

**Remarks for USG John Holmes  
At the Seminar on Humanitarian Agenda 2015  
Helsinki, 12 February 2008**

Thank you for inviting me to this important Seminar. Antonio's speech has left us with a lot to think about, and was as intellectually challenging as we expect from someone with Antonio's background.

I would first like to set out some of the challenges I foresee for the years ahead, and then describe some approaches we may take for dealing with them, before I talk about how to broaden the base of support for these humanitarian activities and operations.

In sum, humanitarian needs will grow significantly in the future. We must stretch our imaginations and ingenuity to meet adequately the increasing demands we will face. Meanwhile, humanitarian space is likely to come under tremendous pressure. The expansion of political agendas into the humanitarian realm and eroding respect for the basic principles of humanitarian law in too many places leave us with less room to operate, figuratively and literally. All this means that we have to adapt. In particular we must seek out more resources, and work to ensure better buy-in to the humanitarian agenda, including from countries from regions of the world that have been less involved in humanitarian efforts to date. Of course, amid all this change, we have to stick to one constant: the humanitarian imperative—to provide humanitarian assistance wherever it is needed, respecting the principles of impartiality and neutrality.

First, demands for humanitarian relief will only grow. The biggest single cause is likely to be climate change, and the increased incidence and severity of extreme weather events associated with it. Even if no single event can reliably be attributed to global warming, the trends are clear, and clearly they are accelerating, with the effects felt on every continent. In 2006, there were 254 floods and related disasters, an increase of 43%

compared to the 2000–2004 average. The scale of this past summer’s massive floods in Africa, Central America, and across Asia is probably now more the rule than the exception. It is the new normal. Sadly, the poorest, most vulnerable communities are the least responsible for causing global warming, but they will be the ones most affected by its consequences.

Related to this, 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. -----is the soaring costs of food commodities around the world. And whatever its positive side, this trend exacerbates the situation of the urban poor, as we have seen recently in Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. And it looks like a structural change in prices, which market forces will not fix in a few months. The consequences of this go well beyond the humanitarian, but the immediate challenges for the World Food Programme, squeezed between rising hunger and rising prices, are formidable indeed.

According to the IPCC, there is strong evidence to suggest that these changes will lead people to leave areas where land has grown infertile and water sources have become scarce----and of course sea level rise may make some areas---and even some countries--- totally uninhabitable. We may face a stream of climate migrants, who could contribute to instability in a number of ways, from moving to areas that would put them in competition for limited resources, to placing even more pressure on the economies of rapidly urbanizing areas. It is difficult to put a figure on their number, but responsible researchers agree that around 50 million people on the move in the next 20 years is not unlikely. Climate change will almost certainly also precipitate battles over resources –

above all energy, arable land and fresh water. It was no accident that the Security Council in New York devoted a session to climate change for the first time. Climate change is a security issue, perhaps *the* security issue.

In the face of these issues we cannot stand still. We must look for new ways to tackle problems. One source of ideas and expertise is the private sector. For example, there is growing interest in how insurance and reinsurance companies might be able to help tackle the response to natural disasters such as droughts and hurricanes, by providing an insurance-based response derived from objective local evidence, satellite photos showing rainfall, for instance---premiums could perhaps be met at least partially by donors as an alternate to paying the bill for the response.

Turning to man-made disasters, I fear they will not be in short supply, either. While wars between States have 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 severe renewed conflict. Kenya more recently has descended into violent chaos in almost a matter of moments. Climbing back out of the pit will be a slower process. The linked struggles in Darfur and Chad threaten a regional explosion. While troubles in fragile states like Somalia or CAR can spill over borders, placing their neighbors in peril. Resource exploitation that fails to benefit local population has long been a catalyst for conflict in the eastern DRC, where problems continue unabated.

All these might be thought of as challenging enough, but in carrying out our own humanitarian work, we also face increasing difficulties. The very environment in which

we work is changing. Respect for international humanitarian law, especially the responsibility to protect civilians, is at a low point in some parts of the world. Maintaining access for aid workers, to allow them to act effectively and neutrally, independent of political and military objectives, in many ways has been increasingly difficult.

Emphasis on sovereignty in the humanitarian context often betokens reluctance to cooperate with those from the international community whose only actual desire is to help. Military involvement in humanitarian operations is a constant source of concern. All this means our status as neutral and independent is under challenge, which complicates access to those in need and can even make us targets in our own right, as we know from our attempts to help in places like Somalia and Iraq.

As I have suggested, we need to be constantly on the lookout for new solutions to these problems. Part of the answer is a much more systematic effort to explain modern humanitarianism and to address head-on suspicions about hidden political agendas, a concern that the international community is seeking to impose a response to crises when we propose essentially simple coordination approaches such as the introduction of clusters.

There are also other ways in which we need to do better now:

- 1) We must continue to strengthen the response system
- 2) We must put much more effort into preventing natural hazards from turning into human catastrophes.

- 3) We must broaden and deepen support for humanitarian action, including with agencies and the private sector.

So let me take these briefly in turn. On the reform side, we are constantly improving our tools and our coordination methods, not least through the humanitarian response strengthening process, which has now been underway for more than two years now.

Darfur was the main specific catalyst, along with the Tsunami, 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. Nor did we have enough staff with the right skills ready to be deployed rapidly.

I believe that if you look at some of our more recent responses, you can see that we have come some way since then, by working hard on a few main areas: First of all, better sectoral coordination to improve coherence, and reduce gaps and duplication; new funding mechanisms; improved partnerships on an equal basis between UN and non-UN actors; better timing and preparedness in humanitarian response, through better qualified and trained UN humanitarian coordinators and resident coordinators.

At the global level, we do now have clearly defined lead agencies for all the main sectors. Thanks to the generous support of many donors, humanitarian response capacity in each of these sectors is significantly 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 of these cases, lead agencies for the key sectors or clusters were designated on the ground in a very short time, as counterparts for governments and other actors. Agencies were able to deploy staff and resources in a much more timely and predictable manner. There is some way to go, but this is beginning to be accepted as the way we now have to do business to be genuinely effective.

We are also working to overhaul humanitarian financing mechanisms. The Central Emergency Response Fund is a major new resource, which has transformed our ability to respond quickly and also equitably and thereby helped to save many lives, and enabled us to direct much needed resources to some of the more neglected, underfunded emergencies such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The CERF has helped us in particular to respond quickly and fairly to recent climate-related disasters of 2007, by kick-starting the international response. 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.

I should add that, as with the CERF, Nordic 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 you in this regard.

Pooled funds at the local level are another useful tool, which puts decision-making where it belongs—closer to the beneficiaries, closer to the needs and closer to local considerations. They are not the answer to everything, and represent only a small proportion of the whole. Agencies and NGOs continue to need reliable, predictable and increased core funding. But the expansion of the available toolbox can only be a good thing.

As we move forward, we have to not only be better organized, but we have to reduce risk as well. And perhaps the greatest risk that we as a humanitarian community face is not from nature itself, but from human nature, in other words our own habit of not acting radically and courageously ahead of time, before disaster or conflict occurs. The lesson is that working together, we must redouble our efforts and work together even more cohesively not only to respond to crises, but also to reduce vulnerability to crises -- both the chronic, so-called silent emergencies and those that strike suddenly.

Unfortunately, because of this propensity I mentioned earlier, disaster risk reduction and disaster preparedness only became issues in the media and the heads of our politicians in the wake of a tsunami or similar catastrophe. This has to change. Above

all, we as humanitarians must recognize more clearly than ever, and persuade international opinion more widely, that the magnitude of a disaster is not measured by the death toll. The opposite is almost the case. Death tolls are falling in many disasters as early warning and better information increase people's chances of survival. Whatever the death toll, the devastating effects on lives and above all livelihoods are getting worse. The survivors are the ones that need our help.

We also need to strengthen the ability of local and national governments, who of course retain primary responsibility, to prepare for and respond to crises. This must become a much greater priority in the future, as part of a general change of attitudes and culture in this case, with less arrogance on the international side.

This brings me to the need to work more closely with some of the key actors, not least the private sector and governments.

I think private companies are increasingly realizing that in a global economy with instant telecommunications, there is no such thing as a purely local disaster. A disaster that is local in origin can quickly become national or even global in impact. For example, an earthquake in Indonesia or a flood in Mumbai may well affect one of their key stakeholders, be it their suppliers, employees, or customers. Corporate social responsibility is in this case not a conscience-easing option, but an actual necessity, stemming from a global commitment, because in most cases, the corporate backyard is literally the world.

The last few years have seen a tremendous upsurge in private sector engagement in humanitarian relief efforts with companies such as DHL, Ericsson, TNT, Nokia, and many others supporting operations with vitally-needed resources and know-how. Not only is this good for us. The companies also value it very greatly because of the enthusiasm it can generate among their workforces and the extra breadth of approach it can give staff. But I am convinced we are only scratching the surface of what the private sector can offer, if only we could put our heads together more effectively, to our mutual benefit.

In UN humanitarian circles, conversations have also focused for years on broadening the donor base to include donors from outside the small group of western countries that are the “traditional donors”----the usual suspects. The wide donor base of CERF, with more than 80 countries, has shown it can be done. But in general, this has proved more difficult than many had originally thought and I am beginning to understand some of the reasons why. In my own travels to places like Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia, I have been struck by the depth of the suspicion and mistrust with which many people regard the humanitarian endeavor. I have been surprised to see how little many official interlocutors know about UN humanitarian efforts. We therefore have to redouble our efforts to explain what we do, why we do it, and the principles of neutrality and impartiality that guide us when we do.

And now, as I have seen more and more disaster stricken places, I have come to another realization. Villages that host refugees and displaced often do so with no assistance of the affected countries, other than the obviously failed states, are almost

always the prime responders to crises on their territory. It is sometimes difficult to estimate the value of this humanitarian aid in dollars and cents, but we cannot continue to act as if these are not significant contributions, and as if we on the international side are the dominant, all-knowing partners.

Likewise, I have come to understand that some countries, such as Saudi Arabia and China, actually do give many millions of dollars in aid, much of it humanitarian aid. But this is almost exclusively bilateral. There is nothing wrong with well-targeted bilateral aid, based on need. But I believe many countries underestimate the fundamental value and the multilateral humanitarian approach and the shared interest and responsibility this carries with it. We need the right balance between the two. That way, all giving can be more effective and more predictable.

To conclude, it is by now a cliché to say that the world is growing smaller and that our interconnectedness and interdependence are deepening. But it is no less true. Climate change puts us all at risk in one way or another. No crisis is local anymore. We may all need help one day. I hope this understanding will strengthen our awareness of the humanitarian imperative more than ever. We are bound ever closer together by our knowledge of shared risk. We all have a corresponding responsibility to help. This is not a lesson Nordic countries need to learn. But it is a message we certainly need to spread further.