

**Speech to the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation Humanitarian Symposium
by John Holmes
Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs
and Emergency Relief Coordinator**

12 September 2007

I'm delighted to be here this afternoon, and to have this opportunity to speak to you about the work the UN and the larger humanitarian community are doing, and in particular about some of the formidable challenges we face going forward.

First of all, in case you were wondering, what do I and the office I head, OCHA, actually do? I would point to three essential aspects. First is coordination of the international humanitarian effort, as mandated by the General Assembly. We have made some progress over the past two years in improving partnerships, for example between the UN and non-UN actors, and making delivery of relief more predictable and accountable. But we have much further still to go. The second is to be an international voice for the humanitarian community, and in particular, the victims. And the third is to be at the intellectual and policy forefront of thinking, for example on how the international community can protect civilians better.

What are the challenges we face over the next few years? My starting point is that demands for humanitarian relief are likely to grow further. The main driver will almost certainly be the increased incidence and severity of natural disasters and extreme weather events because of the effects of climate change. This is not a theoretical fear but a real and current phenomenon, as the massive floods this summer in South Asia and elsewhere have forcefully reminded us. Even if no single event can reliably be attributed to global warming, the trends are unmistakable and accelerating. Moreover, the vulnerability of many to these extreme weather events is also increasing as, for example, the population in highly exposed coastal mega cities grows. And battles over resources – above all energy, fertile land and fresh water – are an almost inevitable consequence of other effects of climate change, such as desertification in Africa. The Darfur conflict may not be directly about this, but it is certainly an important underlying factor. One essential, if unglamorous, way of tackling this is Disaster Risk Reduction, in other words taking active steps to reduce the vulnerability of communities to these inevitable disasters, for example by avoiding building in places subject to flooding, or by making sure buildings are as well-proofed as possible against earthquakes or hurricanes. Not rocket science but it can save countless lives and reduce massively economic damage.

On the purely man-made disaster side, while wars between States have diminished, so-called complex emergencies – in other words various kinds of internal conflicts and civil wars -- are if anything on the increase too, as new religious and ethnic tensions emerge. Civilian populations are the main victims of these conflicts. They are also too often actively used as pawns for political purposes by those promoting conflict. Certainly respect for international humanitarian principles and basic international humanitarian law – the responsibility to protect innocent civilians – seems at a low point in many places. Maintaining the necessary space for humanitarians to act effectively and neutrally, independent of others' political and military objectives, is also

increasingly difficult. Access to those in need is a constant challenge, not helped by perceptions in some quarters that the humanitarian agenda is a western one, which in some way threatens the national sovereignty of the affected countries.

These are serious long-term challenges. Tackling them successfully will mean increasing the capacity of the system and its coherence. And the broader context for this may become more difficult, not less. The international humanitarian scene is diverse, or to use a less positive word, fragmented. This has advantages – different approaches can be complementary. NGOs or the Red Cross movement can often do what UN agencies cannot, and vice-versa. It also has disadvantages. Coordination is far from straightforward among the host of organisations with overlapping mandates, competing needs for resources and their own fiercely-guarded independence. My job has often, with some justice, been described as the equivalent of herding cats. And the future is likely to see more actors appearing – from the Islamic world, from the private sector, from the big new emerging economies. This will be welcome, if it increases the overall resources available to match the increasing demands I have already described. But it will certainly not make my life or that of my eventual successors any easier.

In any case the point is that we will have to up our game - as coordinators, as advocates and as intellectual ground-breakers. I look forward to this, and to the parallel challenges of making humanitarian action more clearly needs-driven, based on objective evidence as far as possible, and evaluating more rigorously the real impact of what we do on those we are trying so hard to help.

One particular areas of focus will be the basic issue of how best to protect civilians in circumstances of conflict, and how to turn the “Responsibility to Protect” concept, agreed at the 2005 World Summit here in New York, into meaningful and practical policies on the ground. For the moment we talk a lot about protection and employ increasing numbers of protection officers - not to be confused incidentally with the rather different profession of bodyguards. We have become better at drawing attention to abuses, and at helping the victims. Our presence alone can often be a vital deterrent. But actually preventing abuses and offering real protection to civilian populations remains a massive challenge.

The debate on how to do so effectively is probably about to restart in earnest. I hope it will focus on what the 2005 agreement actually says about governments’ own responsibilities and the obligation of the international community and the UN to help them fulfil these responsibilities, rather than turning into a sterile and ideological shouting match between the all-out proponents of humanitarian intervention and those determined to protect national sovereignty at any price. Unfortunately, as we all know, the New York UN arena can too readily lend itself to political point-scoring, as opposed to practical problem-solving - and of course the background of what has happened and is happening in Iraq following outside intervention hardly helps calm discussions. Nevertheless, we must do our best to concentrate on what can be done in the vast majority of cases, not just on what can only ever be the absolutely last resort of armed intervention to prevent, for example, another Rwandan genocide.

One other point has struck me forcibly since taking up my role in March, and that is the integral link between humanitarian crises and politics, despite the profound wish of the humanitarian actors to steer clear of the nasty political world. What do I

mean by this? Someone remarked to me early on that there is no such thing, at least in the conflict area, as a humanitarian crisis. Rather what we face are political and security crises, with humanitarian consequences. The truth of this, obvious though it may seem in some ways, has been borne out on me in every major humanitarian arena I have visited. Humanitarian aid is only, can only be, a sticking plaster on an open wound while the solutions to the underlying problems are sought. There can be no avoiding our obligation and the moral imperative to provide that sticking plaster, to save lives and afford those affected at least a modicum of human dignity. But I am nevertheless occasionally struck by the uncomfortable thought that, by helping the victims, we may even sometimes contribute to prolonging the conflicts by allowing those responsible to get on with their political games and fighting, safe in the knowledge that the humanitarian actors will deal with the worst of the immediate consequences. Certainly it often enrages me that the politicians or participants in a conflict seem only too happy to spin out their problems with little or no heed to the impact this has on thousands and in some cases, millions of lives, usually of their own fellow-citizens. Which is why, when I have returned from my various trips, I have always made a point of stressing the need for these protagonists, and indeed the international community, to get off their backsides, not to put too fine a point on it, and start working more urgently for solutions, however difficult that may be.

Perhaps it would be useful in conclusion to take a quick look at a practical situation to illustrate what I have been talking about: not, for once, the well-known and much, publicised conflict in Darfur; but the no less serious and important, but much less well-known, Democratic Republic of Congo, which I have just visited; a vast, rich country whose population has been left impoverished by decades of neglect, corruption and war. Recent progress, with the end of outside intervention and the putting in place of new democratic institutions, has been impressive, helped by a major UN peacekeeping presence. But the challenges which remain are at least as huge as the country itself. And the underlying political and ethnic problems in the east, largely a left-over from conflict and genocide in Rwanda, are far from being solved.

The challenge for the humanitarian community is to help the displaced, still well over a million despite major returns over the past four years, to tackle some of the massive need elsewhere in the country, e.g. the consequences of chronic disease and malnutrition, and to try to protect the civilian population in the east from the many armed groups still in the country, not least the Hutu militia, the FDLR, who fled into the forests of North and South Kivu after the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

The DRC has a strong presence of UN agencies, the Red Cross movement and many NGOs and they are working together pretty effectively, thanks to strong pressure for coordination, and some policy changes, such as the so-called cluster approach and a large local pooled fund for humanitarian priorities.

The biggest challenge is, as I have suggested, precisely in the field of protecting civilians. The illegal armed groups in the east prey on the local civilian population, particularly the FDLR. And the most horrifying feature of this is the extent of sexual violence against women and girls – not only multiple rape but abduction of girls for use as sex slaves, involving constant abuse and humiliation, and frequent violence and mutilation requiring reconstructive genital surgery for those who survive or escape. I met some of the women in the Panzi hospital in Bukavu, which does heroic work to help

them. Several experienced observers told me beforehand I would not emerge the same man from the experience. They were right.

27,000 cases of sexual violence were recorded in 2006, in the province of North Kivu alone, but the true figure may be much higher. The main immediate effect of registering a case is often ostracism by the victim's family and community, while almost total impunity prevails for the perpetrators. The international community has done a lot to help treat the women victims, physically and psychologically and to draw attention to their plight. We are trying to help the government set up a justice system worthy of the name. But the sad truth is that we have not managed to stop this dreadful scourge and, like the government itself - who as always have the primary responsibility to protect their own citizens - we need to do more.

Meanwhile our wider humanitarian efforts in DRC are chronically underfunded, usually one half of what we believe is required, and we are by no means reaching all those in need. I am doing my best to step up our efforts. And I have the plea of the victims and communities I met ringing in my ears: you are the nth high-level visitor who has come to see us. Of course you are welcome, but what difference is your visit going to make? These people desperately want us to make hope happen. We have a responsibility not to let them down.

Meanwhile to go back to where I started, countries in Africa like the DRC are increasingly prone to floods and drought, as climate change produces its effects. Inevitably it is the poorest and most vulnerable who are most affected, as they try to cope with the triple whammy of chronic deprivation, conflict not of their making and weather hazards. That is why the humanitarian agenda remains so challenging, and why I fear I will not be out of a job any time soon.