

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

ECOSOC HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS SEGMENT

OPENING REMARKS

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ECOSOC Chamber

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**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs
and Emergency Relief Coordinator**

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Vice President, Excellencies, distinguished delegates and colleagues,

I am honoured to open this important Humanitarian Affairs Segment of the Economic and Social Council. This is my second ECOSOC as Emergency Relief Coordinator and I welcome this opportunity to identify current challenges, take stock of progress, look at priorities for the coming year, and above all reaffirm the principles that are vital to all of us in the provision of humanitarian assistance.

OVERVIEW

In my opening remarks to ECOSOC last year, I predicted that the incidence and severity of disasters associated with natural hazards were likely to increase. It did not take a genius to make such a prediction, given the increasingly obvious impact of climate change, and indeed the Secretary-General's report for this session reflects this prediction, indicating that the rate of disasters associated with natural hazards has increased by almost 90% since 1987. This year, Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and the earthquake that hit Sichuan province in China have devastated millions of lives and livelihoods and caused tens of thousands of deaths. In China, early response mainly by national actors helped save thousands of lives but the

medium term consequences will still be very tough to deal with. In Myanmar, the issues were more complicated, with avoidable delays in access for international humanitarian actors and assets, but an effective operation was nevertheless put in place in the end, even if the needs remain great. Asia continues to be the continent most affected by natural disasters, but Africa and Latin America have also felt their heavy impact. This reinforces the importance of early warning and preparedness at the national, regional and international levels, as well of course as disaster risk reduction measures, which can make a huge difference to the extent of devastation caused by natural hazards, even if the hazards themselves are unavoidable. In both Myanmar and China, “building back better”, not least in the sense of building in disaster risk reduction components from the start, must be a priority.

This past year has also seen a continued focus on complex emergencies, and the humanitarian and protection of civilians challenges associated with them. Sadly, too many of the current long-running conflicts and accompanying humanitarian dramas show little or no sign of improvement – in some cases rather the opposite. The crisis in Darfur is now five years old with no end in sight, leading to the displacement of an estimated 2.4 million people. In Somalia well over two million people are expected to need humanitarian assistance this year, a 50% increase from last year. Problems in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad and the Central African Republic continue to drive displacement and deprivation. In Gaza, 80% of the population remain in need of humanitarian assistance despite the recent truce. In Iraq, four million people are in urgent need of food assistance, while only 40% of the population have access to safe drinking water. These continuing problems, combined with the increased incidence and severity of disasters associated with natural hazards, and most recently the global food crisis, indicate that the demand for humanitarian assistance will continue to increase. The international community

will want and need to respond to that demand, which will mean extra resources and a renewed search for a wider range of sources for this financial support.

UPHOLDING HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES

Mr. Vice- President,

For the past few years I and my predecessors have talked at length about the importance of access for humanitarian workers to reach populations in need, and for populations in need to be able to access humanitarian assistance. We do so because it is fundamental. How can we provide basic life saving assistance if we cannot reach the populations in need on time? And why do we too often find it so difficult to achieve access to vulnerable populations? We have posed these questions repeatedly, and I take this opportunity to remind Member States and non-State actors, as well as all our humanitarian partners, of the basic, driving principles that guide our work - humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence – and the need to respect them at all times.

Despite the fact that these principles are enshrined, reiterated and reconfirmed in many GA and ECOSOC resolutions, humanitarian workers are still viewed with suspicion in many places, while bureaucratic hurdles and even deliberate attacks block us from reaching populations in need. To Member States, I say it is no longer enough to reaffirm our commitment to these principles each year in the General Assembly. We must translate our words into concrete action that ensures humanitarian access in a timely and consistent manner. For us humanitarians, it is not enough to be faster, more efficient, more reliable, better funded and more skilled, as we aspire to be, if we cannot reach the vulnerable populations.

In the spirit of humanity that binds us all, I therefore ask all concerned – state and non-state actors alike - to make a renewed effort to facilitate our work of saving lives. Ensuring the timely, safe and unhindered access of humanitarian personnel, equipment and supplies, for the purpose of preventing and alleviating human suffering, and protecting civilians in armed conflict, is a core tenet of humanitarian assistance. This is where you, the Member States of the Economic and Social Council, can play such an important role in advancing access as a fundamental pre-requisite for effective humanitarian response.

SAFETY AND SECURITY OF HUMANITARIAN PERSONNEL

Meanwhile we face huge related challenges of safety and security too. Deliberate and violent attacks against humanitarian workers are increasing. Since the beginning of 2007 and until May 2008, an estimated 20 humanitarian workers have been killed in Darfur alone, and insecurity has more recently contributed to WFP having to halve food rations. In Afghanistan, during 2007, NGOs reported 135 security incidents, which included the killing of fifteen staff members, and 65 armed attacks on humanitarian convoys. Insecurity has also severely limited access by humanitarian workers to vulnerable populations in countries such as Somalia and Iraq. Only last week in Mogadishu, on 6 July, the acting head of the UNDP office – Mr. Ali Osman Ahmed - was brutally killed by unidentified gunmen as he left a mosque in Mogadishu. He was with family members. The killing of Mr. Ahmed is a loss for the United Nations and for the Somali people, who are ultimately the victims when humanitarian workers and aid officials are targeted in this way.

I therefore ask you to join me in strongly condemning these increased attacks on humanitarian personnel, which are simply unacceptable from any point of view.

Humanitarian workers are individuals who, in the spirit of humanity, daily risk their lives to help people in need. Their safety and security should be a priority for all of us. I fear we are becoming inured to such losses. There is also a risk that, as we rely increasingly on national staff in some situations, their loss can somehow be seen as less significant than the fate of international staff, who attract more media attention. We must never allow ourselves even the hint of a double standard in this regard. National staff are often knowingly taking huge risks with their lives and those of their families. We owe them an enormous amount.

CURRENT HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES

Mr. Vice-President

All this means that the challenges which confront us every day, when we provide humanitarian assistance, are increasing. Unfortunately, the numbers of vulnerable populations, including refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), are also rising rapidly. UNHCR has this year reported an increase in the global refugee population to 11.4 million. Estimates for IDP figures have meanwhile increased even faster; planning figures for IDPs displaced by violent conflict have reached 26 million this year. Additional millions have been displaced by disasters associated with natural hazards. At the same time the dimensions of these humanitarian emergencies are growing rapidly because of a new and extremely worrying phenomenon: the increased food insecurity associated with the large increases in food prices during the past year, and the resulting global food crisis.

The threat to food security is being felt particularly in fragile states, but also in countries where we have previously taken stability for granted. The first and hardest to be hit are, as always, the poorest and most vulnerable. The World Bank is predicting that, in addition to the existing more than eight hundred million

people currently suffering from hunger, the global food crisis will badly affect at least a further one hundred million people. I was in Afghanistan last month, where the combination of drought and high food prices is having a devastating impact on over 4 million people. In the Horn of Africa a severe drought has drastically limited local food production, and, combined with high food prices, has left millions of people in a highly vulnerable state in several countries. We have just issued a joint appeal for \$404 million for Afghanistan, and for \$325 million in Ethiopia, because of these food-related problems. The needs are genuine and huge - and this overall crisis is, I fear, still only in its early stages.

A sustainable resolution to these problems requires that we - the international community in general, and most of all Member States - must act immediately and in a unified manner to address *both* the immediate humanitarian needs and longer term structural issues to increase food production. The Secretary-General's High Level Task Force on Global Food Security is an important framework for unifying policy within the UN and Bretton-Woods Institutions and ensuring we act in a comprehensive, coordinated and coherent manner. These institutions stand ready to provide the assistance needed to national governments to protect the most vulnerable from hunger and starvation, and to help produce the sustained investment needed to correct the long years of neglect of agriculture and rural development. But all the actors and stakeholders must pull together - governments, civil society, the private sector, regional organisations. We know what to do. We just have to do it.

Particularly relevant for this audience is what we need to do to meet the dramatically rising immediate food assistance needs. Greatly increased resources will be needed, for example to help the World Food Programme deal with the

double challenge of rising needs and rapidly rising costs of meeting those needs. But there are also other steps which are not financial, for example ensuring that humanitarian food purchases are exempt from export restrictions or taxes which have been imposed by some countries. I appeal to all countries concerned to take this step immediately, to help ensure food assistance can reach those in need quickly and at the least available cost.

I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks the set of humanitarian challenges arising from the humanitarian implications of climate change: rising sea levels could impact one tenth of the world's population who live in low lying coastal areas, nearly 634 million people; the increased incidence of climatic extremes such as storms, floods and drought are negatively affecting the livelihoods of millions; changing disease patterns caused by increased flooding could lead to higher rates of water borne diseases, while rising temperatures are increasing the likelihood and range of malaria epidemics in Africa. Climatic extremes may exacerbate struggles for the control of limited resources, which could in turn lead to more intense conflicts and population displacement. Climate refugees may become a common phenomenon in a few years time.

We need a stronger understanding of all these impacts of climate change, particularly on vulnerable societies. But it is quite clear already that addressing these issues will require, at the national level, stronger disaster preparedness and response measures. I hope that the upcoming COP- 14 Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Poznan in December 2008 will mark a key milestone event not only towards advancing climate change negotiations but also towards promoting synergies between the humanitarian and climate change communities. In this context, strengthening

disaster risk reduction and implementing the Hyogo Framework for Action have to be key policy guidance frameworks for us all.

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EMERGING HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES: HOW WE WORK

As I have suggested, this increasingly complex and dangerous world is leading to an alarming increase in the number of people requiring emergency humanitarian assistance. Within the international humanitarian community, we have been working for some time to improve our ability to address mounting and inter-dependent needs. In 2005 we collectively launched a programme for improving humanitarian response by strengthening preparedness, improving country-level leadership and reinforcing accountability. Three years on, we have made considerable progress.

We are for example becoming stronger in addressing response gaps through the cluster approach at the national and global levels. The cluster approach designates thematic leads for areas that previously had no clear lead organisation. A recently conducted independent evaluation indicated that the designation of global and field level lead agencies had indeed successfully addressed gaps and improved strategic planning and preparedness at the field level. During the last year the cluster approach has been implemented in 14 new countries and has improved coordination and effectiveness in various kinds of emergencies. Clusters are a better way not only of organizing international response in each key sector but also in particular of working with national governments, who remain the first and most important responders to any crisis, and whose efforts the international community is there to support.

Meanwhile, effective programming can only be achieved with flexible and equitable humanitarian financing. We need to increase the volume of humanitarian funds and ensure the disbursement of these funds in a better prioritized and targeted manner, based on humanitarian needs. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Member States again for the unprecedented support which the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) has received. We are still hoping that Member State generosity - and we have had over 90 member State donors - will enable us to achieve the CERF target of 450 million US dollars in 2008. I am also glad that the recently conducted independent CERF evaluation has indicated that the Fund has made considerable progress towards meeting its principal objective of improving the timeliness of response to sudden-onset emergencies. But it has also highlighted challenges which face the Fund. I hope you give the evaluation findings the careful consideration they deserve. We look forward to your support in adopting the necessary recommendations in due course, to improve the functioning and effectiveness of this key humanitarian financing tool.

At the country level, the establishment of increasing numbers of pooled funds, Common Humanitarian and Emergency Response Funds, has allowed better channelling of funds towards neglected sectors in various emergencies. We are currently rolling out two additional Common Humanitarian Funds in Ethiopia and Central African Republic. But we recognise that prioritisation in allocation of resources still requires further work. We are currently undertaking training, and developing enhanced guidelines on these issues, all hopefully leading towards a better targeted approach.

These efforts are complemented by the initiative undertaken by OCHA – mandated by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee - to support the development of a global

needs assessment framework. This will allow humanitarian actors to determine humanitarian needs and priorities better by working together.

THE WAY FORWARD

The need to continue to build a response system capable of addressing the needs of extra millions in need of help is pressing. This has to be a joint endeavour between governments and humanitarian organizations.

That is why national and local capacity building, early warning, contingency planning and preparedness remain key priorities. To address all the concerns I have outlined in a timely and adequate measure we must act together, utilizing all resources at our disposal. Only a concerted approach will enable us in the future to alleviate human suffering, and save lives, as we must.

Mr. Vice-President,

humanitarian action is its own driver because of the moral imperative we can all see. It must not and does not conceal any political or other agenda. That is why defence of humanitarian space and humanitarian principles is fundamental. So I return to where I started. Humanitarian workers are brave individuals who risk their lives to save others; denial of access, and above all deliberate attacks and violence against them are particularly abhorrent. I therefore urge Member States, who are primarily responsible, as host governments, for the safety and security of humanitarian personnel on their territories, to do more and to make sure they pursue and prosecute perpetrators of violence against aid workers and their activities and programmes.

Mr. Vice President

Our presence here today is an affirmation of the importance of humanitarian assistance in today's world. It is also a confirmation that humanitarian action and response are matters of concern for all of us. We all share this responsibility. That is why I hope that the work of ECOSOC and the General Assembly will foster not just increased policy coherence and operational progress but also greater understanding and commitment to the principles and practice of humanitarian work. I hope your discussions and deliberations will be driven by the operational and structural concerns that challenge this work, and your conclusions will help to promote humanitarian relief on the ground, where it counts most, for those who need it most.

Thank you.