

**Speech by Sir John Holmes
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to the UK Parliament lunchtime event
“The Humanitarian Implications of Climate Change”
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I am delighted to be with you today, early in what the United Nations Secretary General has described as “the year of climate change”, as we move towards the crucial deadline at Copenhagen at the end of the year.

I think that it is particularly good that this event focuses on the humanitarian implications of climate change, which I fear are too often forgotten as we understandably focus on the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and the question of how to adapt tends to be ignored. Climate change is not just an environmental question. What we have learned from the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report, and from our own experience on the ground, is that the impact of climate change is increasingly central to the global economic and security agenda.

As the effects become felt, we need to face up to the fact that climate change is becoming a major driver of humanitarian need, and disasters. It is also likely to become a huge factor in future forced displacement. The point is that climate change is not just a future threat. It is an actual danger to millions of people, including many of the most vulnerable groups in the world. And this is bound to get worse.

Climate change is already increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme natural hazard events, particularly floods, storms, and droughts. And where these hazard events are allowed to become disasters by our action or lack of it, over the past decade, on average they are costing more lives and displacing more people, year on year.

The number of disasters recorded each year has doubled from 200 twenty years ago to 400 in the past two decades. Better reporting may have something to do with this. But today three quarters of all disasters are now climate related, compared with half a decade ago. Another example: in 2008 the UN humanitarian system issued 10 flash appeals. Every one of these was in response to a disaster resulting from extreme weather. In 2007, 14 out of 15 flash appeals were from were extreme weather disasters. Now, while we can't attribute any specific event directly to climate change, last year, floods and storms affected more than 65 million people worldwide. That is equivalent to the entire population of the UK, or one percent of the world's population. In just one year.

All the scientific evidence suggests this trend will continue and accelerate, whatever happens in Copenhagen. The challenge of addressing climate change is further complicated by its interaction with other global trends, such population growth and urbanisation, which are increasing risks to vulnerable populations. It also means entry and exit strategies for humanitarian assistance are becoming less and less clear as creeping changes in water and food availability create more ‘slow onset’ crises.

Defining humanitarian action by reference to trigger events such as natural disasters or conflicts, as we have done for so long, is less and less relevant in comparison with chronic

humanitarian need in areas where drought, flooding, and sea level rise become the norm. In other words, climate change threatens to overwhelm the current capacity of the humanitarian system to respond effectively and to impose new models of prevention, preparedness and response. I will come back to this in a moment.

But it is much more than this. Climate change is also redrawing the world maps of population, wealth and resources and changing where and how people are able to live their lives. Sea level rise, the increasing climate-related disasters, and the more insidious impacts on water availability and agricultural production are already making some places uninhabitable.

Let me give you just three examples:

For many small island states, sea level rise means that people's lives and homes are increasingly vulnerable to the high tides and storm surges that go with them. Water supplies and agricultural production are threatened by changes in rainfall patterns and the intrusion of salt water. Kiribati in the Pacific is following in the steps of the Maldives by preparing already for relocation for its people on a permanent basis as the rising sea level threatens to submerge it. The permanent re-location of 2,500 inhabitants of the Carteret and Mortlock Islands of Papua New Guinea is already underway.

My second example, in Bangladesh, sea level rise of half a metre over the last 100 years has already eroded hundreds of square kilometres of land from islands in the Ganges delta. Now studies suggest that the number of people displaced by this process is in the order of tens of thousands a year. If we get further significant rises in the sea level, which the scientists tell us are virtually inevitable, the entire coastal area will be inundated, resulting in massive human displacement – tens of millions of people, not tens of thousands, as well as billions of dollars of losses in GDP, and huge reductions in livelihood possibilities for those people that stay.

Third, in the Horn of Africa, the ongoing and increasing drought is putting huge pressure on the key resources of water and pasture. The lives and livelihoods of pastoralist communities are increasingly vulnerable and fragile. On present trends, the area of Eastern Africa affected by drought is expected to double by the end of this century. Periods of drought are expected to increase in length, making recovery more difficult. One effect of this is that people will move.

And although the effects of climate change can be felt by everyone in the world, it is inevitably the poorest and most vulnerable communities who will be worse off. Quite simply, they have the least resources to adapt and in many cases may be the least informed about what is happening to them.

In some African countries, for example, agricultural production fed by rainfall- and virtually all of it is- is projected to halve by 2020, with the most populated regions of the Sahel and Southern Africa among the worst affected. 93 percent of farmed land in sub-Saharan Africa is rain fed. In Nigeria, 1,350 square miles of land turns to desert each year and all of the resulting disruption is uprooting farmers and herdsman and causing internal migration towards coastal areas. The same process is happening across West Africa.

In the world's rapidly growing cities and the so called mega-cities, , many of which are near the coast in flood prone areas with uncontrolled urban growth, the poorest

communities are living in the most vulnerable and flood-prone – areas. That means the risks of living in mega-disasters are growing with these burgeoning populations.

Climate change is increasing the stress on marine fish stocks to the detriment of subsistence and small-scale fishing communities, never mind the large scale producers.

Reduced agricultural productivity will automatically result in reduced food availability and increase food insecurity, especially in the context of higher demand for food and food price volatility, which led to last year's food crisis. And it is important to remind ourselves that the fundamentals of that crisis have not gone away, even if the media has shifted its attention to the economic and financial crisis, away from food.

The underlying issue here is that continuing global population growth means that we have to increase food production by at least 50% by 2050, just to keep pace with the extra mouths, never mind the demand for better diets. How are we going to do this, with the supply of arable land and water is unlikely to grow, and indeed much more likely to shrink under the impact of climate change?

It is the availability of water which is the key variable. Two point four billion people in South Asia are predicted to be living in regions of high water-stress in the next fifty years. South Asia currently supports a quarter of the world population, with just one twentieth of the world's annual renewable water resources. About half a billion people – half of the world's poor – eke out a living using local land and water resources.

And reflect on this possibility: By 2035, there is a high chance that, under the influence of climate change, the glaciers that feed the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra will have disappeared altogether. The flow of those rivers will become seasonal, bringing massive changes in the capacity of the land to support such an enormous population.

The net result could be human displacement on an almost unimaginable scale. And flows of migrants on such a scale will quickly overwhelm the capacity of state authorities, and the international community, to respond, which is why people speak of the threat of climate change to global stability and security. The impact of changes in water availability, food security, the prevalence of disease, coastal boundaries, and mass movement of people is bound to aggravate existing tensions and generate new conflicts.

Even without climate change, as the global population continues to rise, and the demand for resources continues to grow, the potential for conflicts over natural resources to intensify in the coming decades is very high. Add climate change, and the resulting deprivation and displacement found will act as a multiplier and extra trigger for such conflict.

Fortunately, mankind is good at adapting to new situations as it has done throughout history. The bad news is that these developments may happen at an unprecedented and unanticipated speed. Unless we act comprehensively and quickly, they will overwhelm us, and the first to suffer will be the poorest and most vulnerable, who have done the least to bring them about.

That is a crude diagnosis. So what do we need to do? First of all, of course, we do need a strong, binding global agreement in Copenhagen that can start to stop runaway climate change. This is not a luxury, but an absolute necessity to save the planet. Concerns over the

global economy must not derail governments from tackling the longer-term existential crisis of global warming.

But the focus on mitigation must not lead us to neglect the necessary adaptation to the effects of climate change, which, as I hope I have made clear, are, and will be impacting on our world, however successful the negotiators may be in Copenhagen.

For this crucial task of adaptation, I see three particular challenges from a specifically humanitarian perspective.

Firstly, we need to reduce and manage risk coming from extreme weather events. Secondly, we need to ensure that the successor to the Kyoto Protocol strengthens existing systems for disaster reduction and management, rather than undermining them. Thirdly, we need to overcome the traditional divide between the humanitarian and development communities, and develop what we may call a new business model for tackling these issues. Let me take these in turn.

Reducing risk and managing extreme events: Here the good news is that the Bali Action Plan, correctly recognised that disaster risk reduction, risk management and risk transfer strategies are crucially important components of adaptation to climate change.

Disaster risk reduction and risk management are our first line of defence against the impacts of climate change. They will be particularly important in the short term, to avoid massive increases in humanitarian need which we are unable to deal with while we build capacity to implement longer term adaptation strategies.

In our favour, we already have an internationally agreed agenda for reducing disaster risks and disaster losses called the Hyogo Framework for Action, agreed in 2005. It provides clear ways of integrating risk considerations into sustainable development, mechanisms and capacities at all levels in order to build systematic resilience to extreme weather events. But while progress has been made, the magnitude of resources available for disaster risk reduction falls well short of what is required.

But even meeting our commitments under the Hyogo Framework will not be enough because of the new challenges arising from climate change, particularly those relating to displacement and migration.

We also need to look at new ways to share risk. In low income countries, only 4 percent of weather-related losses are currently covered by some kind of insurance. We need to keep on working together to investigate and develop innovative mechanisms for protecting people through collective kind of protection systems such as catastrophe pools, microfinance, social funds and micro-insurance.

The second challenge we face is to ensure that a new global climate change agreement strengthens, rather than compromises, existing systems and mechanisms. We do have established institutional mechanisms and frameworks, at national, regional and international levels.

We have the HFA, we have the cluster approach, which has enhanced system-wide preparedness and capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies. We also have funding

mechanisms, such as the Central Emergency Response Fund, which provides more timely and predictable funding for humanitarian assistance, and much improved partnership between UN other partners such as NGOs. These are the basis for the kind of fast-track action we need.

And we must make sure environmental negotiators and disaster managers – mitigators and adapters, if I can put it that way – are not operating in separate silos, nationally or internationally, but are working closely together at all levels. Copenhagen has to get adaptation, as well as mitigation, right.

The third challenge is to ensure that we can transcend the traditional divide between humanitarian and development action. On the humanitarian side, we have to make sure not only that we are prepared and able to come to the aid of those stuck by extreme weather events, but we also can play a major role in helping to reduce the vulnerability of communities to future disasters.

On the development side, strategies for poverty alleviation and have to incorporate concrete actions to reduce the vulnerability of the poorest people and improve their capacity to adapt to climate change. This means incorporating activities that reduce disaster risks and help communities cope with the longer term impacts of climate change, and their effect on water availability and agriculture.

If we only respond to individual events, disasters will progressively erode the livelihoods of the poor. It will leave them more vulnerable and widen the gap between those who can afford to reduce their disaster risk, and those who cannot. That would not be sensible or acceptable.

We therefore need a new strategic dialogue to reduce the current institutional divisions between relief and development action and funding. We also need a new business model on the humanitarian side, that focuses more on prevention and preparedness, and building capacity to do that so we can do less on the international response side. We will need a new business model that can deliver more international and national capacity, and which moves away from the idea that the internal community will ride across the horizon after an event.

Examples such as that of DfID and IFRC putting aside a percentage of their response funding- up to 20%- to support risk reduction will need to be much more widely followed. We also will need new kinds of action, and to draw on the talents and resources of the private sector.

We also need to start looking intensively into how we handle forced displacement and migration resulting from climate change, whether within countries or across international borders. In other words, what legal and institutional frameworks do we need to deal with this massive future challenge, which is not really covered by existing refugee conventions or by UNHCR? I don't have all the answers but we need to work them out before this out before these tragedies hit us with their full force.

To sum up...

We are already seeing the impacts of climate change on humanitarian caseloads. Increasing floods, storms and droughts are killing and displacing more people year on year. It threatens to overwhelm the capacity of the humanitarian system to respond to them.

But adaptation to climate change is not only a challenge for the humanitarian community, but for the whole international community. Unless we act immediately and with total commitment, it will derail development and social progress and threaten global security. Those that suffer most as a result will be the poorest and most vulnerable.

It is imperative that a strong agreement is reached in Copenhagen. It is imperative that that agreement uses humanitarian expertise and strengthens existing mechanisms for risk reduction, risk management and risk transfer globally. And it is imperative that we find new ways of sharing risk, and working together across the humanitarian-development divide.

If those that are most vulnerable are forced to struggle alone in the face of climate change, any Copenhagen agreement will fail. It will fail because it will be unjust and inequitable; and because if climate change is allowed to become a source of global instability and strife, mitigation promises will be forgotten.

The stakes are high and the time is short. We have to start now.