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Remarks to event hosted by Network on Humanitarian Action (NOHA)

“Understanding Humanitarian Affairs from OCHA’s perspective”

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Hello everyone and welcome.

It’s a great pleasure to be here in this beautiful and historic city, to discuss humanitarian affairs and OCHA’s role in the global humanitarian system, and to look at the future of humanitarian action with an audience that is deeply interested and involved. My thanks to the Network on Humanitarian Action and to Pat Gibbons in particular, and to the organizers of today’s event.

First, let me introduce myself. [...]

My role now is as Assistant Secretary-General in the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which is known by its acronym, OCHA. (As we all know, in humanitarian affairs, you’re nobody without an acronym.)

Some of you may be familiar with my organization, but for those who aren’t, let me briefly describe its mandate and work.

I think we can assume that humanitarian aid has been going on for as long as war and natural disasters. Helping people in need, saving lives and relieving suffering, are basic human desires. But humanitarian aid as we conceive it today is based on principles that were formulated by the International Red Cross 150 years ago, and by the Geneva Conventions. These principles are:
Humanity: we provide aid and protection to save lives and alleviate suffering.

Neutrality: we do not choose sides and we help everyone, regardless of their previous behaviour.
Impartiality: we do not discriminate in our provision of aid and protection; we provide it on the basis of need.

Independence: we are motivated only by the principle of humanity, not by any political, financial, religious, military or other considerations.

These principles may appear rather abstract, but we are called on very frequently to protect them. They are the only defence we have when we are accused of taking sides in a conflict. For example, in Somalia, humanitarian operations must be kept as separate as possible from the

UN's political and peacekeeping operations, to avoid any risk that we will be seen as a legitimate military target.

The Red Cross and others have been providing aid based on the humanitarian principles for 150 years, but for most of that time, there was no central body overseeing humanitarian work and making sure that aid was getting to those who needed it most urgently. After natural disasters and during wars, the provision of aid could be fragmented and chaotic. By the 1980s, the world's media was on the scene reporting this.

In 1991, the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 46/182 which laid the foundations of the humanitarian system as it now stands. This resolution created a senior post in the UN, the Emergency Relief Coordinator, whose job it is to bring coordination to humanitarian agencies, to develop standards and policies for humanitarian agencies, and to advocate for the needs and rights of people affected by natural disasters and conflict.

My office, OCHA, was created to support the Emergency Relief Coordinator's work. The current Emergency Relief Coordinator is Under-Secretary-General Valerie Amos, and I am her deputy. We work very closely with a committee, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee or IASC, which includes representatives from UN humanitarian agencies like UNHCR, UNICEF and the World Health Organization, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, and the major international NGOs like World Vision and Save the Children. So although OCHA is a UN agency, it's slightly unusual because Valerie Amos and I represent the whole humanitarian community – both UN and non-UN.

OCHA's role is small but crucial. The ERC designates a Humanitarian Coordinator in every country that is undergoing a humanitarian crisis. From our offices around the world, we coordinate humanitarian operations on the ground. We don't deliver food, or set up clinics, but we keep everyone informed of what people need and what aid agencies are doing, and we try to make sure that these are as closely matched as possible.

At UN headquarters in New York and Geneva, we have a centralized system to prioritize humanitarian programmes every year based on the needs of people around the world, and we launch annual appeals to Member States to fund this work. We represent the humanitarian community in our interactions with the media and in private, through advocacy with Member States and other UN bodies including the Security Council. You may have noticed that Valerie Amos has briefed the Council on Syria several times in the past few months.

We register the emergency assets and personnel that Member States have ready for immediate deployment in case of a sudden-onset emergency like an earthquake; and we maintain rosters of our own staff that can be sent abroad at short notice. We deployed a team to the Philippines last week, when the first forecasts of super-typhoon Haiyan came through.

And we manage some very specific funds for humanitarian projects, including an Emergency Fund of half a billion US dollars, which is supported by 124 Member States out of 193 at the United Nations.

That is a brief introduction to OCHA. But where do we stand in relation to the global humanitarian system?

Here, I would like to raise some questions about that system, which does not operate quite as it was envisaged twenty years ago when the role of Emergency Relief Coordinator was first created.

First, how global is the global humanitarian system?

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the IASC, which is fundamental to OCHA's work, is heavily dominated by western countries. About seventy percent of multilateral humanitarian funding comes from ten countries, all of which are members of the OECD. While humanitarian agencies on the ground have many national staff, the staff and management of international NGOs are overwhelmingly from the west. In crisis countries, we often see local and regional NGOs, which have the best access to people, networks and expertise, operating outside the IASC.

Many donors prefer to provide aid outside the multilateral system, directly to the country concerned. That is of course their right, but it detracts from the coordinated nature of international aid and may mean that the most urgent priorities are losing out.

We have set out to change this situation and expand the range of multilateral humanitarian donors, for example, by opening a liaison office in the Gulf and holding a donor conference for Syria earlier this year in Kuwait. Our partnerships with the BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – are important and growing.

The effort continues and is gaining strength. But for the time being, it's not entirely accurate to say that the humanitarian system is global.

The system is also not unified – but that may not necessarily be a bad thing. As humanitarian needs grow around the world because of factors including the effects of climate change and urbanization, resources are not keeping pace. There is a growing recognition that no one organization or system can possibly meet these needs.

The new model is one of diversity and inclusivity.

When disaster strikes, people look first to their own governments for help, and second, to neighbouring countries and regional organizations. International aid is the third tier of humanitarian assistance, which is called in for specialized tasks like search and rescue after an earthquake, or to deal with mega-crises that affect millions of people, like the earthquake in Haiti or the drought in Somalia.

We at OCHA are now working more closely with regional organizations like ASEAN and the African Union, which have their own humanitarian capacity. We work with the private sector, non-traditional donors, philanthropists, militaries, civil society, and academic institutions and networks like NOHA. We are providing tools and services, for example, training and guidelines, to support national and regional response and preparedness.

So rather than one monolithic humanitarian system, it makes more sense to think of different systems, large and small, working towards the same goals, ideally in a coordinated way. OCHA is concerned with the inter-operability of these systems, for example, ensuring that data produced by one organization can be analyzed by another, and supporting the introduction of common and agreed standards for humanitarian work.

The mission of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors.

Another element of the move to diversity is a blurring of the boundaries with our colleagues in Disaster Risk Reduction and Development.

Responding to the same recurrent crises on an annual basis is a terrible waste of resources and energy. It doesn't make sense to provide shelter every year for people affected by floods, when improving drainage systems would cost much less. Bringing in bottled water during a drought is far more expensive than improving the water supply in advance.

We now devote some of our resources to building resilient communities in countries and regions that suffer from recurrent crises, like the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. We support national strategies to improve seed stocks and diversify agricultural production, so that people won't be hit so hard if crops fail. We provide funding so that mothers and health workers are trained to spot the first signs of malnutrition in children and take action.

Some people argue that this is not strictly humanitarian work. We argue that if it's reducing a humanitarian crisis, it comes under our humanitarian mandate.

To summarize: what we call the global humanitarian system is not global, is comprised of many systems, and is not purely humanitarian.

That's because it has developed organically over time, and adapted to circumstances as they are dictated by humanitarian crises and trends on the ground.

These trends – urbanization, extreme weather events, the development of greater response capacities by Governments, the private sector and others, and technological advances – are forecast to continue. We expect global humanitarian action will evolve to look very different in ten or twenty years' time.

To prepare for this and to set a clear agenda in the years ahead, the Secretary-General has convened a World Humanitarian Summit, which will take place in 2016. All those involved in humanitarian work will be invited to take part: Governments, NGOs, humanitarian agencies, new humanitarian partners and affected people themselves.

The summit will focus on four thematic areas: humanitarian effectiveness; reducing vulnerability and managing risks; transformation through innovation, and; serving the needs of people in conflict. Its overriding aim is to recognize the diversity in the humanitarian response system, reinforce our commitment to humanitarian principles and form stronger partnerships for more effective global action.

In the run-up to the summit, we will hold global and regional consultations that will be as important as the event itself. They will take stock of achievements and identify ways of working that are more inclusive, innovative and effective. The agenda of the summit will be based on the findings of these consultations, so they will play a crucial role in setting the course of humanitarian action in the future. I urge everyone who has the chance to take part to do so.

Friends,

Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I hope this introduction has given you something to think about.

Humanitarian aid is a complex subject that ranges from technical expertise to matters of strategy, policy and even philosophy. We are constantly striving to improve it and make it more effective and accountable. In the past twenty years, we have seen two major reform initiatives: the establishment of the cluster system which groups all agencies working on an issue; and the Transformative Agenda, which emphasizes leadership and accountability. As we look forward to the World Humanitarian Summit, we welcome another phase of growth and renewal.

We are grateful for the contributions of the academic community and we thank you for your continued engagement and support. We will continue to rely on your expertise and commitment as we set the humanitarian agenda for the years ahead.