

**Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator**

**Stephen O'Brien**

**Global Call for Support and Action: Responding to El Niño**

**Geneva, 26 April 2016**

*As delivered*

Excellencies,  
Distinguished guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are given a tremendous opportunity to help the millions of people, families, and communities affected by one of the strongest El Niño episodes in history. Together, we must now act to prevent enormous suffering by supporting the national and international response to the immediate needs and indeed for longer-term resilience.

The current El Niño is resulting in life-threatening weather extremes around the world, including Ethiopia's worst drought in 50 years. More than 60 million people of the world's poorest and most vulnerable have been affected by droughts, floods and other extreme weather events made more devastating by El Niño. Today and tonight, they require our help.

The numbers are staggering. Needs are stretching to the limit the capacity of governments and their humanitarian partners to deliver. One million children in Eastern and Southern Africa alone are severely acutely malnourished. In Ethiopia, the country worst affected by El Niño, 10.2 million people require food assistance and 6.8 million people need emergency health assistance and water. Across Southern Africa, 32 million people need some form of assistance, and that figure is likely to increase. In the Asia Pacific region, around 11 million people are food insecure. In Central America and the Caribbean, more than 9.7 million people have been affected by drought conditions linked to El Niño.

El Niño's humanitarian impact has been most devastating in countries throughout Eastern and Southern Africa, Central America, the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific. Eight countries have declared a national state of emergency - El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Lesotho, Malawi, the Marshall Islands, Swaziland and Zimbabwe - and many

more have declared a state of emergency in particular regions. In March, the Southern African Development Community declared a regional drought disaster.

El Niño-induced weather extremes have especially affected food security and nutrition, as well as health and water, sanitation and hygiene. There are very worrying increases in acute malnutrition among children under five as well as water- and vector-borne diseases. The lack of clean water in health facilities has reduced or altogether stopped health services and schooling in Mozambique and Zimbabwe. El Niño is also forcing thousands of people to leave arid or flooded regions, including in Ethiopia and Kenya.

The response to this El Niño event has been major. National governments, regional organizations and the United Nations and NGOs have worked hard to respond, and coordination has been working well. But resources are lacking and preventing the necessary scale-up. The gap is threatening to cut short life-saving programmes, including, crucially, the food pipeline in Ethiopia.

Overall, about US\$3.6 billion is needed by governments and Humanitarian Country Teams to tackle El Niño-related needs in 13 countries. A number of donors have made significant funding commitments. Thank you. Already, the Central Emergency Response Fund, the CERF, which I and the team operate, has allocated a timely \$115 million for life-saving activities related to this El Niño. That is a huge amount out of the CERF already. While these contributions provide a good start, they are far short of what we need today.

We collectively face an alarming funding gap of over \$2.2 billion for the provision of food, clean water, basic medicine, and seeds to make sure farmers do not lose their next harvest. This figure is expected to grow as additional plans are concluded and new needs assessments are finalized, notably in Ethiopia and Southern Africa.

So while the collective impact of the El Niño phenomenon has created one of the world's biggest disasters for millions of people, this crisis is receiving, sadly, relatively little attention.

I am here to sound the alarm. Again.

Although the El Niño phenomenon itself is subsiding, its devastating human impact will increase in the coming weeks and months with El Niño-related food insecurity projected to peak between December 2016 and April 2017. This is an alarm, it is not alarmist. This could become even worse if a La Niña event strikes in the third or fourth quarter of this year.

Assistance efforts must be scaled up before the worst-case scenarios become a reality. Any failure will be on our moral conscience.

We must take urgent action now to help people whose livelihoods and whose entire way of life is threatened – even their ability to survive. We are here today to make a global

call for support and action. Sixty million people already require our urgent assistance today, tonight, tomorrow.

Together we can avert the crisis from worsening. But the longer we wait, the longer and more costly our response will need to be. Inaction also risks undermining decades of investments to development. As a reminder, and to put that into perspective, the El Niño of 1997-98 killed around 21,000 people and caused damage to infrastructure worth \$36 billion.

We know what needs to be done. In this crisis we are not held back by political barriers, violent attacks or major access challenges. We must respond quickly to immediate, life-threatening needs, but we must also help people to become more self-reliant, and build individual and community capacity to respond to future shocks.

We are all actively working on this. In the affected countries, we work together with development partners and national authorities. But we need donors to urgently increase funding to the response and resilience efforts. This involves bringing forward planned funding, reprioritizing development funds to support humanitarian and resilience efforts, and finding additional resources to cover funding gaps.

The world, you, have rallied around Agenda 2030 and recognized the need for a holistic paradigm shift to address complex development challenges and reach the furthest behind first. The Secretary-General's Agenda for Humanity stresses that we must move from addressing needs to ending them. We call for commitments to improve risk management, to invest in local capacity, and to transcend the humanitarian-development divide that hampers our collective impact. It stresses the need for us to come together to prevent suffering and set collective outcomes geared at reducing vulnerability and risk. The World Humanitarian Summit, to be convened by the Secretary-General in Istanbul in a month's time on 23 and 24 May, provides a critical opportunity for the international community to change the way it manages climatic risks, including future El Niño and La Niña events.

Thank you for your efforts to mobilize more resources for the sake of the 60 million people in urgent need tonight. Thank you for your commitment.