

Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Ursula Mueller Member States Briefing on Djibouti

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As delivered

Merci. Bonne après-midi. Good afternoon, distinguished guests,

I am honored to hold this Member States briefing on the situation in Djibouti following my recent mission there.

I recently travelled to Djibouti for a three day visit to witness the impact of the climate crisis and regional instability on the country. The visit also gave me an opportunity to express solidarity with the people of Djibouti.

Despite coping with its own serious challenges, Djibouti is a key partner in humanitarian assistance. It supports the largest humanitarian operation in the world by hosting the Yemen logistics hub. And at the same time, Djibouti provides safe refuge and passage to thousands of refugees and migrants from across the region. I salute the Government's efforts to enable these populations to access the country's health, education and other basic services.

All the while, Djibouti is wrestling with the extreme impacts of climate change. Repeated and regularly occurring droughts are worsening already harsh, dry conditions – most of the land in Djibouti is desert and unsuitable to grow any crops at all.

In addition to the risk of drought, Djibouti is also vulnerable to, rising sea levels, which have risen an average of 20 cm since 1990, exposing Djibouti's coastal zones to debilitating floods. The residents of Djibouti town, which make up 70 per cent of the total population, are among the most vulnerable.

These conditions have resulted in severe water shortages and disease outbreaks, as well as increased the levels of food insecurity and malnutrition. Some 6,000 children under five years old are acutely malnourished in Djibouti. And over 230,000 people – or one in every three people - are uncertain of their next meal.

There are serious health issues resulting from the impact of the severe climate. Disease vectors have become more virulent than they were before. As a consequence, malaria cases are dramatically increasing each year. In 2012, there were just 24 cases; in 2019, the

number of cases peaked to 35,000. There were also 66 cases of measles reported this year. Furthermore, recurring water-borne diseases, like acute watery diarrhea, are endemic and affect the whole population.

In a country where only ten per cent of the land is viable for pasture, the impact of drought is especially crippling to pastoralists. While in Djibouti, I met women from pastoralist families that can no longer keep their livestock alive due to water shortages and lack of pasture. They now rely on limited humanitarian assistance merely to survive as their livelihoods are no longer viable.

The extremely hot and dry climate in Djibouti, I experienced temperatures of over 40 degrees centigrade when I was there, and the average year-round temperature is 30 degrees centigrade. The persistent, recurrent climate shocks that people must endure demonstrate the urgency of meeting both critical life-saving needs, and finding long term and sustainable solutions to build people's resilience.

To mitigate the impact of climate hazards on the people of Djibouti, sustainable investments, such as drought-resistant crops and modernized irrigation technology, among other interventions, are desperately needed.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As an island of stability in a region emmeshed in conflict, insecurity and extreme hardship, Djibouti is host to over 30,000 refugees and asylum seekers, most of them from Somalia and Ethiopia, and also from Eritrea and Yemen. Bear in mind, as you will see in our fact sheet, the total population is under one million people.

Furthermore, over 100,000 migrants, mostly from Ethiopia, live in the country. An additional 400 to 600 migrants travel through Djibouti every day – often on foot, through perilous and deserted areas. Some 96 per cent of the migrants cite economic reasons for making the dangerous journey, via Yemen to Saudi Arabia.

These migrants are highly vulnerable, facing severe protection risks, including exploitation and abuse – particularly for those who have used smugglers for their journey.

They also struggle to find access to basic services while on route. Poor access to basic sanitation, hygiene or health services, and poor access to water, increases the risk of disease outbreaks among migrant and local populations.

Many of these migrants lose their lives as they attempt to cross the dangerous sea channel between Djibouti and Yemen. Many among them are children – some unaccompanied by family members and in need of child protection services.

During my visit in Djibouti, I met a group of Ethiopian migrants in Dikil, close to the Ethiopian border. They had just begun their trek towards the Arabian Peninsula. They expressed hope to secure a better life for themselves and their families, despite the great

risks ahead. A 20-year-old woman among them told me that her dream is to become a maid in Saudi Arabia.

In the Ali Addeh refugee village, I met with Somali and Ethiopian refugees who have been living in the village for decades. The community expressed much gratitude for the support provided by the Djiboutian government, which has given them safe refuge and the right to work and to attend school. But the community's main call to the Government and the international community is for greater access to education and vocational training and employment opportunities, so that they can live more productive and fulfilling lives. Doing so requires greater investment from all in not only in livelihoods, but in bolstering the country's basic services infrastructure.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Djibouti is a small and peaceful country, where much can be achieved if we work together. I encourage the international community to rally behind the efforts of the Government and partners in Djibouti toward supporting longer term solutions and meeting growing levels of humanitarian need through more joined-up approaches.

There are already excellent examples that should be scaled up and made more systematic.

For instance, on 19 – 20 May last year, Cyclone Sagar made landfall in Djibouti, affecting 50,000 people. Many of those affected were living in extreme poverty, with limited capacity to cope with shocks. To facilitate response to the increased humanitarian needs, US\$ 1.2 million in CERF funding was allocated to provide clean water and sanitation services. This catalyzed broader efforts by the Government and development partners to eradicate malaria, including through better surveillance, awareness campaigns and distribution of mosquito nets.

Thank you to all the donors who supported these efforts.

Another good example of greater join-up is the distribution of emergency cash in response to the impact of flooding from Cyclone Sagar, which prompted Government and partners to develop a national social protection system. This system ensures that the most vulnerable people in Djibouti benefit from regular support to help them withstand shocks.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The people of the Horn of Africa, as well as the international community, felt a great deal of hope and saw opportunity on the horizon for a peaceful future in the region, after the signature of the Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, in September 2018. This catalyzed improved relationships among the Horn neighbors.

We now have an opportunity to further the peaceful progress in the region by expanding support to Djibouti, which, in turn, will have a reverberating impact across the wider region. Increased engagement and assistance in Djibouti will not only be felt by its

critically vulnerable communities, but also by refugees and migrants who have fled hardship in search of something more. We must also focus on providing aid to refugees and migrants in their countries and areas of origin.

As climate change takes hold, weather conditions in Djibouti are only projected to worsen. We must get ahead of this climate crisis by finding and supporting ambitious long-term solutions to help the Government reduce risk and help communities to adapt as a matter of urgency.

At the same time, UN agencies and NGO partners working in Djibouti need support to ensure that urgent and basic needs are met for the most vulnerable people of Djibouti, as well as for migrants and refugees and to implement sustainable solutions to address the root causes of suffering.

I encourage investment in the Central Emergency Response Fund, which is the Secretary-General's fund, and is a fund by all for all. It has been instrumental in supporting humanitarian efforts in Djibouti, to ensure that resources are available to support life-saving assistance to underfunded crises and rapid response to crises that are deteriorating.

Together we can work towards a sustainable future in Djibouti. Thank you.