

‘People were getting stabbed, wars were breaking out’: working in a warzone

[Virginia Fallon](#) | [The Post](#)



ReliefAid founder Mike Seawright in Syria, visiting the Bounce Back for Syria programme. Photo: Supplied

Mike Seawright does a lot of running.

He runs when he's working in Syria, Ukraine or Afghanistan, and he runs when he's back in New Zealand. He does it for fitness, practical preparation, and as a form of stress relief.

“I must admit I go through periods of nightmares. I guess that's some residual trauma, for want of another term, and one of the reasons I run is to manage that.”

For more than two decades, the [ReliefAid](#) founder has worked in some of the world's most dangerous conflict zones, helping people whose lives have been torn apart by war.

The 53-year-old says he has witnessed the very best of humanity. He has also seen enough of the worst that it follows him into sleep.

“But I'm a bit of an old dog at this stuff now. You do get a bit immune to it.”

Seawright hasn't been home to Auckland for two months. Today he's speaking from Montreal, having just spent eight days in Syria. [Before that he was in Ukraine](#) where he says, "things have deteriorated significantly".

Syria is in a different but no less precarious place. More than 7 million people remain internally displaced, many living in poverty in overcrowded camps. Among them are tens of thousands of children who have never been to school.

During his latest visit, Seawright found himself surrounded by about 110 of those children. They were laughing and yelling as they took part in a [ReliefAid programme](#) designed not so much to provide a formal education, but to show them what life might look like beyond the camp.

Afterwards, he sat down with the community leader and asked what, in practical terms, it would take for them to go home.

"They'd already tried. They were originally from Homs, and after the fall of the Assad regime, they packed up their camp en masse and returned, hoping to re-establish their lives."

But there were no homes, hospitals or schools left standing. The area was also contaminated with unexploded ordnance.

"The leader told me they'd lost three of their kids. Three kids dead; three kids killed; three kids who just wanted to play, and learn, and grow up.

"We have a hard time communicating to the public in general that the war in Syria may have finished - albeit it's fragile - but the suffering hasn't."



Seawright during winter distributions in Ukraine. In 2022 he described the humanitarian crisis as "hell on earth".

Seawright's stories are full of suffering. They have plenty of dark humour and self-deprecation, but there, at the very heart of them, is horror.

His first humanitarian posting came 21 years ago when he arrived in southern Sudan to work for an Irish aid organisation.

“No amount of management experience could have prepared me. People were getting stabbed, wars were breaking out. John Garang, the leader, died while I was there and the whole country went up in flames.”

Seawright, who’d gone from managing five people in a London office to managing 250 in one of Africa’s most remote areas, had never been so out of his depth.

“It was insane, the Wild West. My logistics team manager went crazy and held our medical team leader at knifepoint, then stabbed her in the chest. I was routinely threatened with being killed by military commanders.”

“I started thinking ”is it the environment or is it my poor knowledge?.” In the beginning it was probably both but there are certain jobs that set you up for life, and this was one of them.”

In his previous life, Seawright had been an investment banker. He was making lots of money—“which I had no problem with ”—and even owned a yacht.

He’s says he’s not overly sensitive, let alone given to contemplating his mortality, but there have been two seminal moments that have led him to where he is now.

The first came while he was still in banking.

“I imagined myself on my deathbed and thought: I’ll have had lots of good times and lots of toys, but what will I have achieved? Who will I have helped?”

Those questions eventually prompted that initial posting in Africa. The second moment came a decade later, after he’d worked for Médecins Sans Frontières and the NZ Government as an aid diplomat to Afghanistan.

“By then I’d seen lots of war and I was angry with the injustice of it. I’d seen families in the crossfire of wars they didn’t start and weren’t participating in - that killed and injured their kids.

“I was seeing people in their darkest hours with nobody else to turn to. So I thought do I do nothing and remain angry? Or do I do something to plug the gaps? That’s when I founded ReliefAid.”

That was in 2014, and when Seawright’s hired trucks rolled into Syria they distributed life-saving aid to 1800 people. As of last month the charity has reached more than two million people in Gaza, Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, and Lebanon.



Seawright in Syria during an aid distribution.

ReliefAid's purpose is in its name. By working with trusted, local teams it delivers life-saving essentials - water purification equipment, solar lamps and kitchen sets - to areas where few other agencies are able or willing to operate.

It's difficult, dangerous work and Seawright is quick to redirect attention to the staff who remain on the ground helping their own communities. ReliefAid doesn't put international people into the field - "its Gazans helping Gazans, Ukrainians helping Ukrainians" - and while many of them could leave, too many have paid the ultimate price for choosing not to.

Among them was Karam, an aid worker shot by a sniper while fixing the water tank on the roof of ReliefAid's Aleppo office in 2016.

In Gaza, eight ReliefAid staff have been killed and two injured since October 2023. Two died when their homes were bombed that year.

"Our entire northern team in Jabalia Camp in the north of Gaza - the first team we started working with - they're all dead or injured now."

Seawright agrees that it's difficult to imagine work more capable of defeating a person.

The need is relentless and, at times, the help can seem almost pointless. Supplies are distributed only for homes to be bombed, families survive one assault only to be killed in another.

Why keep going, when the relief can be so temporary and the suffering so vast?

Seawright answers with two stories, and both are about children.

The first is Ahmed, a little boy who arrived at one of ReliefAid's earliest distributions in 2015 with third-degree burns down one side of his body. His home near Yemen's border had been hit in an air strike, and his father and uncle had thrown themselves over him to shield him from the blast.

Seeing the child took Seawright back to his own childhood in Hawke's Bay, and a day beside a river when a woman began screaming for a boy named Michael.

"My dad was wearing stubbies. I remember him running, ripping off his glasses and diving into the water. He dragged this kid out, only to realise it wasn't me."

Decades and thousands of kilometres separated that riverbank from the air strike, but to Seawright, the instinct was the same.

"We've got my dad jumping in to save my life in Hawke's Bay, and we've got an uncle and a dad doing the same thing in Yemen. It's no different.

"Humanity has no boundaries. Families are the same the world over. They may look a bit different, their food may taste a bit different, but humanity remains the same wherever you go."



Refugees arriving at the Romanian border, where Mike Seawright helped provide aid to displaced people. Photo: MIKE SEAWRIGHT

The second story is about Miriam, who was 9 years old.

"In 2016, Aleppo city was all but encircled. Miriam was an orphan we gave winter clothing to - one of hundreds in orphanages.

"We handed her a red jacket, and I won't ever be able to get the image out of my mind. The team sent me a photo a few weeks later - she'd been hit with an artillery round, lying on the side of the road, still wearing the red jacket.

"I could take that in two ways. I could give up and think, what's the point? Or I could think, at least she was warm for those two weeks she was alive."

He still has the photograph. He doesn't look at it and can't bring himself to delete it, though he knows it all too well.

"I have to admit it did give me nightmares for a while."

But Seawright carries on, backed by supporters and donors who share his anger and his need to do something about it.

A Canadian businessman provides ReliefAid with office space, lends Seawright his car when he's in the country, and gives the charity substantial financial support.

"He rages all the time. He sees what's happening in Gaza but being able to take action helps alleviate that anger. It's turning anger into action, so to speak."

Seawright knows all too well public attention inevitably, eventually moves on. Donor fatigue sets in, interest wanes and, he says, the colour of the people suffering can play a part in the response.

He's careful with examples.

"But I'm still happy to see humanity poke its head out in places like Gaza. The world has been galvanised by the horrors that have happened there."

For Seawright, turning anger into action does not mean leaving warzone impressions behind when he's home.

"I like to think I'm relatively immune, but I've had periods when I've come back and, if I hear a plane, I look up to see if we're being bombed."

"I don't feel significant fear. I think I just have quite a high tolerance—or threshold—for risk."

Back in Aotearoa, he relies on friends who understand his work and give him ways to decompress.

"I can't afford a boat anymore, but my mate has a big launch and we do boys' trips."

"I love spearfishing, although that's getting a bit hairy with all the sharks. I do love the sea because it's a place that grounds me."

Yet even on the boys' trips, the work never entirely stops.

"It does take its toll. It's quite tiring. That said, we've been lucky to get some great staff here in New Zealand."



Mike Seawright is the founder of Relief Aid, a humanitarian organisation that works in some of the world's most dangerous conflict zones. Photo: BRUCE MACKAY / The Post

It would be a strange sort of irony, he suggests, to survive more than two decades in war zones only to be killed by a shark off the coast of Auckland.

“But at least when I’m being chased by a shark, I’m not thinking about Syria.”

There is only one way Seawright would consider ReliefAid’s work truly finished.

“The ultimate success is for us not to be angry any more, because wars aren’t happening and kids aren’t being killed in the crossfire. Our goal is to be unemployed because we’re not needed.”

He is under no illusion that will happen soon, or ever. Wars will continue, and every new conflict will leave more families needing the things his organisation provides.

“More money means more people helped. I do want to grow ReliefAid. I want our revenue to increase. I would love to be in places like Sudan, but we don’t have the resources to do it.”

As for his own resources, Seawright says they’re endless.

“I’ll just keep going,” he laughs—he of the nightmares and the photograph, and the anger that, despite all the action, is still right there in his voice.

“Just keep going, and running and drinking.”

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