

**ECOSOC HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS SEGMENT  
OPENING REMARKS  
Monday 20 July 2009, 15:00hrs  
Plenary Hall E-XIX**

**John Holmes  
Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs  
and Emergency Relief Coordinator**

Madame Vice President, Excellencies, distinguished delegates and colleagues,

I am honoured to open the Humanitarian Affairs Segment of the Economic and Social Council in this, my own third ECOSOC as Emergency Relief Coordinator. As in the past, I welcome this opportunity to identify current challenges, take stock of progress and outline some of our priorities for the coming year.

Unfortunately, many of the adverse trends which have plagued the humanitarian community in recent years, particularly the pressure on humanitarian space and principles and the increased severity of natural hazards, show no sign of disappearing. If anything they are intensifying. The Secretary-General's report under consideration reflects that, despite a slight decrease in the incidence of natural hazards in the past year, as part of the inevitable uneven variation from year to year, their severity was still on the rise, causing substantial losses of lives and livelihoods. For example, the Sichuan earthquake in China caused 87,476 deaths and some \$85 billion in losses, while Hurricane Ike in the USA caused economic losses estimated at \$30 billion. And while Asia continues to be the continent most affected by natural hazards, with the highest numbers of disaster related deaths recorded in nine of its countries, hazards have also severely affected other parts of the world. For example in the Horn of Africa, the humanitarian impact of conflict is being dramatically exacerbated by a combination of drought, food crises and population pressures. This is not only leading to the erosion of coping mechanisms of over 19 million people, but also to malnutrition levels which are at or approaching emergency thresholds in several countries of the region.

In 2009, complex emergencies have taken an even heavier toll than in previous years. While long-running and intractable conflicts such as those in Darfur, DRC, the occupied Palestinian territories, and Somalia continue to affect millions, outbreak of conflict in Pakistan, and the end game of the long running conflict in Sri Lanka disrupted the lives of hundreds of thousands more. The humanitarian operation in Darfur - the largest in the world and now in its fifth year - struggles to provide assistance to 4.75 million conflict affected civilians. In Somalia, three and a quarter million people desperately need help, an almost 50% increase from last year, in the most difficult and dangerous circumstances imaginable. An estimated two million have been displaced in Pakistan during the past few months. In Sri Lanka, while the guns have finally and thankfully fallen silent, nearly 300,000 people are in camps with little or no freedom of movement, waiting anxiously for the possibility to return home. The protection of civilians in

these and other conflicts must continue to be a major concern for all of us, primarily for the governments concerned.

Madame Vice President

Let me single out today two sets of issues affecting the provision of humanitarian assistance: chronic problems, and new challenges coming from the combined impact of current global trends.

First of all the chronic problems,

As the international humanitarian community works to help member states meet the life saving needs of communities, our assistance efforts continue to be limited by restrictions on the unhindered access we need to communities in distress, and by violent attacks against our staff. Access issues have of course confronted humanitarian assistance since its early days. No-one challenges the fundamental primacy of national sovereignty. But access for humanitarians poses no challenge to this. On the contrary, since Member States are primarily responsible for the well-being of their citizens, and for the initiation and coordination of humanitarian assistance to populations affected within their borders, calling on the international community for help at a time of need and allowing those concerned free and timely access is precisely an expression of the sovereign responsibility of all governments with the interests of their citizens at heart.

Operationally, access to affected communities can be constrained by multiple factors, including intense military operations, unfavourable seasonal and weather conditions, geographical or infrastructure constraints, and, too often, bureaucracy that either intentionally or accidentally limits the delivery of humanitarian assistance. This is a complicated area, which we can only tackle in partnership. On the bureaucratic side, the more countries put in place in advance of any crisis the administrative and legislative arrangements which help keep humanitarian aid delay-free and untrammelled by unnecessary and unjustified costs and taxes, the better.

Meanwhile I am deeply saddened and increasingly horrified by the rising attacks on humanitarian workers. These are dedicated professionals – the majority of whom are from the communities they are trying to help – giving their energies and their lives to helping others in need, too often they are rewarded only with hostility, suspicion, violence and even murder. Humanitarians have always recognised the difficulties and dangers of what they do - the risk of being caught up in events, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But too much of what we are seeing now is different, as humanitarians are attacked for what they have, as in Darfur or Chad, where banditry is rife and largely unchecked, or even worse for who they are, as in Somalia, Afghanistan and now increasingly Pakistan.

So I ask you to join me in strongly condemning these unacceptable and extremely damaging attacks on humanitarian staff. In 2008, the UN Department for Safety and Security reported a 36% increase in the number of UN personnel killed by malicious acts. NGO casualty rates are, I fear, are even worse. Local staff, who are at the forefront of many humanitarian operations, constitute the majority of victims. An increasing number of violent attacks seem to be motivated by a perceived association between humanitarians and parties to conflict or to political

stabilisation efforts. Humanitarian assistance is and must always be needs-based, impartial and independent. This is what should and must facilitate its acceptance by local communities, by governments and by all concerned, not least armed non-state actors. The latter in particular need to recognise, as some currently do not, that action against humanitarians is the equivalent of attacks on the very communities they claim to represent or to be protecting. For their part host governments have a fundamental responsibility to protect humanitarians working in their countries and must take every possible measure to ensure that humanitarian personnel are safe and allowed to work impartially, without this leading to further restrictions of humanitarians access to communities in need. In this regard alarming practices such as the incitement against humanitarian workers by local media should never be tolerated.

These difficulties for humanitarian assistance are not novel, unfortunately. But they are more and more common and, it would seem, more and more tolerated, even accepted as the norm. They will continue to plague and even at worst prevent life-saving operations, unless there is a sustained effort by all stakeholders to promote, respect and adhere to the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. We desperately need a more open, frank and transparent debate between Member States and actors providing humanitarian assistance on how the principles can be better respected and upheld operationally. And I hope the panel on the issue of principles will prove an important step forward in this area.

Madame Vice-President, Let me look at the emerging problems to humanitarian assistance.

Beyond these problems from the lack of respect for and adherence to the humanitarian principles, and the safety and security of humanitarian workers, the international humanitarian community is facing new threats generated by the combined effects of global mega-trends: climate change, chronic poverty, the food and financial crises, water and energy scarcity, migration, population growth, urbanisation, pandemics. The list is depressingly long. It is increasingly evident that we are witnessing the emergence of large-scale and cyclical humanitarian needs in ways and in areas where humanitarians do not have extensive expertise or experience, such as among the urban poor and the elderly.

The trends I have talked about are exacerbating vulnerability on a massive scale. Since early 2008 an estimated 115 million have joined the ranks of the hungry worldwide. FAO estimates that by the end of 2009 the world's hungry may surpass 1 billion, roughly one sixth of the world's population. Climate change is increasing the severity and incidence of natural hazards and affecting morbidity patterns of diseases such as malaria and dengue fever. Hundreds of millions may be on the move in the next 10 or 20 years, driven by floods or drought or inexorable sea level rise to live elsewhere. And while the effects of climate change are felt globally, the brunt of it is borne by the poorest and most vulnerable – now, not in the distant future; and humans beings, not just polar bears. These trends are challenging traditional notions of humanitarian need, based as they largely are on the existence of triggers such as conflict or sudden natural disasters; these trends will shape humanitarian assistance - and its coordination - in the future.

The Secretary-General's report to the Council outlines the major challenges from this spike in humanitarian needs and the increased complexity in defining entry and exit strategies for

humanitarian actors. He also sets out some opportunities including those from the use of new technologies such as satellite photography and increasingly universal mobile communications, new aid provision strategies and a new and much closer relationship between humanitarian and developmental actors.

We need to adopt novel ways of doing business with better use of new technologies; and more emphasis on sustainable solutions through stronger partnerships with development actors and greater emphasis on action to prevent and mitigate disasters, as well as making sure we have a well organised international fire brigade to respond when necessary. We need to do much more in helping to build stronger national and regional capacities, and pooling of regional resources to enable countries to respond jointly to common concerns, or help each other automatically in time of need. In other words, for all of us, our priority needs to be strengthening preparedness and putting greater emphasis on disaster risk reduction at local, national and regional levels – a new business model for humanitarian policy and relief efforts, as some have put it. The recent Global Platform on disaster risk reduction last month here in Geneva showed how far the most vulnerable countries and communities are beginning to recognise the risks they face, not just to lives and livelihoods from the increased disaster probabilities, but to their development, the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, and even in some cases their very existence. Hence the fundamental importance they attach to effective action to achieve real disaster risk reduction, as part of the vital adaptation to climate change. This is an agenda which must not be marginalised before or at the Copenhagen discussions in December.

Again I look forward to the discussions and recommendations of the panel on these new and developing risks and challenges.

Madame Vice-President,

Humanitarian action today stands at a dangerous crossroads, confronted with rising difficulties of access and insecurity, increasing needs, and global mega-trends which are driving chronic vulnerability on an unprecedented scale.

The humanitarian endeavour is about saving lives, not about helping political, military or stabilisation agendas, whoever's they may be, including even those of the UN itself. This is the message we must all send, not least to those illegal armed groups, which so often seem to doubt it, including through direct contact with them where necessary.

Meanwhile despite the scale of these challenges I am delighted to be able to report that our efforts to strengthen humanitarian assistance, including through enhanced coordination, continue to yield positive results. Humanitarian reform efforts launched in 2006 now constitute the normal framework of our operations. They have led to more equitable, predictable and accountable responses to crises of all kinds, conflicts and natural disasters alike. The cluster approach has for example been implemented in 24 out of 27 countries where the humanitarian situation justifies the presence of a Humanitarian Coordinator, and has contributed to bridging assistance gaps, strengthened humanitarian leadership and improved accountability. Separate steps have also been taken towards strengthening Humanitarian Coordinator leadership, including through improved training and a more professional selection process. We are currently

looking at means of further strengthening our support to them, with a particular focus on preparedness.

In terms of humanitarian partnerships, Humanitarian Country teams bringing together the UN and non-UN actors on a basis of equality and mutual respect are now the norm, and are making an increasing difference to our ability to act together and to avoid gaps and duplication. We are looking forward to the next Global Humanitarian Platform meeting bringing together the Principals of many of the key actors next January. The Inter Agency Standing Committee meanwhile continues to function well in bringing together humanitarian decision makers, and has improved its ability to represent the humanitarian community by bringing round the table extra NGO representatives.

Overall I am confident that as a system we are more than ever before able to respond to the humanitarian challenges we face. But we also know just how much we still have to do to build the capacity we need to address the needs of extra millions who require our help. This has to be a joint effort between governments and humanitarian organizations at the national, regional and international levels. So one of our priorities in the coming months and years will be precisely to strengthen our dialogue with member states and regional organizations. At the same time, the truth is that we can do nothing without the necessary resources, and the humanitarian system, including OCHA itself, depends overwhelmingly on voluntary contributions. Let me therefore urge all donors, potential donors and supporters to ensure that diverse, flexible and multi-year funding is not only maintained, despite the economic and financial crisis, but increased to match what I fear will be the significantly increased needs facing us in the coming years. There are many ways of funding humanitarian need, from core funding for the main agencies and NGOs and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, through bilateral contributions to particular disasters or countries, to pooled funding at the international or national level. But I have no hesitation in saying that there are advantages to using the multilateral appeals system in terms of ensuring not only full accountability but also that your contributions fit into the strategic approach and prioritised projects that the appeals, whether consolidated or flash appeals, represent.

In this context, the Central Emergency Response Fund has a particular role to play in improving reliability and predictability of funding. It has undoubtedly strengthened the humanitarian system's ability to deploy rapidly in response to sudden onset crises and to make sure that resources are more evenly spread, without following either the whims of the media or political distortions in donor responses. Since its inception in 2006, CERF has disbursed more than \$1.2 billion to help humanitarian response in rapid onset and under-funded crises. But it still requires more support, not least to achieve the annual target of 450 million dollars this year, to match the achievement of 2008. So far no less than 107 member states have contributed to CERF, an extraordinary achievement. But I am not satisfied. I want to see all 192 member states contributing, however modestly, to illustrate in the most graphic form possible that humanitarian assistance in general, and the CERF in particular, are universal international responsibilities and concerns.

Madame Vice-President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen, some final thoughts to conclude.

Humanitarian action is its own driver because of the moral imperative we can all see and must never ignore. It should not and does not conceal any political or other agenda. That is why defence of humanitarian space and humanitarian principles is fundamental. So I return to where I started. Humanitarian workers are brave individuals who risk their lives to save others; all attacks and violence against them are abhorrent, but most of all those which are deliberately targeted against them, like the horrific murder of a member of UNHCR's national staff in a Pakistan IDP camp last week, and recent kidnappings in Darfur and Somalia. I urge Member States, who are primarily responsible, as host governments, for the safety and security of humanitarian personnel on their territories, to do more and to make sure they pursue and prosecute perpetrators of violence against aid workers and their activities and programmes. But above all I use this platform to appeal to non-state actors of all kinds and stripes to recognise your obligations to respect international humanitarian law and your responsibility not to harm those who are doing no more than trying to save the lives and preserve the dignity of members of your own communities.

Madame Vice President,

Our presence here today is a re-affirmation of the importance of humanitarian action and a confirmation that humanitarian assistance is a shared priority and responsibility for all of us. It should never be politicized. That is why I hope that the work of ECOSOC and the General Assembly will serve to strengthen not only effectiveness, coordination and operational coherence but also common commitment by all to the principles of humanitarian work. I hope your discussions and deliberations will be driven by these concerns, and that your conclusions will help to promote humanitarian relief where it matters most and for those who need it most – people and communities on the ground.

Thank you