

**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief
Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, Remarks at Johns Hopkins University School of
Advanced International Studies: The Global Humanitarian Landscape - Challenges
and Opportunities**

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As delivered

Thank you, Maureen.

I do feel honoured to be here at SAIS today. Thank you for inviting me.

I admire your commitment to developing the next generation of leaders in international affairs.

We live in a world where pretty much everyone can see pretty much everything almost everywhere, pretty much all the time. Everything and everyone is inter-connected.

And every country has to decide how to deal with that. But the choice is how, not whether. Autarchy might have been a viable choice for a few countries earlier in human history. It's not anymore.

For the students in the audience today, one thing that this means is that there will be lots of opportunities for you in international affairs when you graduate. Because the world's problems don't seem to be going away soon. And the world is not going to get less inter-connected either.

Today, I want to talk to you about one aspect of this: human suffering across the world and how we respond to it. Both the challenges and the opportunities.

Around one person in 50 across the planet is right now caught up in a major humanitarian crisis. Their suffering is often extreme and brutal – especially where conflict or terrorism is at the root of the problem. I've been doing this kind of work for quite a while, but I am still frequently shocked by what I see, and the stories people tell of the horrors they have experienced in the 18 countries suffering major conflict or disaster which I have visited over the last year.

But it's also true – and this is an important point, which I want to stress —that the international humanitarian system, made up of the UN agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent family and huge numbers of international and national NGOs – has never been more effective.

Every month now, international humanitarian agencies are providing life-saving help to more than 8 million Yemenis, and more than 5 million Syrians inside the country. We have reached nearly 5 million South Sudanese this year. Humanitarian agencies prevent huge loss of life – and investing in humanitarian help is in fact, one of the cheapest ways of saving a life.

So, the global humanitarian system works.

At a time when multilateralism and international institutions are under fire across the world, we should hold it up as a relative success story.

We are better – and quicker – at identifying different groups' specific needs in crises.

Response plans are more coordinated, comprehensive, innovative and well-executed.

Collaboration between local first responders and international agencies like the UN, Red Cross and Red Crescent and NGOs is more joined up.

And while needs still outstretch resources, humanitarian action has never been better funded. UN appeals alone raised a record \$14 billion last year, up from \$4 billion in 2005. I think this year we will raise more, setting a new record.

Last month, at the UN General Assembly, my boss – the UN's Secretary-General Antonio Guterres - urged world leaders to “promote and support a reformed, reinvigorated and strengthened multilateral system.”

At a time when the purpose, principle and premise of multilateralism are being challenged, I think the global humanitarian system –which my office supports and coordinates - is an important example of how, when the world works together, we can save lives and make the world not just a better but also a safer and more secure place.

The last year in this job has also, though, made me keenly aware of the scale and complexity of the challenges we face, and the need to improve the response, and that's what I want mostly to focus on today.

First though, let me just make clear what a critical role the US – Government, researchers, think tanks, NGOs, faith-based organizations and individual citizens – plays.

The world has changed dramatically since the 1990s when Madeleine Albright – one of your many distinguished alumni – described the US as the ‘indispensable nation’ in global affairs.

But that description remains true in the humanitarian sector. The US has unmatched capabilities, bringing together financial resources, global presence and influence, research and policy-making capacity and reach, your humanitarian NGOs and, obviously, your military capability. Without US leadership over many decades, the humanitarian system would not be as strong as it is today, and many more lives would have been lost.

We continue to need US partners to engage at every level, if we are to make progress on the complex humanitarian challenges before us.

We also need the burden to be shared more fairly.

I greatly value the collaboration and support my office enjoys from the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in USAID (OFDA), and our interaction with the State Department, the NSC and other parts of the Government especially on the most politically-complex crises.

I think the humanitarian system needs to be better in a number of important ways. We need better responses to tackle the growing volume of violations of the laws of war, which we have seen during the current decade. We need faster and better solutions for huge numbers of people displaced inside their own countries by conflict and other crises. We need a more predictable and proactive system for financing humanitarian action, focused on the people who need help rather than the institutions providing it.

There is important policy work in all these areas underway in Washington, not least in think tanks, universities and NGOs, and I value our ability to work together. More innovation is part of the answer, of the sort being encouraged by the Humanitarian Grand Challenges Initiative launched last year by the USAID Administrator Mark Green and his British counterpart Penny Mordaunt.

Today, global humanitarian needs are at record levels. That seems paradoxical, given that the proportion of people across the planet living in the most extreme poverty is at a lower level – a bit less than 10% on the latest data – than ever before.

So why are humanitarian needs so high?

Well, it is partly that the world is simply bigger, at 7.5 billion people, and that much of the growth in population has been in countries vulnerable to crisis – including natural disasters or climate-induced shocks.

The effects of climate change on sea levels, ecosystem health, water availability and agricultural production are already feeding through to increasing levels of food insecurity and local conflicts over resource shortages in some parts of the world.

It's also partly that humanitarian response is now better and more comprehensive than it used to be.

People caught up in humanitarian crises have a multiplicity of needs. Those fleeing from violence don't just need food, water and shelter. They need protection, health and education services, trauma counselling, and psycho-social support amongst many other things. Women and children, who always constitute the majority of the displaced, in particular, demand a more effective response. Doing a better job of meeting people's needs, in other words, is adding to the bill.

But the biggest reason needs have grown is that most human suffering now is associated with war and conflict. And especially with conflicts that are longer lasting, more intractable and in too many cases, more brutal than they were 20 years ago.

Conflict of course also has roots and origins – often in resource pressures exacerbated by climate change, in development and governance failures, in regional politics and increasingly in nihilistic terrorist ideologies.

Conflict has forced record numbers of people to flee their homes during the current decade.

At the end of last year, nearly 70 million people were forcibly displaced because of persecution, conflict or violence.

As a result of the growing need driven by all these factors, the size of the UN's annual humanitarian appeals has quadrupled from \$6.5 billion to reach 25 million people in 2008, to \$24 billion to help 134 million people this year.

And the average length of humanitarian appeals has risen from four years in 2005 to seven years by 2017.

I want to say a bit more about conflict, because it is both the biggest source of suffering and also the biggest constraint affecting the ability of humanitarian agencies to relieve that suffering.

The nature of conflict has changed as this century has progressed. Wars last twice as long as they did in 1990, as military victories are harder to achieve and negotiated settlements often don't stick.

The number of armed groups involved in conflicts has exploded, making it difficult to negotiate access or secure peace deals. The emergence of globally interconnected terrorist groups – like Islamic State groups with variants in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Nigeria and elsewhere – which explicitly reject global norms of behavior in conflict, is just one manifestation of this.

Belligerents and their backers increasingly fail to respect international humanitarian law. The use of rape, starvation, the deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure like schools and hospitals as weapons of war has become more common.

We are seeing an emerging preference for the use of remote warfare, and especially, aerial bombing, with so-called precision-guided smart weapons. Over the past 20 to 30 years, in countries with advanced militaries, citizens' tolerance for casualties in military interventions overseas has declined. The consequence is an increasing reliance on remote warfare and airpower to pursue military objectives. That can put more civilians at risk of harm.

Conflicts are increasingly played out in densely populated urban settings, where casualties are overwhelmingly civilian.

Urban conflict inevitably destroys essential infrastructure, with lasting effects on health, food security and livelihoods.

A particularly disturbing feature of humanitarian crises caused by conflict is the way aid workers are increasingly coming under attack.

Last year 139 aid workers were killed in the line of duty. So far this year the World Health Organisation has reported 232 attacks on healthcare facilities

These attacks are fueled in some cases by criminal violence, as we have seen in some of the aid worker deaths in South Sudan this year, and in others are a calculated part of a violent ideological campaign, as we witnessed in this year's abduction and killing of two ICRC health workers in Nigeria, by the Boko Haram offshoot, Islamic State in West Africa.

Before I talk about how I think we need to tackle the challenges I have described, and what needs to happen to make the humanitarian system better, I want to say a couple of things about the two mega crises in Yemen and Syria.

Last week, I briefed the UN Security Council on the impending risk of famine in Yemen. There is now a clear and present danger of an imminent and great big famine in Yemen – much worse than anything any professional in this field has seen during their working lives. That is a judgment I reached on the basis of the UN's assessment of the deterioration in the situation on the ground over the last three months. Our analysis is actually very similar – almost identical – to the latest assessment published by FEWS Net, supported by USAID, on 24 October.

While UN-coordinated response efforts are now reaching 8 million people a month in Yemen, an increase from 3 million in early 2017, the combination of the recent intensification of fighting and a further collapse in the economy means that there may soon be 14 million unable to survive without assistance. That's half the population of the country. But many people among the rest of the population are sliding towards similar vulnerability.

The situation is still salvageable – or at least millions of people can still be saved. As I told the Security Council, we need a cessation of hostilities to facilitate the delivery of aid; the protection of the supply of food, fuel and medicines into the country; a larger and faster injection of foreign exchange to finance imports and salaries so people who still have jobs can be paid and thereby acquire the purchasing power to support their families; and increased funding to expand the humanitarian operation from 8 million to 14 million people. And finally, we need a peace process to end the conflict.

Syria is another large-scale politically complex crisis. The conflict is in its eighth year, leaving 13 million people inside the country and another 5.6 million who have fled its borders, in need of assistance and protection.

There are two immediate priorities now. First, to extend the current period of relative calm in Idlib following the agreement reached between the Russian Federation and Turkey to create a demilitarized zone in the province. Three million civilians, including 1 million children, would face the full impact of any military onslaught launched by the Syrian Government and its supporters on armed opposition groups in Idlib. That must be prevented at all costs.

And second, we need to improve access for impartial and independent humanitarian organizations to assess needs in the majority of the country now under fuller control of the Government. And to see how far those needs are being met, and who is being helped with money voluntarily provided by donors for the UN coordinated appeal.

I've visited Syria twice this year, most recently in August. While I was in Damascus, I began discussions with the authorities on steps needed to ensure that humanitarian agencies would have better access to people in the areas that the Government now controls. I hope the Government will now follow the approach we agreed.

Let me now set out a few ideas applicable across all countries on how, in practice, we can improve the humanitarian system. As I've said, I think humanitarian agencies do a good job, better than in the past, unquestionably saving millions of lives and reducing extraordinary suffering. But the system can be better, and it needs to be.

These ideas are in four broad areas: not the only ones, but points I think are particularly important. First, dealing better with warring parties' behavior in conflict; second, developing a more proactive humanitarian finance system; third, improving coordination; and fourth ensuring humanitarian agencies themselves exhibit the highest standards of behavior and professionalism.

First, we must acknowledge and act on the fact that the biggest driver of humanitarian need is the behavior of combatants in conflict.

Put simply, wars have laws. And currently too many people – both State and non-State armed groups - are defying those laws. We need to collectively redouble our efforts to change this behavior.

I gave a speech in Berlin in early September on this issue which outlined some ideas for how we might do that.

And for those with a deep interest in the topic, I would strongly recommend the ICRC's study from June of this year titled 'The Roots of Restraint in War.'

The good news is that ICRC's study – and examples from around the world - show that there are things that we can do that can work.

To begin with, we must make sure that combatants –both State forces and non-State armed groups – know their obligations under international law.

A number of countries – including the US – train their own armed forces as well as those of other countries, while organizations such as ICRC and Geneva Call work to ensure State forces and armed groups know the law.

We need to ensure the norms set out in international humanitarian law are integrated into military practice and doctrine and encourage armed groups to adopt internal codes of conduct. There is evidence that these have a self-disciplining effect.

We need to show combatants that adherence to international humanitarian law is in their strategic interests and helps them achieve their broader political and military goals. For instance, in Colombia, the Government realized in the 1990s that it was losing the vital support of the local population in its operations against FARC because of its gross human rights violations, and it changed its approach.

In line with the UN Secretary-General's agenda, we also need to see greater integration of protection of civilians into policy frameworks, and to spread some good practices, such as limits to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, action plans to end the recruitment and use of children, and strict arms export controls based on the risk of serious violations of international humanitarian law.

We also need to strengthen accountability mechanisms. People mostly commit the worst violations when they think that they won't be seen, won't be caught or won't be punished.

National judicial institutions are critical for accountability and we must work with States to ensure that they are robust. But we also need a broader, more universal international architecture that is fit for purpose to uphold IHL. And we need to face up to the fact that a lot of human suffering arises from or is hard to deal with as a result of the behavior of movements espousing terrorist tactics. I don't have a full prescription here – but I do believe we need to talk about the problem more openly and be aware of States' counter-terrorism responses that can sometimes make things worse by adding to grievances that draw people towards insurgent groups. One central point is that while military action

against terrorists may be legitimate and necessary, such actions also have to comply with international law.

In general, the humanitarian system needs to be better at engaging with military actors. There are some good examples. For example, in Yemen, my team operates a deconfliction system to facilitate the warring parties' respect for aid personnel, facilities and convoys. The UN provides the Coalition with coordinates of key aid facilities, and we let them know when humanitarian convoys, immunisation teams and other assistance missions will be on the road. This system has proven largely effective in sparing the aid operation from accidental or incidental harm. Without it, we would simply not be able to deliver assistance safely.

Within my office, we are strengthening our civil-military liaison capability and will soon have more than 40 people across our field offices working on that.

The second area which I think the humanitarian community needs to reform and improve is the way in which responses are financed. I think that there are huge opportunities to rethink the model we currently have.

At the moment, the system is essentially reactive. We watch the signs of crisis emerge, we see suffering grow and we then start mobilising money and the delivery system. It can take several months to galvanize donor support, particularly in slow-onset crises, like the droughts in the Sahel or Horn of Africa, that destroy the lives and livelihoods of millions.

A better system would be one where finance and the organization of the delivery system is pre-agreed and pre-negotiated, and then triggered automatically when disaster strikes – or even earlier where possible, as is the case with events with predictable impacts – like African droughts.

Examples of this sort of approach are growing. They include the insurance policies small islands have taken out against major natural disasters. And the contingency financing products now offered by the development banks to more of their borrowers.

This kind of approach will surely save lives, reduce suffering, cuts costs, and support more effective responses.

More humanitarian agencies, including UN agencies like WFP, FAO and others but also the Red Cross family and many NGOs are increasingly adopting these approaches.

One of the most exciting initiatives is the Famine Action Mechanism or FAM, launched by the UN and the World Bank at the UN General Assembly in September, to predict and prevent famines.

Google, Microsoft and Amazon are among the many partners involved in the FAM.

There is I think scope for more use of insurance and other risk-sharing mechanisms with the private sector.

Third, improving coordination.

The world has decided, in its wisdom, to create and finance a plethora of different institutions to support humanitarian action. Just in the UN, we have an agency for refugees, an agency for food, an agency for children, an agency for population issues and so on. Each is governed separately and seeks money for their activities separately.

Some people think it would have been better to have established a single lead agency in the UN for emergency response. Kofi Annan suggested something along these lines at the beginning of his second term as UN Secretary General. The idea was not pursued.

But no one agency or organization has the scale, reach, capacity or expertise to provide all the necessary response in any significant crisis. Which is why a coordinated response, getting the best from everyone, is important.

Coordination increases the impact of aid on the people most in need by avoiding duplication and gaps and ensuring responses are as comprehensive as possible.

My office, OCHA, and the Humanitarian Coordinators the UN Secretary-General appoints in countries facing major crises, coordinates needs assessments and the planning and monitoring of humanitarian activities on the ground to try to ensure that all aid is channeled to the most vulnerable people first.

We are trying to do that in as inclusive, facilitative and supportive a way as possible. We are in the market for ideas on how to do it better.

We also aim to coordinate the mobilization of humanitarian financing that is better prioritized, and develop more consultative response plans that are more rigorously based on data and objective evidence of the real needs in each country.

Pooled funding mechanisms are one of the key instruments to achieve this.

Pooled funds cut management costs and achieve economies of scale. By bringing together response planning, information and tracking, aid can become more efficient.

The UN's Central Emergency Response Fund – CERF – is one example with a proven track record of efficiency, scale and reach. It quickly releases funds to support coordinated action and kick-start the response to emergencies.

In addition, my office manages 18 Country Based Pooled Funds, which provide financial resources to the best-suited organizations on the ground to deliver the response that is needed.

Often these are national NGOs. Nearly one quarter of the money in these funds went to national NGOs last year, funding over 270 local organizations around the world. And we are looking for ways to grow that number.

A further area for improved coordination is between humanitarian agencies and those promoting development and solutions to the problems which are at the root of humanitarian suffering. These worlds have in the past been too often kept separate by artificial divides. We really have to do something better to address that, and in the UN, we are committed to playing our part.

We need more innovation in coordinated responses. For example, multiple studies have shown that cash is cheaper, swifter, and more empowering as a way of helping people than providing help solely in kind.

Since 2015 cash transfer programming has increased by 40 per cent, to reach 10 per cent of total humanitarian aid, with some donors making ambitious commitments to further scale up.

In Somalia, last year, cash was sent to half a million households affected by the drought, playing an essential role averting famine.

Technology used for beneficiary identification, like biometric data, combined with new means of recording transactions, like the blockchain, are being used in Jordan, Turkey and elsewhere today to enable refugees to procure basic goods.

These kinds of innovative approaches, once scaled up and connected, can play a pivotal role in creating a more nimble, flexible, solutions-driven humanitarian sector in the years to come.

The fourth area for improvement is in ensuring the highest possible standards of integrity and professionalism.

One aspect of that is preventing sexual exploitation and abuse and tackling sexual harassment in the work place. Recent scandals have brought home to all of us that, just like Hollywood, churches everywhere, many businesses and legislatures in many places, the humanitarian sector also needs to get its house in order. I now see a lot of serious effort across the whole sector in this area, with energy and momentum provided by events like the Safeguarding Summit hosted by the UK Government in London earlier this month.

Another dimension is ensuring effective mitigation of the fiduciary risks that are implicit in operating in crisis zones. Corruption, fraud, the infiltration of aid agencies by criminal gangs and misdirection of aid money to terrorist organizations are all genuine dangers. They are only prevented by a serious clear-eyed approach to risk management – without so constraining the agencies that they stop being able to reach the people in need. And again, I see a genuine and serious effort on that in many humanitarian organizations.

So, while I see everywhere I go, evidence of the truth that the humanitarian agencies are effective, saving lives and delivering results, I hope it is also clear that we are far from complacent.

The global humanitarian system is not the answer to all the world's problems, but without it the world would certainly be a much nastier and more dangerous place.

But we must constantly embrace change and improvement. And it will require people just like you - with your skills, training and passion – to help us do that.

Thank you.