

Remarks for Acting Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Ramesh Rajasingham, at the Opening of the ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment

Opening Session of the ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment

23 June 2021, 10:00-12:00

As delivered

Thank you, Ambassador Baeriswyl, for your introduction.

This year's ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment is an exceptionally important session as the Ambassador said or three specific reasons: First, the continued unprecedented challenges unleashed by the pandemic; second, the scale and complexity of the ongoing issues, such as protracted conflict and the climate crisis, which the humanitarian community faces in 2021; and third, the number of people in need, and the intensity of their needs.

In 2020, humanitarian needs soared, propelled by conflict, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors compounded risks, exacerbated inequalities and worsened vulnerability.

As a result, this year 161 million people in 56 countries need emergency assistance, at a cost of US\$36 billion.

These needs have been heightened by the COVID pandemic, which has caused poverty, hunger and unemployment to soar, and heightened the divide between the haves and the have-nots.

The response from the humanitarian community to the pandemic was swift and sustained. The humanitarian system worked.

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee, or IASC – the coordinating body of the formal humanitarian system – issued a coordinated Global Humanitarian Response Plan within two weeks of the World Health Organization's declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic.

The IASC rapidly activated its protocols for swift response scale-up, touching on all humanitarian sectors and spanning all 63 countries covered by the Response Plan. This scale-up was also adapted to a pandemic reality.

With the generous funding received from donors, humanitarian organizations:

- We reached 74 million people with critical water and sanitation supplies
- We reached 75 million women and children with essential health care, mental health and psychosocial support.
- We assisted 33 million displaced people – including migrants and stateless people
- We trained 2.3 million health-care providers in COVID-19 detection, referral and case management.

All of this work was assisted by a UN Crisis Management Team, led by WHO, which brought together 23 agencies across 9 workstreams, to smooth information-sharing, analysis of needs and prioritization of response.

Keeping up operations relied on partnerships with the private sector to produce and supply PPE and channel cash transfers.

A UN supply chain task force was set up to scale up procurement and delivery of PPE, as well as supplies for testing and diagnostics supplies and biomedical equipment.

The World Food Programme staged one of its largest-ever logistics operations, which included launching new passenger and cargo services as commercial flights shut down. These transported 118,000 cubic metres of emergency supplies and more than 28,000 humanitarian and health workers.

But at the heart of the response were local NGOs and civil-society groups, including women's groups, which were on the front lines, accessing people in need in hard-to-reach areas across the world.

The Central Emergency Response Fund and Country-based Pooled Funds played a critical role in humanitarian response to COVID, allocating \$439 million to 49 countries.

Almost 60 per cent of this went to international and national NGOs, Red Cross/Red Crescent National Societies, and civil-society groups.

Humanitarian partners also did all they could to adapt and sustain ongoing humanitarian operations despite added access and supply challenges due to pandemic containment measures.

Large operations continued to combat worsening needs in Syria and Yemen. Operations scaled up in Burkina Faso as conflict and violence deepened across the Central Sahel, making Burkina Faso home to one of the world's fastest-growing displacement crises. Humanitarian agencies coordinated to launch or scale up responses to the outbreaks of desert locusts in the Greater Horn of Africa; to storms in Central America and the Caribbean; and to the port explosions in Lebanon.

Towards the end of the year, violence broke out in Ethiopia's Tigray region, creating a protection and hunger crisis that has challenged us aid groups, as access to affected areas is still highly restricted and violence continues.

Aid groups are targeting 5.2 million people in the Tigray region.

Since we convened last year, we have also seen some alarming humanitarian trends develop or worsen.

First, food insecurity has escalated, leaving 142 million people in 40 countries acutely food insecure and more than 40 million people at risk of dying of hunger.

More than 11 million of these people are in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, southern Madagascar, north-east Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen, and more than half a million are already living in famine-like conditions.

Women and girls represent 70 per cent of the world's hungry.

Second, protection challenges have also increased over the past year, with continuing or intensifying violations of international humanitarian law, impediments to humanitarian access, and attacks on civilians and humanitarian and aid personnel even in this time of extraordinary need.

Attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure have become commonplace. Hospitals, schools, water and sanitation facilities, and food systems are targeted. Starvation is used as a method of war.

Third, a shadow epidemic of gender-based violence, including sexual violence and sexual exploitation and abuse, has emerged, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

COVID -19 has amplified pre-existing gender disparities, pushing close to 58 million women and girls into extreme poverty.

We have also witnessed **the largest interruption of educational services in our history**. More than 1 billion children risk falling behind due to school closures, and many children – mainly girls - may never return to school undoing years of progress in literacy.

And the number of internally displaced people has reached an all-time high, with 55 million people forcibly displaced by conflict, violence and disasters by the end of 2020 in their home countries.

Alongside these trends, the climate crisis has brought on prolonged drought, intense storms and flooding to many parts of the world, from the Sahel to the Caribbean.

Last year, 15 of the 20 countries most vulnerable to the effects of climate change had an inter-agency humanitarian appeal, totalling about one third of global humanitarian funding requirements in 2020.

So, there is ample reason for concern. But the humanitarian community has stepped up to the challenge.

First, we have been working to avert famine and address acute food insecurity.

To prevent famine, the Secretary-General convened a High-level Task Force, which is raising the alarm, coordinating information, advocating for access to all in need and trying to mobilize billions of dollars to respond.

OCHA, the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization have raised the alarm in the Security Council, high-level meetings and with the media of the risk of multiple famines.

With funding that has come in, we are rapidly scaling up food, nutrition, cash and vouchers; agricultural inputs and support for livestock to help keep people alive and healthy and able to support themselves. This requires well-coordinated scale-up by members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and their partners.

Protection, water and sanitation and health care are equally important in a famine response. At highest priority are the worst-affected in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, north-east Nigeria, southern Madagascar, South Sudan and Yemen.

Allowing famine to arise is a stain on our humanity and we must do all we can to avert it.

At the same time, we must also reach zero hunger by committing to creating strong, inclusive, equitable and sustainable food systems. Outlining how will be the subject of the upcoming Food Systems Summit next month [in July 2021].

Second, humanitarian principles and humanitarian space are under intense pressure.

Protection of civilians in conflict must be central in humanitarian action.

And parties to armed conflict and all Member States must take practical steps to respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law.

There is a growing body of good practice on facilitating and protecting humanitarian action and health care in situations of armed conflict. We must draw on this.

Third, the scourge of gender-based violence must be addressed and perpetrators investigated and held to account.

We must prioritize funding for women-led organizations and target women and girls in all humanitarian response, including to COVID-19.

And promote the meaningful role and participation of women and women-led organizations in humanitarian action.

OCHA has taken steps to target women and girls through the Country-based Pool Funds and the Central Emergency Response Fund that it manages. Last year, we provided more than half a billion dollars to gender equality and gender-based violence interventions.

Fourth, we need to see ambitious, accelerated and scaled-up global action in climate change mitigation, adaptation and resilience and financing, with a focus on the most vulnerable countries.

This includes not only increasing overall adaptation funding, but also increasing the proportion of adaptation funding that targets low-income fragile countries. Currently, adaptation support makes up about 21 per cent of climate finance – the Secretary-General has called for this to reach 50 per cent by 2024.

One of the most important lessons we must carry forward from the COVID-19 pandemic is on the need to better understand and address the systemic nature of risk.

We must invest more in preventing and anticipating future disasters, pandemics and other shocks.

To stop fast-onset climate shocks from turning into large-scale disasters, for instance, humanitarian organizations and donors need to increase support for anticipatory action.

In this way, we can prevent predictable crises from turning into full-scale humanitarian disasters.

Last year, OCHA provided \$140 million from CERF for anticipatory action, including projects to avert food insecurity in Ethiopia and Somalia, and to contain the impact of flooding in Bangladesh. A high-level pledging conference on anticipatory action later this year will give all a chance to significantly scale up our commitments.

We must also find better solutions to displacement.

We need to see Member States, the United Nations, and humanitarian and development organizations support the scale-up of efforts to prevent and reduce internal displacement, to protect and assist displaced people, and to collaborate to achieve durable solutions.

This starts by acknowledging the interplay between climate change, weather disasters, conflict and displacement, and how these forces can push people into a downward spiral of vulnerability.

To support our progress, the forthcoming report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Internal Displacement in September this year will be an important and timely contribution for the way ahead.

And to end need and suffering for the displaced – and for all indeed – the root causes of humanitarian crises and drivers of conflict need to be addressed while strengthening community resilience.

Finally, excellencies, with COVID-19 still wreaking havoc, vaccine equity is paramount to protect all people and to protect and rebuild economies.

We urgently need a global plan to vaccinate the world – no one is safe until everyone is safe as the Secretary-general as often repeated.

This means vaccinating everyone, including people on the move, people in detention, all who live under the control of non-State armed groups, and the 160 million people who live in fragile or conflict-affected areas.

We need to see increased support for the UN-coordinated COVAX Facility set up to provide vaccines and other critical supplies to all who most need them.

Crucially, financial support to vaccine roll-out must come on top of ongoing humanitarian relief so that aid for life-saving activities, including routine immunization, health care and food aid, is not diverted.

So, we have our work cut out for us.

The Humanitarian Affairs Segment provides an opportunity for all of us to commit and to act with greater ambition to address the compounded risks of conflict, the climate crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts.

I wish you all a productive event.