Good morning everybody

It’s fantastic to be here. Thank you Ramesh, thank all the panelists for joining us. But most of all thank you to all of you. It’s my first time here, and I’m pleased to have the opportunity to join you at the event. I want to thank the Government of Switzerland who support this generously. As Ramesh said, this is the sixth year we have been engaged in bringing everyone together.

Thousands of you – more than we’ve ever had before, from hundreds of organizations, are representative of the enormous diversity of the humanitarian response sector. All the colleagues of the UN agencies, from the Red Cross family, from academia, the private sector, the military, lobby groups and think tanks, community-based organizations and international NGOs. It’s a tremendous advert for the professionalism, commitment courage determination bravery and passion of the humanitarian sector. Thank you to the thousands of you and the tens of thousands of your colleagues around the world who have made the humanitarian response system much more effective than it’s ever been.

The sector is growing, and the truth is, the reasons it’s growing are not fantastic. But it’s also important that if there are large numbers of people in humanitarian need around the world that they get the help and protection they need.

And what we have today is an effective humanitarian response system. I’ve been working on these issues myself for a lot longer than my children would believe – the whole of my adult life basically - and I compare the way the sector deals with challenges now with the way we used to deal with things when I first used to work in the mid-1980s I see a complete transformation.

My first job was working on a response to the famine in Ethiopia in 1985-86. And then what we thought humanitarian response was mostly about, was trucking and dumping or air-dropping food and maybe a bit of shelter and water. Now we know that we need a much more comprehensive response and a much stronger focus on collaboration and coordination.

All those years ago, 35 years ago, there used to be 2 million people a year who would lose their lives in these crises. Now because we have a better system, the loss of life is much smaller. The world is not getting better at solving the underlying reasons we have
crises but it is getting better at protecting and saving the lives of people caught up in crises, notwithstanding all the difficulties that we see in front of us at the moment.

One of the consequences of having a sector which is entirely voluntary and is as diverse and big and complicated as ours is that there is need for coordination. And what my office is trying to do is to provide a coordination service for all of you.

We’re trying to do four things. We’re trying to identify need – who is being caught up in humanitarian crises, who needs what help and we do that through the Global Humanitarian Overview which we published the latest version of here in Geneva in early December.

Second, we’re trying to support the coordination sector to get better response plans and the UN system has an important role to play there because about 70 per cent of global humanitarian activity takes place through the response plans that my office coordinates. They hold a whole plethora of organizations - the NGOs, Red Cross and others - and they represent the bulk of responses in crises.

The third thing we’re trying to do is to support all of you with the fundraising. Last year through the appeals that I coordinate, we raised a record US$16 billion in funding – that’s more than three times as much as 15 years ago. Of course that in of itself is a consequence of there being greater need. But all of the contributions we get for our responses are voluntary. And I do take it as an important responsibility for my office and myself to try to do everything we can to support the fundraising so you get the resources that you need to implement your programmes.

And the fourth thing we do is to try to support implementation of the plans with the money that’s raised especially through negotiating access and trying to break down the barriers that prevent some help from reaching some people.

I want to say a little bit about how I see the prospects for humanitarian challenges in 2020. And I do this in all humility. In December 2018 I projected that there would be 145 million people in need of humanitarian assistance during the course of 2019. And that was wrong by 20 million in the wrong direction. It turned out we needed to try to reach 165 million people.

Now, my projection for 2020 as we set it out in the GHO at the beginning of December is we’re going to have a more difficult year this year than we had last year. The reasons for that are essentially because of the nature and drivers of humanitarian crises around the world at the moment.

The single biggest driver of the problem is essentially geopolitics. Most people caught up in crises are caught up in conflict and displaced by conflict. And those things are made worse by the way States and non-State groups interact with each other. And the declining compliance with the rules of law that were established primarily after the Second world war through international humanitarian law. We are seeing declining compliance with
those values, and that’s reflected for example in the fact that last year there were more than 800 attacks on health workers and health facilities that were part of the humanitarian response.

Unfortunately it’s not my forecast that we will see an improvement in that set of problems during the course of 2020. I think you’ve already seen how the year has started in the Middle East. We see a lot of problems right now in parts of Syria. We see what’s happening in Libya. It was a very bad year last year in the Sahel and I’m afraid our projection is that it will not improve this year. And we see continuing challenges in places like Afghanistan.

The Second big driver of need is climate-related events. In recent years we’ve seen 300 climate-related emergencies a year, on average. That’s twice the level of what we were seeing 20 years ago. There are both the wet events – storms, such as Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas, the storms that hit Mozambique last year. But also floods. We’ve had a spate of floods related to climatic events, especially across the Horn of Africa over the last six months.

There are also all the dry events. The droughts particularly affecting southern Africa, central America and large parts of the horn of Africa. Associated with those, a new problem that I’m particularly alarmed about right now is this huge locust threat in Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya which has the potential to be the most devastating plague of locusts in any of our living memories if we don’t reduce the problem faster than we’re doing at the moment. Again it’s not my projection that we will see a slowdown or a decrease in the number of these climate related events.

The third of set of challenges is related to pandemics. You all know we’ve been dealing with this long-running Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. You’ve all seen the spate of measles outbreaks in various parts of the world. There was a 700 per cent increase in measles cases in Africa in the first three months of last year compared with the previous year. You all saw the human cost of the measles outbreak in Samoa and other parts of the Pacific at the end of last year. Now everyone is trying to understand the implications of the Corona Virus.

Some of the problems we’re dealing with relate to the continued fragility and weakness of immunization systems. There’s no reason why there should be measles outbreaks - there’s a vaccine that deals with it. But until immunization systems have sustained and perpetuating coverage there’s a risk of problems of the sort we’ve seen in Africa last year and in the Pacific in the last few months being sustained.

Now, the only solutions to this set of problems are in the space of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. If countries get richer and more resilient they’ll have fewer crises and be able to cope with them better.

And in the space of the world getting more effective in the way it used to be during the 1990s and first part of the current century, in preventing resolving and dealing with
conflict. Until we do better on those things and deal with the climate emergency, I’m afraid no one should expect we’ll see a reduction in humanitarian need.

That is why in the GHO we published in December, we forecast that in 2021 and 2022 there will be further increases in the number of people in need - currently one in 45 around the planet will need humanitarian assistance and protection.

At the same time there are some opportunities to help countries move these forward. And it’s really important where there are opportunities that they are seized.

In Sudan where I was late last year, and where the people of the country are very proud of what they call their revolution, there is an opportunity in a country which has been devastated by conflict and other humanitarian crises for 30 years, to help them move forward. And the international community would be smart to take those opportunities when they arise. Unfortunately Sudan has had a lot more help in the form of words than in terms of actual practical concrete action. The world would be smart to change the balance there.

Likewise in Somalia after a long time there is now a prospect of Somalia getting debt relief which will happen before the end of next month. That will open up a whole new availability of resources to help the country resolve its problems.

So when we see opportunities, it’s really important to take them to help countries move forward.

It’s also very important that we sustain and continue to improve the humanitarian response system. And I hope one of the big things that you will get from networking and partnerships week this time is talking to each other, learning from each other, working out how in every organization we can improve to deal with the challenges ahead.

We have to improve because the needs are outpacing our ability to respond to them. And we have also to be aware that the whole system is voluntarily financed. And unless the people who finance it believe that we are committed to make our system even better, we’re going to run into problems with sustaining high-level finance.

We also need to see if we can identify problems earlier and deal with them earlier. Because we know if we respond earlier to predictable events - when there is a drought in the Horn of Africa, the consequences are predictable; when locusts start swarming the consequences are predictable - there’s a lot more, using technology pre-agreed financing and pre-agreed deliver systems that we could organize earlier. And that involves cheaper action, less suffering and less likelihood of contagion. So one of the big challenges for our sector is to get all of that early action connected.

I am in favour of networks and of partnerships. And my office wants to everything it can including through our support through the Inter Agency Standing Committee system and all the guidelines and the information material that we provide to support all of you. I
hope that one of the things you will do over the course of this week is to let us know if there are things you want more of, or indeed that you’d like less of, from the coordinating system. We’re here to serve you, and through you, people who are caught up in these crises. So please do tell us the things you would like us to do better.

Enjoy the week thank you very much.