

**Briefing to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Sudan
Statement by John Holmes
Under-Secretary General and Emergency Relief Coordinator**

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Mr. President,

Thank you for this opportunity to brief the Council on the humanitarian situation in northern Sudan.

Five years ago next week, my predecessor told the Council that more than one million people in Darfur faced a humanitarian emergency. Relief operations there grew after that to become the largest operation in the world. Today, after five long years, not least for the people of Sudan, it is disheartening that we are now scrambling to find ways to cover the life-sustaining needs for more than one million people due to the removal of 16 non-governmental organizations, all of whom are critical to that humanitarian operation, and as partners to the United Nations.

Following the decision to remove these NGOs, the United Nations and the Government of Sudan agreed to a joint assessment of the gaps left and the capacity to fill them in four critical sectors: food, water and sanitation, health and nutrition, and shelter, through visits to a number of areas in Darfur.

This joint assessment, agreed with the Government and released earlier this week, reveals both the extent of the gaps and the lack of capacity on the ground to cover them properly, even in the short term, despite the best efforts of those remaining in Darfur, including those of the Government's own line ministries. In short, while these efforts can plug some of the biggest holes for the next few weeks, the cumulative effects over time of the removal of such a large amount of humanitarian capacity significantly increase the risks to well over a million people. This is why we have been urging that the Government's decision should be reversed.

Mr. President,

Let me briefly summarise the findings of the joint assessment. In the food aid sector, thanks to the rapid response by the World Food Programme, 1.1 million people are receiving rations for March and April via an ad hoc one-off distribution by local food committees. However, this emergency distribution will not reach all beneficiaries, and specialized monitoring capacity to ensure the most vulnerable do not fall through the cracks has been lost. As the 'hunger gap' quickly approaches, when food is in any case in shorter supply than usual, the World Food Programme needs partners with the experience and expertise to assume the many responsibilities needed to ensure food aid is delivered successfully and sustainably.

In the case of water, the assessment showed that the emergency resources currently deployed by the Government's water department, UNICEF, and national NGOs to supply more than 800,000 people with drinkable water may become increasingly ineffective within four weeks due to the loss of critical systems that ensured the consistent provision of mechanics, spare parts, transport, and fuel. These kinds of networks, specialized knowledge and expertise cannot be

replaced or rebuilt quickly. The Government this week committed themselves to sustain their effort until the end of the year. This is welcome.

The departure of the NGOs has left a particularly serious gap in sanitation services in some areas. Without regular maintenance, latrines will overflow, threatening the spread of diseases like cholera. The rainy season starting in May is likely to make the situation significantly worse. In Zam Zam, in North Darfur, where nearly 40,000 men, women, and children have arrived in recent weeks seeking refuge from violence in South Darfur, we need to build new sanitation systems.

In the health sector, we have lost significant capacity to monitor and mitigate disease outbreaks, to treat diseases, and to prevent loss of life, particularly in light of the current outbreak of meningitis across the region. This loss will be compounded further during the rainy season, when water borne diseases increase. The departure of the NGOs has left 650,000 people with lower levels of access to basic health services. Rural areas will most likely be hardest hit, where the expelled NGOs operated a number of mobile clinics. The Sudanese Ministry of Health, the World Health Organization, and others are responding as best they can. The sustainability of this response is in question, but again it is welcome that the Government has committed to providing salaries, staff and supplies until the end of the year.

For shelter and other critical non-food items, the UN Joint Logistics Centre lost its primary implementing partner in Care International, and therefore the ability to ensure nearly 700,000 people are provided with critical materials necessary to protect families ahead of the rainy season. The Government should allow UNJLC access to its own supplies to find emergency means to deliver this shelter assistance, not least to new arrivals in the camps.

Another critical area of concern is finance. Pledges by the federal government to provide funding until the end of the year in health, water and sanitation are welcome. They need to be quickly implemented to allay state-level concerns over how to continue the response beyond next month. UN agencies and remaining NGOs have in many cases already been approached to pay for a substantial part of the activities, in particular the logistical and operational costs of health, nutrition and water programming, such as utilities, maintenance, fuel, and fresh food for patients.

Finally, the assessment also underlines a fundamental concern that the significant managerial and technical expertise lost will be difficult to replace on any short timescale. I cannot stress enough that effective relief assistance depends on such underlying skills in order to be both timely and sustained.

Mr. President,

The joint assessment is only a snapshot and in no way provides a comprehensive picture of the overall humanitarian situation in Darfur. Only four sectors were assessed, and many areas were not visited in the time available, notably key rural and contested areas. It does not cover the vital issue of protection of civilians. The assessment also made several assumptions that are probably too optimistic, including that there would be no new needs, that the conflict would subside, and that regular and reliable access to the population would be possible. As you know, conflict continues in Darfur, with 65,000 people newly displaced so far this year. Bureaucratic

problems and threats to the safety of humanitarian workers persist. And access for the government or organizations seen as close to the government to some camps is problematic.

In any event, not least after the initial brutal treatment of experienced and dedicated staff, we urgently need to re-establish an atmosphere of trust and mutual confidence with the government. This includes the need for a legal and technical framework for humanitarian work in the country that is consistently applied. The United Nations has consistently stressed that existing legal and administrative frameworks, such as the *Joint Communiqué on the facilitation of humanitarian assistance*, provide the means to discuss issues of mutual concern. These frameworks were simply pushed to one side when the government took its decision on the removal of the NGOs. We need to repair and strengthen this broken architecture, and rebuild confidence that the government will actively support the international aid effort.

As part of this, technical agreements between the Government and NGOs, which allow for work and travel permits, should be signed as soon as possible. As of today, only 7% have been approved. Assets seized by the Government should be returned for humanitarian use, as was agreed this week in Khartoum. A Ministry of Labor decree dated 19 March, which demanded that the 16 NGOs pay an additional six months severance pay in addition to normal labor law requirements for, I quote, "their violation of the laws and regulations governing the humanitarian works in Sudan," is particularly troubling. It is also important that the remaining 36 expatriate staff from the 13 international NGOs are allowed to travel when they need to.

Security remains another fundamental concern. Attacks, particularly vehicle hijackings and compound invasions, which in the past seemed to have been about property, in recent months have grown increasingly sinister in nature, highlighted by the kidnapping of five MSF-Belgium staff two weeks ago. Attacks on UNAMID have also increased, including the killing of one peacekeeper and injury of three others in the past two weeks. Continued negative media messages about foreign NGOs and NGO staff create an environment in which this trend might worsen. I urge the government to take active steps, including via the Arabic press, to increase security for all.

Mr. President,

I have dwelt on Darfur because this is the area of most immediate concern, and the subject of the joint assessment. But there are important areas beyond Darfur seriously affected by the Government of Sudan's decision, including the Provisional Areas and eastern Sudan. There too NGOs play a critical role in the provision of life-saving humanitarian, recovery, and development assistance, thereby contributing to much needed stability in areas fraught with distrust and uncertainty for so many years.

The risks of negative consequences of the Government's decision also extend beyond Sudan into the sub-region. In Eastern Chad, for example, over 50 humanitarian aid organizations continue to alleviate the suffering of 250,000 Sudanese refugees and 180,000 IDPs. New population movements across the border from Sudan could exacerbate an already very difficult humanitarian situation.

Mr. President,

Agreement on the joint assessment is a small but welcome step forward. We have with the government a shared commitment to try to plug the most immediate gaps. We have a shared analysis, based on technical data, that we face a major challenge in replacing the capacity which has been removed, and thereby preventing further unnecessary loss of life. The best way forward, in our view, remains to allow the NGOs concerned to resume their activities.

Meanwhile where do we go from here? To summarise, the following steps seem to me indispensable.

First, we must continue to work together to identify, prioritize and fill the most immediately life threatening gaps.

Second, the government should genuinely facilitate the work of the remaining agencies and NGOs, in particular by signing Technical Agreements. As I suggested, the negative media campaign must be stopped, and overall security for all improved.

Third, if the expulsion decision cannot be quickly reversed, the government should facilitate an orderly departure and transition for the organization and staff affected, and proper use of their assets, and cooperate with the appeals process.

Fourth, we and the government need to agree rapidly on how to guarantee a genuinely supportive and consistent working environment for humanitarian relief in the future.

Fifth, against that background, and if the expulsion decision cannot be quickly reversed, we can begin to identify where the replacement capacity can come from for the longer term, including the desirability of progressive and agreed building of national capacity.

Sixth, we will need to rework the financing needs for humanitarian assistance in Darfur and elsewhere to reflect the extra costs of filling the gaps, and to fund new actors on a sustainable basis. We will look to the wider donor community for help with this if the conditions are satisfactory, but also to the government.

Seventh, we need a systematic process of assessment and monitoring to ensure that life-threatening developments are identified and dealt with.

Mr. President,

The humanitarian imperative poses a dilemma for us here. Whatever our sense of outrage at the government's decision to remove, in such a fashion, organizations whose reputation and expertise have been built over years of dedicated service in humanitarian crises around the world, we must do all we can to prevent extra suffering for those in need as a result of this decision. We will do our best to work with the government to bring this about in ways consistent with humanitarian principles, and with our responsibility for the safety, and ability to work effectively, of humanitarian staff. I urge the Government of Sudan to think again about its decision, not least bearing in mind its obligations to the well-being and protection of its own citizens, and meanwhile to work with us in the same spirit. I hope the Council and the international community more widely will also continue to offer their support.