

Gordon Bacon

Master of Arts

Durham Cathedral, 10 January 2019

Gordon Bacon is a North East lad turned global citizen, who has served communities from County Durham to Myanmar and has been recognised for his exceptional contribution to humanitarian work supporting victims of human atrocities and natural disasters.

Gordon grew up in Sunderland. He left Bede Grammar School and joined Durham Constabulary as a Cadet. He was a policeman for 27 years. Gordon gained his first international experience during a secondment from 1977 to 1984 to what was then still the British colony of Hong Kong, working on anti-corruption.

In October 1992 Gordon became an emergency aid worker. He was appointed Country Director for the charity Feed the Children in Bosnia & Herzegovina and Croatia, coinciding with the first years of the wars in the former-Yugoslavia. Often working close to frontlines and regularly crossing them, Gordon's team established aid distribution programmes in areas of Bosnia where there were none. Feed the Children helped Bosnian Muslims, Croats and Serbs. The aim was to reach the most vulnerable babies and young children. Ethnic cleansing would leave huge number homeless. Within Bosnia alone more than 2.5 million people were displaced. The Yugoslav wars saw humanitarian aid workers come under attack as some warring groups saw their efforts to provide relief to civilian populations as breaking sieges they were trying to maintain to force a population to capitulate and then be cleared out. Gordon and his team quite regularly came under fire. Delivering humanitarian assistance became a very difficult and dangerous job.

This was most apparent in trying to provide relief to principally Bosnian Muslim populations cut-off in enclaves within territory that was predominantly controlled by Bosnian Serb militia groups, backed by the Yugoslav army. Despite their declaration by the UN as 'safe havens' these enclaves were often hard to access. Gordon's

negotiating skills and persistence eventually saw Feed the Children given permission to deliver aid to babies and young children, saving many from starvation.

In summer 1995 the 'safe havens' were overrun, most notoriously with the massacre of the male population of Srebrenica. Gordon and Feed the Children were among the first to reach 20,000 exhausted, starving and terrified women and children in Tuzla. When the 'safe haven' of Zepa was overrun, Gordon set-up an emergency reception centre.

In 1998 Gordon's humanitarian work was recognised with an OBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours list. He was also presented with the European Commission Task Force Medal by General Martinez Esparza, Head of ECTF. After a period working with Feed the Children and the New York-based International Rescue Committee, Gordon returned to Bosnia in August 2000. He took charge of the International Commission on Missing Persons which at the time was short of funds and struggling with internal and external political disputes. Set-up at the suggestion of President Bill Clinton, with Senator Bob Dole as its Chairman, its aim was to recover and identify the war dead.

There were 40,000 missing across the Balkans. The reality was that almost all were dead. 30,000 of these were in Bosnia, of which over 8,000 were from Srebrenica. A ground-breaking DNA programme helped identify the bodies that were recovered. The cemetery just outside Srebrenica contains 6,000 headstones with the names of the deceased, thanks to ICMP's work. Gordon's role in securing substantial funds from new donor countries, and his patient expertise in brokering access to mass graves was pivotal to this success.

Subsequently, Lord Paddy Ashdown, the High Representative in Bosnia, asked Gordon to represent the International Community on a Commission, set up by the government of the principally Serb-populated element of Bosnia, Republika Srpska, looking into the events of Srebrenica. The Serb members of the Commission had to endure verbal abuse, as well as threats to themselves and their families. Nevertheless, the Commission acknowledged the reality of the massacre at Srebrenica and made strong recommendations to the government of Republika Srpska, controversially including an official apology.

Gordon's expertise in humanitarian work has seen him play important roles in subsequent crises outside the former Yugoslavia. After the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, Gordon joined a team in Sri Lanka as Emergency Co-ordinator. Following the devastating cyclone Nargis in May 2008, which killed 140,000 people in Myanmar, International Rescue Committee asked him to work in a politically sensitive liaison role with the military government. Like all aid workers at the time, Gordon was initially refused a visa but secured one by outlining his experience in the Balkans with missing persons. He was the only international from any organisation allowed into Myanmar at the time, establishing the blueprint for an emergency aid programme. Significantly, Gordon persuaded the military government to allow International Rescue Committee to implement a programme, something which, in the past had taken up to three years to secure.

Gordon returned to Sri Lanka in 2009 for International Rescue Committee during the last months of the civil war between government forces and the Tamil Tigers. Again, Gordon successfully navigated deep suspicion of the international community to establish an emergency aid programme for displaced, traumatised families many of who had endured months of bombardment trapped in a besieged stretch of land.

Gordon continues to travel extensively, sometimes witnessing different sorts of disasters, as a dedicated supporter of England's cricket team. His most recent trip to Sri Lanka was a far happier event.

Chancellor, I present John Gordon Bacon to receive the degree of Master of Arts honoris causa.