumping money into their coffers. The West is in a position to give help that really would make a difference, enough to transform the third world. However, we choose not to."

Practicalities are all that matter to John O'Shea. He needs the practicalities of military training to help his people on the ground. "Military is only a word to me, it's their skills I'm interested in. I have no interest in working with the hierarchical military structure. If they're on the ground with us, they work alongside us. To date sadly, the government and successive Ministers for Defence have taken a very peripheral approach to this. I think as an organisation, the Defence Forces has a far

greater capacity to assist than they have been allowed by government. I would question why so many are made available to UN missions and so few to us. We need them and their skills and they should be made available.

NGO & Military Mindsets

There is a perceived conflict between military culture and NGO culture, a clash of mindsets. Doctor James Orbinski, President of Mediciens Sans Frontieres, said in his Nobel Lecture acceptance speech in 1999 that military involvement in humanitarian action effectively meant using a humanitarian issue to legitimise security action through military means.

"When one mixes the humanitarian with the need for public security, then one inevitably tars the humanitarian with the

Africa's Darkest Hour

Commandant *Mick Dolan* volunteered to work with GOAL in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide.

"Like everybody else, I first heard about the massacre in mid July 1994. John O'Shea was looking for volunteers and since I had experience working in Lebanon and Central America, I thought I should go. I was one of 13 people from the Defence Forces who went over with GOAL," said Comdt Mick Dolan.

After a brief induction period, Comdt Dolan was sent to Goma in Eastern Congo and from there worked on a variety of tasks. "There was so much to do. First of all I worked in a health centre as a logistician. It was my job to liaise with the medical staff and ensure that they got the right amount of medicines, water, equipment and utensils. We also set up a centre for unaccompanied children. Some time later I was sent to South Western Rwanda as a team leader to set up a new GOAL outpost. By February 1995 the situation had stabilised somewhat and we got the opportunity to set up a camp in Tanzania. I headed up the logistics aspect of this operation until May 1995, when I was sent to Angola"

"It was a tremendously stressful environment for everyone involved. Our background in the Defence Forces gave us the experience of working in a team. However, going to somewhere like Rwanda, you realise how it takes people from all different types of backgrounds to deal with a crisis like this," explained Comdt Dolan.



John O'Shea visits Honduras, where GOAL began working after Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

security brush. It must be recalled that the UN Charter obliges states to intervene, sometimes by force, to stop threats to international peace and security. There is no need, and indeed a danger, in using humanitarian justification for this," he said.

In today's complex conflict zones, in places like Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone, situations have arisen where military and humanitarian personnel have to work together. The two disciplines make strange colleagues, diverse in ethos but finding themselves working together due to the strange dynamics of warfare and international politics. John O'Shea, and agencies such as GOAL, are more than eager to have personnel with military

training to work with aid workers in areas with security concerns, but John O'Shea remains clear: "The principal justification for having military involvement in a "humanitarian" effort is to protect those who are delivering aid. If there is a security situation, it is imperative that there is someone with such expertise. Due to their training, they are of great benefit in a civilian capacity to NGO's as well. It's that simple."

27 years on, John O'Shea struggles to explain any great leaps forward in terms of implementing real change in the impoverished world. "With the exception of Nelson Mandela, there has been very little positive progress in the governing of third world nations. The enriched nations of

western world have shown nothing in terms of leadership. That's a very poor record." He reiterates that NGO's such as GOAL are not the answer, that leadership and determination on a global leadership level is needed to drive real change.

The Defence Forces has the skills to help. However, the disciplined methodology of the military mindset could be invaluable in situations where gross inefficiency and logistical failures are evident. The Defence Forces brings key skills to complex emergencies and according to John O'Shea, those skills should be deployed in a flexible and non-confrontational manner in order to work effectively with today's humanitarian organisations.