

**Opening remarks of Under-Secretary-General John Holmes
First Regional Conference on International Humanitarian Partnerships**

Mexico City, Mexico, 10 September 2008

Excellencies,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

First of all, let me join Her Excellency Foreign Secretary Patricia Espinosa and the Government of Canada in welcoming you to this Regional Conference on International Partnerships which for the first time tries to bring around this table all the countries in Central and Latin America, as well as the Caribbean. As we all know and as we have already heard, this is a highly disaster-prone region – it was the second worst affected in the world in 2007. The fact that we are so strongly supporting this meeting is a symbol of the increasing importance we as OCHA attach to the region, and our commitment to helping build local capacity and improving our relationships with the governments.

We meet at a tragic time for the region, following the huge devastation and the loss of life caused by successive storms and hurricanes Fay, Gustav, Hannah and Ike. Let me take this opportunity to express my and OCHA's sympathy and solidarity with the victims of these disasters. Humanitarian response to the storms is continuing and increasing. For Haiti, the worst affected country, we are launching a Flash Appeal this week. We will also be releasing funds from the CERF for Haiti and Cuba and possibly elsewhere. UNDAC teams have been mobilized for Haiti and Turks and Caicos, and key agencies including WFP, UNICEF, PAHO, the Red Cross and NGOs, are working hard to scale up their efforts and their capacity. Unfortunately this is happening when we are only half way through the hurricane season, and what we have seen already are further very stark reminders of the hazards we are facing both here in Latin America and worldwide from natural disasters and the effects of climate change. And we now of course have to face also the food crisis, affecting particularly Central America, and compounding the needs of the region's most vulnerable communities.

Importance of disaster response

Given the impact of global warming and challenges like the food crisis, effective disaster preparedness and response will be more important in the coming years and decades than at any time in human history. Over the past 30 years, disasters have already affected five times more people than they did in the previous generation. These trends are very clear and unlikely to change in foreseeable future. If we are going to tackle these successfully, we can only do so through strengthening our cooperation and partnerships – with governments, agencies, Red Cross, NGOs, and all relevant stakeholders. The United Nations has decades of experience in disaster response around the world, in earthquakes, floods, droughts, volcanoes and other calamities. The many parts of the UN system, many of them with us here in this room, possess as a result a vast range of expertise, from logistics to coordination, from drilling wells to setting up and managing camps for survivors. The United Nations can also exercise unique authority in

public advocacy, whether for disaster preparedness and risk reduction, or response. And of course in addition to aiding governments before or at the onset of disaster, the United Nations, as part of the international humanitarian response mechanism, can also give support in the vital process of recovery and rehabilitation.

Key role of Governments

But let me emphasize that the expertise and aid brought by the UN system, by non-governmental organizations, and by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are all only there in support of the governments concerned, who have the primary responsibility and are always the prime responders. Local, regional and national authorities, together with the local stakeholders on the ground, are naturally and rightly in the front line when a crisis happens. The UN and the international humanitarian system are only there to reinforce and support their efforts. That is why we ourselves are putting increased emphasis on the role of national governments, and the need to cooperate ever more closely with them, before and after crises.

Disaster Risk Reduction

Rapid and effective response after the event is vital and a moral imperative. But as climate change exacerbates our collective vulnerability to disasters, we need above all to act quickly to protect ourselves from natural hazards before they happen and to mitigate their effects. We cannot stop the earthquakes, tsunamis or hurricanes. But natural hazards need not lead automatically to human catastrophes. Countries and regions, towns and villages, must redouble their efforts to invest in simple, life-saving measures that can reduce their vulnerability to disasters and a changing climate. These include investments in better building codes, relocation of populations away from flood-prone areas, reforestation, early warning, contingency planning etc. We have much to learn from each other from our respective decades of disaster experience. And since the poorest countries and communities are the most vulnerable, that is where we need to start. We need to work together – we have no time to waste. I have no doubt that investment in disaster risk reduction is one of the best investments governments can make – and we have initiated a comprehensive study, along with the World Bank, to provide the solid economic evidence for this.

Objectives of the meeting

For all these reasons this conference is extremely well timed. It covers a broad area of topics, from international support to country-level response, to regional and sub-regional disaster management mechanisms, to civil-military coordination, to capacity building on disaster preparedness. Most of you around the room have been exposed to each and every aspect of disaster response. Undoubtedly some of you have better knowledge in some areas than others. I would encourage you to share this knowledge in the following two days, in the spirit of south-south cooperation and of building our mutual capacity to help each other in the most effective way. For our part we will want to explain further recent changes in humanitarian response – not least in sectoral organization and accountability – the so called cluster approach – and in financing - CERF and other pooled funds – and partnership. And I hope this Conference will be the beginning of a continuing dialogue that will not only span the length and breadth of the

continent in improving response to natural disasters in the future, but also create conditions where the knowledge base of Latin America and the Caribbean can be “exported” on a national or regional level to help alleviate the suffering of others across the world, whether they are suffering from natural disasters or the result of conflict.

I say all this because international solidarity is the key to all our efforts – which is why I also take this opportunity to appeal to all of you in this region to regard yourselves not only as potential recipients of international assistance but also as important contributors to the system and significant potential donors. The burden of international humanitarian assistance needs to be shared as widely as possible and I hope you will be able to increase your own contributions to multilateral aid relief, including to CERF which has proven itself a successful innovation in providing rapid and equitable funding for all kinds of disasters across the world, and is also designed to be a fund from all for all.

I am only able to be present for part of today, but I look forward to hearing your conclusions and recommendations, and hope it is only the start of a process, where this meeting will be followed up by others in the region in the future.

Thank you.