

**Keynote Address by Sir John Holmes, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for
Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator
United Nations Association of the UK, 64th Annual Conference
Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh
5 June 2009**

**“Humanitarian challenges in the 21st century: reconciling national
sovereignty with international responsibilities”**

Excellencies, distinguished guests and fellow UN supporters, I am delighted and privileged to be here with you this evening at your 64th annual conference. Let me take this opportunity to thank Lord Hannay of Chiswick, and the Association as a whole, on behalf of the United Nations, for your continued and invaluable support, and for the outstanding initiative and leadership that the organization has shown in the UK in support of the United Nations. The organization’s efforts to build support for the United Nations within the United Kingdom helps to create the kind of stronger UN, better able to meet the challenges of the world today, which we all want to see. The multilateralism the UN incarnates has never been more needed than now. The good news is that this is increasingly recognised, not least by the new US administration. The less good news is the distance that the international community still has to go to turn this renewed goodwill into effective reality.

On the humanitarian side, I believe the UN has a success story to tell, together with the rest of the humanitarian community. Our ability to respond rapidly, effectively and predictably to crises, natural or man made, has improved out of all recognition in the last 20 years. But the challenges I see to humanitarian work in today's world are nevertheless formidable, at a time when needs are still increasing, and may do so more dramatically in the next few years, but when raising more resources to tackle them is obviously difficult in the current economic and financial climate.

I will talk about two sets of problems. First, there have been many advances in support for universal human rights, international humanitarian law, and providing humanitarian assistance based on the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. But there are still many obstacles when it comes to combining such universal norms with the rights and sovereignty of the nation states which remain the essential building blocks of the international community. Second, we face a series of interconnected global trends which could transform the context of humanitarian work beyond recognition and which go well beyond the ability of any state to deal with.

Let me start by looking at the relationship between international humanitarian work and sovereignty concerns. Humanitarian action is in fact much less subject to this sovereignty tension than many other core UN areas, for example peacekeeping or human rights. Nevertheless it does come into play more often than you might imagine or than it should.

The starting point is often the perception in some quarters that humanitarian assistance is not in fact genuinely neutral or independent, but is somehow an excessively Western or Northern affair, which consciously or unconsciously, wittingly or unwittingly, reflects a wider Western or Northern agenda. This perception can take two forms. The first is that there is a hidden political or security motive behind humanitarian activities, and that humanitarian agencies, whether UN or NGOs, are in some way acting at the behest of Western or Northern governments, and cannot therefore be regarded as separate from them. The milder version is that while the intentions of humanitarian organisations may be as impartial and independent as they claim, in practice they cannot help representing and reflecting Western/Northern mindsets, and cultural, social and intellectual values, which they are therefore effectively foisting on unwilling recipient populations.

The first of these suspicions is particularly prevalent among some major non-state actors, militants and fundamentalist groups. It is largely responsible for the sad truth that, in some areas, a UN, NGO or even in some instances even a Red Cross/Red Crescent flag no longer offers protection for those flying it, but instead invites attack.

The second version is more insidious and, no doubt, more widespread, often not openly admitted, but all the more pernicious for that.

How do these suspicions manifest themselves? Let me identify some of the ways.

First, over the issue of access. Access for humanitarians is fundamental. It needs to be, in the by now hallowed expression, full and unimpeded, as well as timely. Even parties to conflict are obliged by international humanitarian law to provide for affected populations under their control and, if they are unwilling and unable to do so, to allow and facilitate the passage of impartial humanitarian aid. If we cannot reach the people we are trying to help, by definition it is almost impossible to give them the help they need. Access can be constrained for many reasons - physical remoteness of affected areas, for example, or the continuation of active hostilities where the risk of being caught in the crossfire is simply too great. But too often it is deliberately restricted or complicated by governments and other actors who do not want international eyes, including humanitarian ones, to see what they are doing, or to poke their noses into sensitive issues such as sexual violence, or who even suspect international humanitarian staff of being spies for Western powers. Think of the more or less complete inability of humanitarians to get into the conflict zone in the latter stages of the Sri Lankan government's battle against the LTTE. Think of the Myanmar government's initial resistance, thankfully overcome after some tough negotiating, to the entry of international humanitarian personnel into the delta area following the devastating passage of cyclone Nargis last year. Think of the Sudanese government's recent expulsion of NGOs, coinciding with the International Criminal Court's indictment of President Bashir, again thankfully at least partially softened following wiser second thoughts about the potential consequences.

Second, in actual violence against humanitarians. 2008 was, statistically and by common consent, the deadliest year yet for humanitarian staff. Afghanistan and Somalia lead the way in the numbers of deaths, kidnappings and attacks, but Sudan and DRC for example are becoming increasingly dangerous too, though in a less deliberately targeted way so far. The trend is

alarming, if not yet universal. It is so far mainly the work of the kind of ideologically driven armed groups I mentioned earlier, who see all foreigners and foreign organisations as equally guilty of unacceptable interventionism. But I fear the possible contagion effect as others watch and see how effectively such violence can restrict access.

Third, in reluctance to allow humanitarians to engage in one of the fundamental pillars of modern humanitarian action, namely the protection of disaster and conflict-affected civilians from violence and other abuses, and the promotion of their rights. Such activities are seen by some as unacceptably political in nature, aimed at changing behavior or even regimes. Or they are seen as culturally interventionist, even neocolonial, for example drawing attention to taboo issues such as domestic or sexual violence, or fostering unacceptable - to some - cultural and social values such as education for girls or women's rights more generally.

Fourth, in resistance to any kind of calls for accountability for violations of international human rights or humanitarian law, which are seen as politically motivated interference and also likely to delay or derail peace, for example by seeking to impose an unattainable and in any case heavily contested form of justice or truth seeking. Reactions to the ICC are only the tip of this particular iceberg. And you do not need to be a fanatical supporter of the ICC to see that one of the greatest threats to sustainable peace in many parts of the world is precisely the habit of impunity.

Fifth, and finally, reticence on the part of some about the concept of the responsibility to protect, a responsibility which is above all that of governments themselves to protect their own citizens, but which also leads to a wider international responsibility, within the framework of the UN Charter, where a government is manifestly failing to protect its own citizens in ways which amount to committing or allowing to be committed war crimes or other grave infringements of international human rights or humanitarian law. I do not propose to go further into this complex debate this evening, which above all must not be reduced to a simplistic question of when and where outside military intervention can be justified. Nor is it by the way a panacea for all the world's complex problems. But sovereignty is undoubtedly at the heart of the debate.

How far are these suspicions of humanitarians justified, either in their severe or their mild versions? I dismiss altogether the virulent suspicion of humanitarians as dancing to someone else's political or security tune. True, we must continually examine our own policies and practices to ensure full adherence to humanitarian principles. However, significant humanitarian organisations, whether from the UN, NGO or Red Cross/Red Crescent worlds, are what they say they are, and do what they say they do, i.e. respond to needs in a manner that is equitable, without discrimination and irrespective of politics of any kind. There are no more fierce defenders of these principles than the humanitarian actors themselves, particularly the ones on whom unreasonable suspicion can often fall, the NGOs.

But the milder version is trickier. Humanitarian assistance has indeed for many years been a Western/Northern dominated affair, as Western economies and activists have been the most visible supporters of humanitarian assistance. No one should feel the need to apologize for that. There is certainly a risk of seeming arrogant, all too ready to tell local governments what to do and how to do it in their own countries, or seeming to assume that the values of the

humanitarian organisations are the only ones which are right or even possible. No doubt that risk is not always successfully avoided. We need to be ready to say *mea culpa* in such cases and do all we can to prevent such risks. I will come to this in a moment. Nevertheless, certainly in my experience, humanitarian workers, wherever they are from, are nowadays extremely aware of the need not to interfere inappropriately, not to impose alien cultural values or habits, to respect local culture, and not to try to dominate local actors. And those who propagate this kind of suspicion of humanitarians most are often those who have the most obvious political reasons to do so to justify their own behavior, or in some cases those who have the most to hide.

Nevertheless, the perceptions can be there and can be genuinely held, and perceptions, as we all know, create their own reality that we ignore at our peril. What can we do to reduce or fight such perceptions? Let me suggest several ways forward.

First, humanitarian agencies, UN or otherwise, must try even harder than they do now to achieve diversity in their international ranks, and to ensure that national staff, who already make up the vast majority of their employees, are given as much local authority and visibility as possible. Let's promote and support the establishment of the Oxfam Indias, the Care Kenyas, or the MSF Malaysias. Let's more actively seek the creation of strong, professional and independent local NGO partners and their full involvement in our humanitarian response – in Sudan , in Pakistan , Somalia , Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Second, we should put less emphasis on the international fire brigade side of what we do -- even if well-coordinated international responses will always be needed, and maybe more than ever in the next few years -- and focus more on building local, national and regional capacity to respond to local crises and meet local needs. Putting more emphasis on reducing the risks and impacts of disasters before they happen is a natural complement to this.

Third , we must work even harder to broaden the donor base of the international humanitarian effort. The emerging political and economic powers such as China, India, Russia, Brazil, Mexico and Indonesia need to accept more of the responsibilities and costs which go with their growing big international player status. It needs to be clearer that the humanitarian responsibility is indeed shared by the entire international community.

Fourth, we must work much harder to explain the thinking behind, and universal validity of, the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. Respect by state and non-state actors alike for principles such as neutrality and impartiality has been the basis for us to establish acceptance and consent for humanitarian activities in the past and will continue to be so in the 21st century. In particular, we need a more systematic approach to improve the compliance of non-state armed groups with international humanitarian law. This should involve actions ranging from engaging them in dialogue to robust efforts to enforce their compliance, such as targeted sanctions. And such efforts should not be held hostage to the concerns of some states that dialogue and engagement with non-state armed groups confers upon them a recognition that they do not possess or deserve. If we are serious about protecting civilians, ensuring access to those in need and the security of aid workers, we must be able to talk freely to all parties to conflict.

Fifth, we should look at concepts like responsibility to protect in their totality, and with a realistic approach to what is genuinely needed and justifiable, rather than bandying around words like genocide too freely and somehow giving the impression that almost every international crisis can be equated to what happened in Rwanda, and that the international community is therefore in imminent danger almost every week of repeating its mistakes of 1994. Such an approach is not serious and only discredits the important principle that is being defended.

In short we need an approach that shows more respect to those people and societies whom we are trying to help and the countries from which they come, that appears more as help than as interference, and that is a genuinely shared enterprise. We are already heading in this direction. Let us try to increase our speed of travel.

Meanwhile the humanitarian landscape is being shaped in new ways by profound and threatening global challenges: climate change, the recent global food crisis, which has not gone away at all in many poor developing countries, population growth in many poor parts of the world, demographic shifts causing many more people to be live in high risk areas, rapidly growing urbanisation, land, water and energy scarcities, disturbance to key ecosystems, the risks of pandemics, and last but not least in the shorter term, the impact of the current global economic and financial crisis on the poorest and most vulnerable groups in our world.

These challenges pay no attention to traditional notions of national sovereignty. As has been said, the problems arrive without national passports. Why should we think the solutions need them? If ever there were issues which called for more multilateralism, these are they.

Individually these so-called mega trends are likely to drive up humanitarian needs by creating more poverty and vulnerability; greater levels of inequality; higher unemployment; increased frequency and intensity of disasters; new kinds of conflicts; and major weather driven migrations. Combined, they threaten to create chronic vulnerability on a scale we cannot readily imagine now.

At the forefront of these global challenges is inevitably the existential threat of climate change. It is increasingly central to the global economic and security agenda and a major driver of disasters, displacement and new humanitarian needs. Climate change is not a future concern but a current 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 action – they are costing more lives and displacing more people, year after year.

What does this mean for international responsibilities?

First, we need to reduce and manage risk from extreme weather events. Disaster risk reduction and risk management are our first line of defence against the impacts of climate change.

Second, we need to reach out to those negotiating the new global climate change deal to ensure that they do not focus too exclusively on the so-called mitigation agenda, i.e. the vital task of reducing emissions and bringing the causes of climate change under control; but also give sufficient attention to the issue of adaptation to what climate change is doing to our world already, including financial mechanisms which provide the resources to tackle the problems.

Third, we need to decide now how we will handle forced displacement and migration resulting from climate change, whether within countries or across international borders. A recent study commissioned by OCHA and the Norwegian Refugee Council indicates that at least 36 million people were displaced by sudden-onset natural disasters in 2008. Of those, over 20 million were displaced by climate-related disasters. We must work out whether we need new conventions or institutions, and if so which, before this phenomenon hits us with its full force, for example because of catastrophic sea level rise.

I am sure I do not need to remind this audience that unless we act immediately, with total commitment, climate change 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. And it is imperative that that agreement reflects the humanitarian consequences of climate change and strengthens mechanisms for risk reduction, risk management and risk transfer on a global basis.

But climate change is hardly the only global crisis. Two others are having truly global effects—the food crisis and the current economic and financial crisis.

A combination in 2008 of increasing food demands from a growing population, rising oil prices, development of the bio-fuel industry, and extreme weather events in individual parts of the world led to food price spikes and a food security crisis that affected almost all parts of the world. And it is very far from over. While world market prices for basic food staples have decreased from the record highs of 2008, they still remain much higher than they were just a few years ago. And prices in many developing countries remain disastrously high and out of the reach of many. As a result, the need for humanitarian relief linked to food security has not abated. The FAO estimates that over 1 billion people suffer from under-nutrition today.

And the bad news does not stop there. Unfortunately today's deep global economic slowdown is bound to increase further both the incidence and depth of food insecurity and overall humanitarian needs in a large number of countries. The loss of revenue at state and household levels, caused by sharp falls in investments and exports, decreases in international remittances, and steep declines in commodity prices on the world market, is having a very negative impact on the financing and implementation of programs that represent the only real social safety nets in developing countries. As vulnerable populations are pushed deeper into poverty, we will inevitably see more food security, health and education problems.

Looking further ahead, by 2025 the world's population is forecast to reach 8 billion, with all the population growth occurring in less developed regions. This demographic expansion coupled with changing consumption patterns will necessitate a corresponding increase in global food production by an estimated 50 percent.

Agriculture already consumes 70% of the world's fresh water supply. Any increase in food production is bound to involve major rises in water usage and further aggravate water shortages that already affect some 1 billion people. This number was anyway expected to double to 2 billion people by 2025 on present trends. Simultaneously, some predict a 50 percent increase in energy demand by the end of that decade, 83 percent of which would be for fossil fuels.

Furthermore, by 2025, some 5 billion people, about two-thirds of the world's population, are likely to be living in urban or peri-urban settings compared to 3.17 billion in 2005, and exposed to multiple extra risks as well. And many of those people will be young, poorly educated and struggling to find employment. In sub-Saharan Africa, the population will have doubled from its 1998 size, with half of it under 24 years of age.

What does all of this mean for the humanitarian community and international responsibilities? It means that in addition to humanitarian emergencies driven by single events like earthquakes or tsunamis or conflicts, we face a multi-hazard environment where there may be no individual trigger but rather a build up of fundamental and interlocking factors which over time drive major new waves of chronic and acute vulnerability.

The dynamics of emergencies may shift from crisis peaks to constant and long running crises in some parts of the world, with uncertain triggers for international humanitarian response and non-existent exit strategies. Of course chronic need is itself hardly new. It is the likely scale and prevalence which will pose such deep challenges to our current ways of doing business.

We have no chance of tackling these challenges successfully without much greater coherence and coordination within the international community, and a greater degree of consensus on how to solve these intersecting global issues. For example, how do we feed the world's poor and meet growing water and energy needs without wrecking our environment further?

In general I think we are going to need much more than the current \$12 billion per year which represents the world's humanitarian assistance insurance policy, and which looks increasingly good value compared to the average bank bail out or fiscal stimulus package, where only trillions will get the Financial Times headline writer out of bed. But money alone will obviously not be the answer. We have to reshape radically our understanding of humanitarian versus development action to deal with these situations where there are new and additional humanitarian caseloads in supposedly 'developmental' contexts. Who takes responsibility? What capacities are needed? Where will the money come from? We cannot dodge these questions if we want to avoid even worse catastrophes in the future which can easily threaten security and stability in any part of the world.

Part of the answer, and a particular challenge for the humanitarian community, is again to favour prevention rather than response, to reduce the vulnerability of communities to future disasters but above all to bolster social protection programmes and safety-nets in developing

countries. In other words all our strategies, whether developmental or humanitarian, must be aimed at favouring resilience to the multiple threats which loom.

The good news is that mankind is good at adapting to new situations as it has done throughout history. There is no call to sink into unremitting gloom, even if I have been painting a rather bleak picture. The bad news is that these developments may be happening at an unprecedented and unanticipated speed, even if the process remains largely invisible for now. The point is that unless we act comprehensively and quickly, these developments may overwhelm us. The first to suffer will be the poorest and most vulnerable, who have done the least to bring about these new threats. But no-one will be immune from the effects in this interdependent world.

Let me sum up. We must respect national rights that make humanitarian assistance possible, but we must also ensure that the international community takes collective responsibility for dealing with the global challenges that affect us all. The principle of sovereignty and state consent remains fundamental to governments' ability to assist their own populations – and our ability to support them in these efforts. However, sovereignty means above all responsibility. And we all have to recognise that exercising that sovereignty and that responsibility means knowing where sovereignty has its limits in tackling problems which respect no boundaries and defy the national capacities of even the largest countries.

Promoting respect for human life and protection of vulnerable people are after all universal concepts, supported by all of the great religious traditions and accepted in all cultures.

That is why I remain fundamentally optimistic that we will find the ways to avert the worst. So I hope I have not depressed you too much - but welcome to my daily world.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you all an enjoyable and successful annual conference.