

## **UNITED NATIONS LAUDS PAKISTANI RELIEF EFFORTS**

(Islamabad/New York, 2 July 2009): “The everyday people of Pakistan are the real heroes of this current crisis in Pakistan,” said Martin Mogwanja, United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for Pakistan. “They are opening the doors of their often modest homes, sharing what they have, no matter how little, no matter how it strains their often modest budgets. True humanitarians, they set an inspiring example of extraordinary generosity for the whole world,” he added, speaking at a press conference in Islamabad today. He noted that he hoped this example is followed by the governments of this world, whose continued urgent support is desperately needed.

These sentiments were endorsed by Dr. Eric Laroche, Assistant Director General of the Health Action in Crises Cluster of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Louis-Georges Arsenault, Director of the Office of Emergency Programmes of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). On mission to Pakistan, Dr. Laroche and Mr. Arsenault underscored their concerns about the situation in Pakistan.

Dr. Laroche noted that the World Health Organization is extremely concerned about the health of the approximately 2 million people displaced in northwest Pakistan, as well as the ability of the healthcare system to keep providing life-saving care given the massive influx of people. Hospitals, basic health units and other facilities are under extreme strain and are struggling to treat people who face multiple health threats, he observed. He delineated the most important threats to people’s health as diarrhoea, acute respiratory infections, measles, surgical emergencies, and mental trauma.

“There are major challenges facing the displaced and those people still caught in the conflict area, for example in the Swat Valley and other conflict zones, where health facilities have been damaged or destroyed,” Dr. Laroche said. “The private sector, which had been providing 60-70% of healthcare in some areas, has totally shut down,” he added. . He particularly noted the need for more drugs and equipment, ambulances for referral and health staff, particularly female workers. Despite these challenges, he noted that more than 30 potential communicable disease outbreaks have been investigated by the disease early warning system led by WHO. All have been quickly controlled by aid agencies working in health.

Mr. Arsenault noted that UNICEF is deeply concerned about the situation of women and children in the current crisis, which is stretching the capacities of government, humanitarian actors and host communities to the limit. More than 60 per cent of those displaced are children under the age of 18, who are in critical need of health and educational services, nutritional support, water and sanitation infrastructure and hygiene education and protection. “Of critical concern is the situation of women and children who have remained behind in areas of conflict. The full extent of their situation is as yet not widely understood – but it is believed that they have been living under intolerable circumstances without proper access to clean, potable water, medical services and food and they are in dire need of urgent humanitarian relief,” Mr. Arsenault said.

On the nutritional well-being of the displaced, Mr. Arsenault noted that “there is good news and there is bad news.” While malnutrition rates among children in north western Pakistan were high even before the conflict, proper management of malnutrition among displaced populations has meant that malnutrition rates have remained below the critical level of 10 per cent. He warned, however, that without sustained support the situation could deteriorate rapidly.

The UNICEF representative also said that basic needs in water and sanitation are being met in camps, but that the situation is critical for the vast majority of IDPs living in host communities, as well as for the host communities themselves. Re-establishing damaged and destroyed water supply schemes and drainage in conflicted affected areas for the eventual return of IDPs to their homes and villages will be a key priority. Looking ahead, he noted that a major challenge for all humanitarian agencies would be the need to support education, a key underpinning for the development of Pakistan, as for any nation.