

**Remarks of Sir John Holmes, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs
and Emergency Relief Coordinator, UN-OCHA at
The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid in the International Context
29 January 2008**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak at this discussion. I should say at the outset how grateful those of us in the UN's humanitarian wing are for our close cooperation with the EU and its institutions. We much appreciate the tangible commitments made by the EU to ensuring that the emergency needs of the world's most vulnerable people are met. We value greatly the constructive dialogue on how we can together improve our efforts to do this. And we are extremely grateful for the generous and vital financial contributions the humanitarian system receives from Europe in various ways. To give only one example, EU countries have contributed more than USD 700 million of the funds we have received for the Central Emergency Response Fund, established by the UN in 2006, which is some 70% of the total. Let me make clear our absolute commitment to maximize the impact of every Euro, Kroner, or Pound contributed, whether in the Central Emergency Relief Fund or elsewhere.

As you all know, the focus of our attention today is the EU Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, which we regard as a strong affirmation by Europe of the principle of the provision of humanitarian assistance to those who need it, and of the basic humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence which underlie this. The document also reaffirms the value of the partnership with the UN and underlines support for OCHA's central coordinating role in the humanitarian system, both of which I warmly welcome. I am confident the European Council, the Parliament and the Commission, by adopting this common approach to humanitarian aid in complex emergencies, natural disasters and to vital issues, such as disaster risk reduction and transition from relief to recovery, and by then turning it into action, will help to make the international response faster and more effective, and to save more lives as a result. Because of course what happens on the ground is always the most important thing, particularly in emergency relief.

Let me also say how delighted I am that the Consensus document so strongly endorses the approach we are taking to reforming the humanitarian system, and also supports the way we work together in using military assets in emergency responses. I will come back to these two issues in more detail in a moment, but let me first set out some of the overarching challenges I think we will be facing in 2008.

CURRENT HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES

My starting point is that demands for humanitarian relief are set to grow significantly in the coming years. One main driver will be the increased number and severity of natural disasters linked to the effects of climate change. The scale of this past summer's massive floods in West Africa, Central America, and across Asia is probably now more the rule than the exception. Another growing concern is tied to both climate change and rising energy costs, as well as changing dietary habits in large parts of the world, population growth and the trend towards biofuels. I have in mind the soaring costs of food commodities around the world. Whatever its positive sides, this trend exacerbates the situation of the urban poor, as we have seen recently in Bangladesh, and can put vulnerable people in even greater need in some of the world's worst trouble spots. Already this year Afghanistan has appealed urgently for international assistance to

help their citizens cope with food prices that are rising beyond their reach in the case of staples such as wheat flour.

I fear that 2008 will have no shortage of man-made disasters, either. While wars between States have perhaps diminished, so-called complex emergencies caused by internal conflicts and civil wars show little sign of disappearing. Sri Lanka, engaged in a peace process just 2 years ago, is now threatened by renewed conflict. Kenya more recently has descended into violent chaos in almost a matter of moments, and shows no sign of recovery for the moment, rather the opposite. As I have seen for myself in DRC, Somalia and Darfur, civilians are always the main victims in conflicts like these, and it is our duty to help them, wherever and whoever they are.

The very environment in which we work has also changed. Respect for international humanitarian law, especially the responsibility to protect civilians, is at a low point in many parts of the world. Maintaining humanitarian access for aid workers, to allow them to act effectively and neutrally, independent of political and military objectives, is increasingly difficult. Our status as neutral and independent is under challenge, which complicates access to those in need, as we know from our attempts to help in places like Somalia and Iraq.

At the same time, the humanitarian environment itself is becoming increasingly complex as the number and variety of actors continue to increase. In addition to military and civil protection forces, new entities and new organizations are emerging from the private sector, from religious/political groups, and from new regional powers. Coping with this diverse range of actors will require still better coordination and a greater accountability on the part of the humanitarian community both to those who pay the bills, and to those who legitimately expect to receive help when they need it.

HUMANITARIAN REFORM

Despite these apparently discouraging elements, there are many positive factors too – for example, I believe we are constantly improving our tools and our methods for meeting these challenges, not least through the humanitarian reform process, which has now been under way for more than two years.

Darfur was the specific catalyst for a major re-think of how we provide humanitarian assistance. When the crisis in Darfur erupted, the world was slow to respond, humanitarians included. There were no clearly designated responsible agencies that could be called on to lead the international response in each of the different sectors. There were inadequate links between UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Further, we discovered that the aid system was not well enough equipped. Some sectors were severely lacking in capacity. Emergency stockpiles were not sufficient and we did not have enough staff with the right skills ready to be deployed rapidly.

If you look at some of our more recent responses, I believe you can see that we have come a long way since then. At the global level, we now have clearly defined lead agencies for all the main sectors. Thanks to the generous support of donors---particularly European donors---humanitarian response capacity in each of these sectors is far greater than it was two years ago. The system is now able to respond much quicker and more effectively in new emergencies, as we saw for example in the case of the Pakistan earthquake in 2005, the Lebanon crisis in 2006,

and most recently in Bangladesh and Kenya. In each case, lead agencies for the key sectors or clusters were designated within the first 48 hours of the emergency, as counterparts for governments and other actors. Agencies were able to deploy staff and resources in a much more timely and predictable manner.

The CERF is another major new resource available to respond rapidly to new disasters. I believe it has transformed our ability to respond quickly and equitably, and helped to save many lives. The CERF has also enabled us to direct much needed funds to some of the more neglected, underfunded emergencies. Operations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, have received the most funding from the CERF's underfunded window. The CERF has also helped us in particular to respond quickly and fairly to recent climate-related disasters, by kick-starting the international response – ranging from massive flooding across West Africa and the Horn of Africa to droughts, and then floods, in Southern Africa, to intensive storms and cyclones that have swept with deadly force across Southeast Asia. By prioritizing needs and allocating resources accordingly, and helping to drive coordination, I can also say frankly that the CERF helps me as the Emergency Relief Coordinator to encourage and to lead a more coherent and timely humanitarian response in circumstances like these.

As with the CERF, European donors have been amongst the most generous in supporting the global cluster capacity-building programme, having contributed the lion's share of what has been raised over the last two years. Although there will be no more separate appeals for global capacity-building, we still need to ensure that each of the global clusters is properly supported in the long term and I hope that we can go on counting on Europe in this regard.

At this stage, we need to move beyond talking about "humanitarian reform". The changes that have now been agreed amongst the international humanitarian community must now be implemented everywhere. This is how we do business. We must ensure high standards of predictability, accountability and partnership in all international responses to humanitarian emergencies. And NGOs, who do the bulk of the work in many of today's emergencies, must always be treated as equal partners - not simply as sub-contractors of UN agencies.

This better-organized system as we see it is designed to make it easier for humanitarians to work with people from outside our sphere, and for them to work with us. Which brings me on to the way humanitarians work with military actors and assets in emergency situations. Here too, I think, the Consensus document helps provide us with useful clarity.

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Changes in defense missions and the availability of military assets, combined with the scope, scale, and intensity of natural disasters in particular, have led to an increase in the mobilization of foreign military and civil defense assets in support of humanitarian operations. The clearest examples we all remember are from the Indian Ocean Tsunami and the Pakistan earthquake.

These showed how, professional militaries are well positioned to mobilize rapidly, especially during the early stages of a natural disaster response, and can sometimes offer assets or capabilities unavailable elsewhere, particularly at such speed. This should be welcomed. And experience has shown that in natural or environmental disasters, the use of these military and

civil defense assets and cooperation with the military is usually accepted by all actors, allowing coordination to focus on improving the effectiveness and efficiency of these combined efforts, as long as military involvement is not seen as the standard way of doing business, and its potential financial costs are clearly understood. In a complex emergency or conflict situation, on the other hand, wary co-existence perhaps best describes the relationship between the humanitarian and military communities. Coordination focuses on minimizing competition and conflict so that the actors can work in the same area with minimum disruption to each other's mandates and activities.

But if we are not very careful, the humanitarian community may, as a result, face increased operational difficulties as well as greater risks and threats for the workers in the field, because of confusion of roles and objectives.

As the Consensus recognizes, adherence to the principles of neutrality and impartiality in humanitarian operations, and the perception that this is indeed the case, are crucial. Maintaining a clear distinction between humanitarian and military actors is therefore essential for humanitarian organizations to be able to discharge their responsibilities effectively and safely. Humanitarian assistance cannot be conditioned upon the beneficiaries' allegiance to or support of parties involved in a conflict. Humanitarian aid must never be instrumentalized. It must remain independent of military and political action. This may not always guarantee the safety of our staff, as the murders of our colleagues in Algiers and Baghdad have shown us all too clearly, and most recently, yesterday, the dreadful loss in Southern Somalia of colleagues from MSF-Holland from a roadside bomb. But without this distinction we have no chances of retaining our neutrality and impartiality, and therefore the essential independent basis of our action.

CONCLUSION

In closing, let me again recognize the achievement represented by the Consensus document. It brings out the many areas where we have already worked together and found common ground in our approach to addressing catastrophes. We have indeed made progress in the way we bring aid to people in need. But we cannot be satisfied. There is a long way to go yet.

I hope in this context that the EU's common humanitarian budget will continue to be maintained and indeed increased, as it needs to be to meet the rising demands I have already identified. From our point of view it would also be welcome if there was greater humanitarian focus for discussion in the Council context, to ensure that these issues get the attention they deserve.

But beyond this, to do our job properly, we need not only the significant financial resources which Europe contributes to our operations; we also need your engagement, your ideas, and your shared commitment. I know that I can count on your continued support in pursuit of our common goal of reaching the maximum number of people in need with the highest possible standard of assistance.

Thank you very much.