Statement by Dr Ramiz Alakbarov, Deputy Special Representative for the Secretary General, Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator, on the Continued Food Insecurity and Malnutrition Crisis Facing People in Afghanistan

15 March 2022

People in Afghanistan are today facing a food insecurity and malnutrition crisis of unparalleled proportions. The rapid increase in those experiencing acute hunger – from 14 million in July 2021 to 23 million in March 2022 – has forced households to resort to desperate measures such as skipping meals or taking on unprecedented debt to ensure there is some food on the table at the end of the day. These unacceptable trade-offs have caused untold suffering, reduced the quality, quantity, and diversity of food available, led to high levels of wasting in children, and other harmful impacts on the physical and mental wellbeing of women, men, and children.

In Afghanistan, a staggering 95 per cent of the population is not eating enough food, with that percentage rising to almost 100 per cent for female-headed households. It is a figure so high that it is almost inconceivable. Yet, devastatingly, it is the harsh reality.

Hospital wards are filled with children suffering from malnutrition: smaller than they should be, many weighing at one year what an infant of six months would weigh in a developed country, and some so weak they are unable to move.

As Afghanistan continues to grapple with the effects of a terrible drought, the prospect of another bad harvest this year, a banking and financial crisis so severe that it has left more than 80 per cent of the population facing debt, and an increase in food and fuel prices, we cannot ignore the reality facing communities. Enormous challenges lie ahead.

With this in mind, as the United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Afghanistan, I want to reiterate that the United Nations, alongside our national and international partners, are doing everything we can to support a comprehensive and coordinated effort to alleviate the impacts of hunger and malnutrition, while giving communities the means to protect and sustain their livelihoods in the future.

Already in 2022, humanitarian partners have supported 8.2 million people with life-saving and life-sustaining food assistance, including emergency food rations, seasonal support, school meals for children, agricultural supplies for farmers such as seeds, fertilizers and animal feed, and nutritious foods and supplements for nursing mothers and their infants.

Over the next months, the United Nations and humanitarian partners will continue to focus on scaling-up response activities, reaching underserved and remote areas that have been inaccessible in previous years due to insecurity and active conflict.

Acute malnutrition rates in 28 out of 34 provinces are high with more than 3.5 million children in need of nutrition treatment support. Already, there are over 2,500 nutrition treatment sites spread across all 34 provinces, both urban and rural, reaching 800,000 acutely malnourished children since mid-August and we plan to reach 3.2 million affected children this year. We also aim to reach one million people through vocational skills training, one million children through school feeding, and millions more people both directly and indirectly through programmes that will protect and boost the agricultural livelihoods upon which so much of the population depends.

We must remain mindful that while the massive humanitarian response mounted since August 2021 has prevented our worst fears from being realized over the winter, food insecurity and malnutrition remain at historic highs and require an immediate, sustained, and large-scale humanitarian response to prevent the loss of more lives and livelihoods. The fate of an entire generation of Afghans is at stake.
In the coming weeks, the United Nations will continue to provide regular updates on our combined efforts. On 31 March, the United Nations and the Governments of the United Kingdom, Germany, and Qatar will co-host an international pledging conference in support of the humanitarian response in Afghanistan. I urge Member States to dig deep for the people of Afghanistan at this time, and to continue their generous support to these life-saving efforts.

Humanitarian assistance alone is not enough to address all needs now and in the future. But it is absolutely necessary to keep people alive and healthy, and to prevent vulnerable people in the most precarious situations from sliding ever further into need.

As we collectively support millions of Afghans to rebuild their lives and communities, we must remember that the long road to a better future is impossible on empty stomach.

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