

**Opening Statement of John Holmes
Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator**

**Afghanistan Humanitarian Action Plan Launch
3 February 2009
Geneva**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to all of you gathered here today for the launch of the Afghanistan Humanitarian Action Plan for 2009. I'd like to extend a particularly warm welcome to my fellow speakers, Mr. Nesar Popal, Advisor to the Presidency, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and Bo Asplund, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Afghanistan.

We are here to ask for a large-scale and generous international response to the serious and deteriorating humanitarian situation faced by the civilian population in Afghanistan, most of whom already suffer from chronic poverty, but whose lives have also been severely impacted by decades of conflict as well as by recurrent natural disasters in a highly disaster-prone country.

Over the past eight years, Afghanistan has made significant progress in many areas including health and education. However, due to the escalating armed conflict and severe drought, many of these gains are now at risk of being reversed.

In 2008, at a time of rising global food prices, Afghanistan harvested only two thirds of its annual food requirements, leaving a serious gap for the Government and the humanitarian agencies to fill.

Meanwhile, the armed conflict in Afghanistan has escalated further, affecting areas that had, until recently, been largely peaceful. According to UN figures, over 2,100 civilians were killed as result of armed conflict in 2008, which represents an increase of about 40% from 2007. Ten of thousands more were affected by the conflict in other ways including injuries, displacement, loss of relatives and friends, loss of assets, weakened livelihoods, and general insecurity. During my mission to Afghanistan in June last year, I was told over and over again by local populations how they feel trapped between the warring parties, with no way out. Clearly, the civilian population must be respected and protected, including from the ongoing hostilities and from forced displacement. And more must be done by all parties to the conflict to ensure full compliance with international humanitarian law and respect for human rights.

Meanwhile, Afghan refugees continue to return home, despite the hardship faced by many communities. Since 2001, over five million Afghan refugees have returned, including 278,000 in 2008. This group is particularly vulnerable, and many returnees need our assistance and support in finding durable solutions as they try to re-establish

their lives and livelihoods in Afghanistan, in a context of a rapidly growing population and severe limits on cultivable, habitable land. I saw this for myself during my visit to eastern Afghanistan last summer, including to an area outside Jalalabad for returnees from camps on the Pakistan border, where the possibilities for agriculture or other livelihoods were extremely limited.

We also need to do more to address the suffering of those internally displaced by conflict and natural disasters. Currently, at least 232,000 people remain in a situation of protracted displacement in Afghanistan.

In this complex situation, humanitarian actors are doing their utmost to respond to the immediate needs, often at great risk. Over the past year there has been a disturbing increase in the targeting of humanitarian operations by insurgents and armed criminal elements. As a result, the number of security incidents involving NGOs in Afghanistan rose by 30% from 2007 to 2008. In the first three quarters of 2008 alone, there were 28 deaths and 72 abductions of NGO staff. UN agencies have also suffered, though less so. Insecurity reduces humanitarian access, and creates additional risks for humanitarian staff as well as beneficiaries of assistance. Furthermore, it drives up the costs of operating in Afghanistan, as reflected in the projects of the HAP.

This brings me to the Humanitarian Action Plan, the importance of which I believe is hard to overstate.

In close consultation with the Government, some 47 aid organizations, including UN agencies and NGOs have worked together on this Humanitarian Action Plan that we present to you today. The Plan, which requests a total of US \$604 million, offers concrete help to the people in need. It includes: first and foremost food assistance for 8.7 million people affected by high food prices and drought; agricultural assistance for 290,000 vulnerable farming families; it also includes targeted support in areas such as health; water, sanitation and hygiene as well as education. Overall, it aims to improve resilience to natural disasters. Finally, an important key objective of the Plan is protection, which translates into monitoring and advocacy for the protection of civilians and multi-sectoral programming to address specific risks faced by civilians, particularly increased action to reduce and remove the risk of mines. It also embraces international organizations requirements uncovered following the July 2008 joint food appeal for \$404 million, which was only around 50% funded. The Humanitarian Coordinator, Bo Asplund, will provide more details.

We recognize that this Plan is an imperfect document, above all because limited access prevents humanitarian actors from gathering all the information necessary to paint a complete picture of the scope and nature of the humanitarian situation, but also because we have not previously had the resources to synthesize and analyze the available information. However, the finalization of the Humanitarian Action Plan is a crucial milestone. For the first time since 2002, humanitarian actors in Afghanistan have come together to develop a coherent and prioritized plan to tackle the humanitarian situation in the country. The NGO participation – a total of 39 NGOs have submitted projects that

were selected – is particularly encouraging. I should note that the HAP is a living document. Its portfolio of projects and funding requirements is, for example, likely to undergo some adjustments in the coming weeks, in areas such as refugees/IDPs and staff safety and security.

Overall, I believe we are gradually putting ourselves in a position to perform consistently better on the coordination front. We are, for example, in the process of establishing an OCHA office in Afghanistan, and are increasingly well placed to assist the implementation of the HAP, through investment in humanitarian coordination, information management and civil-military coordination capacity in support of the humanitarian community. OCHA will also work to preserve and promote the fundamental principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, in a difficult context where the lines between military and civilian actors are too often blurred, and to improve access wherever possible through contacts with all relevant actors on the ground.

We now count on your generosity to turn this Humanitarian Action Plan for Afghanistan into reality, for the benefit of the Afghan people. Thank you very much in advance for your support.