

2020 ECOSOC-Humanitarian Affairs Segment

**Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy
Emergency Relief Coordinator a.i Ramesh Rajasingham – Closing Statement**

11 June 2020

As delivered

Thank you, Ambassador Hilale. As we reach the conclusion of the ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment for 2020, I would like to thank the Chair for his wise leadership throughout the process. I also thank the Chair for your important initiative, supported by many Member States, and your drive in developing the Call to Action to support humanitarian action in responding to the challenges we face with COVID-19 pandemic. The Call to Action underlines the urgency to redouble our efforts to prevent further human suffering and death.

I would like to thank health and humanitarian workers around the world who are working harder, more creatively and making use of technological innovations to stay and deliver, often placing themselves at risk to ensure that existing and additional humanitarian needs are met, despite the pressures and constraints wrought by COVID-19. This indeed is stay and deliver. It has been an honour to take part in this year's ECOSOC HAS, which has had a special focus on the compound effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Two important messages emerged from our discussions:

- 1) COVID-19 is exacerbating pre-existing humanitarian challenges. The pandemic is not only spreading sickness and death; the secondary impacts are also pushing people into poverty and hunger. In some cases, it is reversing decades of development progress. As a result of the pandemic, violence against children and women is growing, with women and girls facing a “dual pandemic” of COVID-19 and gender-based violence during confinement. Food insecurity is increasing, with lockdown measures negatively impacting the production and distribution of food. Access of children to regular vaccination and education is compromised. Humanitarian access is deteriorating with humanitarian and health workers vulnerable to attacks, as well as due to lockdown measures.

- 2) The COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed and amplified existing inequalities. The most vulnerable are disproportionately impacted by this pandemic, just as they are to other humanitarian crisis whether disasters, climate crisis, conflict or health emergencies. Gender inequality in particular, has been exposed. We must act now to avert further devastation for the some of the world's most vulnerable people and most fragile contexts. And these impacts hit those hardest who were already highly vulnerable prior to the pandemic, in particular internally displaced persons.

Several clear recommendations for improving the overall response emerged from all across all the panels and side events.

First, Access is crucial to an effective response. For millions of people in need, their already acute vulnerability is compounded by weak health systems and travel restrictions, which are severely impeding access to lifesaving humanitarian assistance. Countries should facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid and release any restrictions for humanitarian staff and supplies. Just as health workers, humanitarian staff should also be recognised as essential. They also need personal protective equipment, safe facilities, medical and MHPSS.

Second, it is imperative to ensure compliance with and respect for international law, including humanitarian, human rights and refugee law. Respect for humanitarian principles must be central to any humanitarian response. It is only through respect for human rights and international humanitarian law and refugee law that we can protect civilians and affected people and ensure respect and protection for health and humanitarian workers and infrastructure. Where armed conflict continues, COVID-19 makes the protection of civilians more challenging than ever – and our support more important than ever. Bombing and shelling in towns and cities has devastating impacts for civilians. The Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire must be heeded.

Third, community engagement and localization of response must be reinforced. We need to recognize and bring local actors, especially women-led local organisations, into our response, which needs to be flexible and continually adapt to meet local needs. Communities and affected people are crucial in the frontline response and must be heard, empowered and prioritised. The UN must facilitate the participation of local humanitarian non-governmental organizations in decision-making. It is important to recognise the important role of women leaders and organisations as we saw during the segment and we see on the ground every day. In all aspects of humanitarian action, special attention must be paid to include persons with disabilities, older persons, and adolescent girls. They are the furthest left behind.

Fourth, investment in the mitigation, response and prevention of gender-based violence must be a priority. This means we need to increase focus, funding, and programming to ensure victims and survivors are protected, and have access to survivor-centred support. Investment in gender equality, respect for women's rights and promotion of their leadership remain key.

Fifth, Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support (MHPSS) should be an integral part of our humanitarian response. COVID-19 serves to underscore the importance of MHPSS. It will not only reduce needs, but also increases resilience.

Sixth, it is important to continue investing in strengthening health services. There is great concern about the secondary effects of the crisis, especially regarding tuberculosis, HIV and malaria. As the Secretary-General has reminded us, during the Ebola crisis, more people died from secondary effects of measles than from Ebola itself.

Seventh, we need to do more to address the needs of displaced persons. They are particularly exposed and vulnerable to COVID-19 and its knock-on effects reinforcing both the importance of integrating them into COVID-19 prevention and response efforts and the need to advance durable solutions. We also heard a clear and consistent call that in the pursuit of solutions we ensure the participation of IDPs, pay particular attention to women, girls and vulnerable groups, and work across the humanitarian, development, and peace spectrum. Protection must remain central. Rapid climate change also places a premium on integrating displacement issues into disaster risk reduction efforts and the other way around. And we heard strong support for the work of the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, and the extension of its mandate and a call for donors to help fund such an extension.

Eighth, it is clear that anticipatory action has saved lives in this crisis and can save still more. We need to invest in preparedness, and that must be based on strong data, and analysis of where needs will be greatest. It is not too late to act now to mitigate the impacts for many vulnerable people.

Ninth, the importance of collective humanitarian action has never been more evident. I wish to highlight the importance of the work that is done through IASC with humanitarian partners. We also need to work with partners beyond the humanitarian sector, and to work in a coherent manner across the UN, including development and peace.

Tenth, all other humanitarian needs remain as least as urgent as before COVID-19; and we cannot neglect them: Funding to the Global Humanitarian Response Plan is essential, but it cannot be at the expense of funding to other humanitarian operations. Flexible, unconditional funding is key. Investing now will reduce the scale of the problem and avoid a more costly response in years to come.

Finally, and in conclusion, the most important takeaway of this Humanitarian Affairs Segment is that challenges will remain with us, but we need to rise to the occasion, working with Member States, affected people and all of our partners to save lives and prevent suffering.

We now need to act urgently and differently. This moment is an opportunity to do things better, together.

Mr. Chair, thank you very much for the opportunity.

ENDS