

Giving peace a chance



BLESSED are the peacekeepers ... for they may inherit one hell of a mess of other people's making. Ask Blackpool's own one-man version of the UN, minus the weaponry, Mike Bluett. He's just back from Indonesia and is off to Nepal.

Mike (*right*), 38, who grew up in North Shore, is a volunteer with Peace Brigades International (PBI). He's skint but committed to voluntary peacekeeping, which sends out the message the international community is watching for any signs of abuse or exploitation.

He acts as a bodyguard to others who may be in peril for helping troubled communities abroad.

Mike's part of PBI, a registered charity, which has promoted non-violence and protecting human rights since 1981.

It is one of the few international non-governmental organisations with permission to work on the ground in Papua.

Since Indonesia's first democratic election in 2004, the country has been on a rocky path to peace and democracy. The human rights situation is still grave and many human rights defenders receive death threats.

Mike was part of a team of international observers who provide protection to such human rights defenders.

They are concerned with risks to democracy, economic development, environmental issues, indigenous rights, the military, and fear and trustbuilding in conflict zones.

He sees his voluntary work as a natural extension to the work he did in the UK.

He studied social work and worked with children at risk here and in Nepal for more than 10 years before joining PBI Indonesia in October 2006 after a stint in Italy working with refugee Romany gypsies who faced persecution in the inner cities.

Mike explains: "PBI works with local organisations who are actively working towards peace and justice; we do not impose our own views on the way they should do this."

"It is after all the people who know best how to bring peace to their own country. But, as a UK citizen, just being there helps this process."

Why Mike? Well, he says he grew up with two great "socially active" role models. "They still are." His mum worked as a local health visitor with homeless families and elderly folk. His dad, from South Limerick, knew all about the conflict of growing up in a divided isle.

It helped frame Mike's outlook on what he

A former social worker is back from one of the world's troublespots before he heads off to the uncertain democracy of Nepal. **Jacqueline Morley** reports

wanted from life at an earlier age.

The former pupil of Collegiate High School and Sixth Form, says: "When I got involved with the Peace Brigade and went working away in conflict areas, it made me think more about my family's involvement in such issues of old."

"My grandfather on mum's side was in the British Army in Asia, and my grandfather on my dad's side was involved in the Independence struggle for Ireland – the original IRA.

"What's history to some has never been far away from me personally and I can see it reflected in people's experiences in Indonesia and other areas."

"What the Peace Brigade provide is a physical presence on the ground – there to lend international support on request from local organisations."

"In Indonesia, we were helping others who were investigating human rights abuses and were at risk of violence."

"They could be threatened, get followed in cars, even get attacked, and, once they requested the service we provide, we physically went out with them."

"It was a more visible deterrent. They'd meet families representing local victims and we'd sit outside the office there to show they were being protected by international representatives."

"It's like a bodyguard but we wouldn't use physical force. We're unarmed so it's more a form of passive resistance – what we represent by our presence in these troublespots."

"We do a lot of groundwork, meeting the military and the police, so they know who we are, and what we're doing, and realise that this is a pacifist organisation, and we're not supporting illegal groups, or violence, and respect the rule of the country in which we work."

"Most of the time you don't feel the personal danger but feel the danger for the local people. We don't tend to get threatened directly. People will threaten, say, the local growers, but not international people."

"It's not like working in Afghanistan where they have a political aim in kidnapping incomers."

"There's a respect for the international community and for you as a person. And although we may not like what they do, in meeting the military and police commanders, and getting their

backing for our work, we're able to use that when we find illegal activity, or hostility, and say to the local military or others – we met your boss last week – and it's more than likely they will have never met their colonel or general."

"It's all about engendering respect and relat-

ing to people on a one-to-one basis. Some of my friends say how can you relate to soldiers, say, when they are oppressing this group?"

"But I think of my grandad, and the local people in India probably said the same about him, and yet he joined the army to serve his country."

"And if you talk to the military, they often don't want conflict."

"We are apolitical, we don't, can't, take sides, but the important thing is to protect people who are working hard to improve life for people at greatest risk."

"These are the real heroes, fighting for human rights against powerful forces, and what they achieve shames others who dismiss situations as hopeless."

"That kind of commitment is very humbling. It makes the things I do here, going to the supermarket, the sheer excess I see, seem almost irrelevant. But then life is a struggle for many local people."

Mike's next posting is Nepal, as PBI's country co-ordinator (in partnership with Germany's civil peace service there) prior to elections in April.

"There we have another community of victims – and need to help them to become part of the election process."

"We can't speak up for them politically but we can protect their human rights and empower them to do so for themselves."

● email outreach@peacebrigades.org.uk or hit www.peacebrigades.org.uk

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THREAT: Police beat a protester in Nepal

SO what do you get for potentially saving a kid's life? A pat on the back, a warm round of applause?

How about two fingers waved at you? Well, the latter, of course, what else did I expect?

I've never started one of my weekly ramblings with four questions before, but I'm a little perturbed.

I had a day off on Tuesday and so I grabbed the chance to take my daughter to pre-school. En route, a young lad – he couldn't have been more than 11 or 12 – was on his mountain bike, weaving all over the road.

I slowed down and waited until it appeared to be safe to overtake.

As I finally made my move, he darted right across my path. He was so close I could see he was plugged

into his iPod, Walkman, personal stereo or whatever the current mobile phonograph device is these days.

I bit my tongue as I had the kids in the car, so resorted to that old fashioned warning device – my horn.

As I looked in my rear view mirror, there he was, a 4ft nothing brat, waving his pegs at me.

I stopped, rolled down my window and, for want of anything more considered, said: "Hey son, what do you want me to do next time – run over you?"

His response was even more off the cuff than mine.

"Yeah," he said, "just do it".

Crikey they clearly breed a death wish into them young these days.

To be fair, I was not surprised. You

Jon Rhodes

A word in your ear



come to expect modern kids will answer back with a bit of cheek or worse, the now classic put down "whatever".

I heard a debate on radio last week – an age old issue – about whether kids are getting worse and need a clip round the ear.

My initial thought, being the recipient of many a clip round the ear in my formative years, was YES.

But once the jerk of my knee had recoiled to a position of sensibility, I thought more about it.

There have recently been horrific examples of violence involving children on children and youths on adults, but are kids as a whole really that bad?

For my own part the only marker I can use to compare them with is myself, circa 1979.

I was an ordinary kid, ordinary background, and yes I was a bit lippy. I did some stupid things, got involved in fights, petty vandalism and even chopped down five of the neighbour's 20ft conifers to use them on our estate's bonfire – he was on holiday.

But one instance has suddenly shot to the forefront of my mind and that

was when I rode my Gripter at full pelt down a hill and flew across a busy junction without looking.

A lorry driver was forced to slam on his brakes and almost took me out. The fearsome-looking trucker shouted at me. I took one look at him and pegged it without saying a word.

There are two answers here to the conundrum about whether kids are getting worse. A) Yes they are, given the peg waving I suffered the other day; or B) No, it's just that driving my wife's car and tooting my horn did not instill the same fear factor as a scary 1970s trucker.

I'm probably going to side with the latter and work on my mean adult stare and shout a bit more. That and get a more manly horn sound.

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