



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR VALERIE AMOS

Keynote Address: Canadian Humanitarian Conference, Ottawa
5 December 2014

As delivered

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to have been asked to join you at this second annual Canadian Humanitarian Conference. I understand that your discussions yesterday were thought provoking. I am sure that today's discussions will be equally stimulating.

My thanks to the government of Canada which plays a significant role in crisis response as I saw for myself in the Philippines last year, and is a strong supporter of humanitarian work around the world. Thanks also to the NGOs and other partners here today who are at the forefront of efforts to save lives around the world.

I have been asked to talk about some of the global challenges which are facing us as a humanitarian community and to address some of the actions we need to take to remain relevant and effective.

The world is in the midst of political turmoil and as solutions to some intractable conflicts seem further and further away, the world increasingly looks to us, the humanitarian community, for action. In a paradoxical way more is expected of us as hopes fade for political solutions to long term crises. We are in the spotlight and our successes and failures are amplified as never before with the growth of social media and a 24/7 news cycle. We are often judged not by what we have been able to do, but by what others have failed to do.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These are truly challenging times, when humanitarian actors are being called on to deal with the consequences of crises that have their roots in conflict, poverty, inequality, poor governance and under-development. In addition there is the impact of climate change, environmental degradation and population growth in some parts of the world. High levels of internal displacement and forced migration as a result of natural disasters and conflict is putting a huge strain on some already fragile and vulnerable countries. In addition we have rising

insecurity and instability caused by the growth of terrorist and armed groups. And there are popular uprisings challenging democratically elected Governments.

There are now very few conflicts which are national in character – most are regional and global. The crises in Syria and Iraq impact on political relations with Gulf countries and Iran; they pose security concerns on Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey; cause heavy refugee flows; and impact the broader dimensions of the politics of the Middle East. The crisis in Yemen also has significant and complex regional, political and security dimensions, which impacts migration and people-trafficking flows from Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea and other countries in East Africa. I could go on and make similar regional connections as a result of the conflicts in Libya, Mali, South Sudan and the Central African Republic.

This increasing complexity and connectivity is not only testing humanitarian response efforts, it is testing the principles that are the foundation of our work. Attempts are made to politicize our work as never before. In the interest of time I am going to make some broad generalisations about the different types of work we undertake.

Classic humanitarian response in the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster.

Response to slow onset crises – think the consequences of drought and famine where investment in early warning, prevention, social safety nets and building the resilience of communities is key.

And increasingly we are there in the midst of conflict. Desperately trying to get the access we need to help those who desperately need it. Humanitarian workers putting their lives on the line.

Between 2002 and 2013 over 80 per cent of the money we asked for through UN interagency humanitarian appeals, was for assistance to people affected by conflict and violence. Conflicts are now protracted. Look at Darfur in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Somalia. The average length of time a person is displaced is 17 years.

When I made my first visit to Syria nearly four years ago I was trying to persuade the Government that they had a humanitarian crisis on their hands. About one million people were in urgent need of help and assistance then. That figure now stands at over 12 million, inside the country. Over three million have fled to other countries.

So our work is multi-layered and multi-dimensional, requiring distinct approaches that address specific elements in different types of crises, but also requiring greater attention to be paid to areas where our work connects with that of partners working in the areas of preventive diplomacy, peacebuilding and development. And of course the role played by national Governments is crucial.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Statistics don't tell the whole story but they do give an indication of the rise in global humanitarian need.

Over the past 10 years, the amount requested through humanitarian appeals has risen from \$3 billion to \$17.9 billion; while three times as many people---more than 100 million --- now need assistance.

The number of disasters associated with climate change, including storms and floods, increased by roughly 10 occurrences per year over the past decade. 2013 produced the highest number of people killed by floods in a decade and a record \$118.6 billion in damage. Oxfam projects that the number of people affected by climate-related disasters will rise to 375 million by 2015, a more than 50 per cent increase on the average number over the past decade. This increase is fuelled by higher concentrations of people living in flood, storm and drought-prone areas and a lack of adaptation strategies to protect them.

While experts differ on whether droughts are increasing what is clear is that they are affecting the livelihoods and food security of greater numbers of people. One sixth of the world's population lives in arid and semi-arid regions, Some 2.4 billion people in Southern Asia are expected to live in areas of high water stress over the next 50 years; and 250 million Africans will be doing so by 2020. In these areas crop yields are predicted to drop for farmers relying on rain-fed agriculture, which is the case for the majority of African and Asian farmers.

Armed conflict forced 33.3 million people to become internally displaced by the end of 2013 and the number of refugees increased by 21 per cent, from 13.8 million to 16.7 million people. About 78 per cent of those displaced in 2013 came from just five conflict-affected countries: Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Nigeria and Sudan.

Three of those countries: Sudan, DRC and Somalia were responsible for more than half of all humanitarian appeal requests between 2002 and 2012. Just three countries. We know that something must be wrong if over a ten year period and with billions of dollars of investments, we are still negotiating access, to save lives and bring people the basics they need to survive.

Behind each and every statistic is a child, a woman, a man needing our help and support. These are the most vulnerable people in the world.

In 2012, of the 22 countries that had an inter-agency humanitarian appeal, 21 had had at least one other crisis in the previous 10 years. Despite the economic gains achieved by many countries, poverty is still concentrated in fragile states where half of the world's extreme poor live. The number of people living in abject poverty is rising.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the four years that I have been in this job I have seen the best and the worst that we as people can do to each other. I have seen the aggressive use of state sovereignty as an excuse for inaction in countries where there is a clear humanitarian imperative. I have seen the callousness of leaders whose rhetoric is inclusiveness and concern for their people but whose practice is something else. I have seen increasing fragility, fragmentation, polarization and marginalization but also greater connectivity between people of different cultures and religions, individual and

community resilience, and fights for justice, equality and human rights played out globally. And I have seen people and donors around the world support resource mobilisation at unprecedented levels. 2013 was a record year for humanitarian giving, with US\$22 billion mobilised in response, one quarter of it from private givers – most of them individuals. And there is the know-how, the innovation we have tapped from private sector companies like DHL and Ericsson and the myriad small and medium sized enterprises in many countries.

Against this backdrop, how can the humanitarian sector adapt to ensure it is providing the right solutions to people who need help and support and want to be treated with respect and dignity? We have to reform to stay relevant. We talk a lot about innovation. that innovation is not just about technology, it is also about how we do business.

To be effective we must listen to people and work with them to find sustainable solutions. Humanitarian organizations are looking at different ways in which we can engage with people, individually and collectively. Using for example, TRAC FM to conduct country-wide citizen-centred interactive radio polls.

Fostering partnerships is critical to our success because no community, government, or agency can address the scale of these crises alone.

That is why, the World Humanitarian Summit, which will take place in Istanbul in May 2016, is so important. With the growth in humanitarian need, the pressure on resources, the increasing numbers of actors including private sector partners, and challenges to the principles which underpin our work, the consultative fora in the run up to the summit are an opportunity to debate the challenges we face and to develop a forward-looking agenda.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We need to work together to create a truly global, diverse and inclusive humanitarian system. We need to foster greater cooperation not competition as is happening today in Sierra Leone in the fight against Ebola. Cuban doctors from their Ministry of Health, trained by the World Health Organisation, are working in field hospitals run by NGOs such as Save the Children. Hospitals built by the UK military and paid for through the UK humanitarian aid budgets. One example of effective partnership.

The growth in cash transfers has been made possible because of the cooperation of banks working with aid agencies. Partnerships with telecommunications companies have helped us to find people trapped in rubble after disasters; have helped us to communicate with more people; and saved time and resources because we can find out exactly what people need. We need to encourage these partnerships between humanitarian actors, the private sector and affected communities.

A strong message emerging from the World Humanitarian Summit regional consultations is the need to forge more equal and inclusive partnerships with national NGO and civil society organisations. National NGOs are at the forefront of humanitarian response and are far more in

tune with community capacities and needs but may not have a seat at the table when response decisions are being taken: this needs to change.

Let me now turn to one of the most complex areas of our work. How to protect the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality as we work in increasingly politicized environments. Turning these principles into practical tools are the best means we have to stay and deliver assistance; and to build the acceptance of local communities. That is how NGOs are still able to operate in ISIL-controlled areas in Syria. In negotiating access we must be firm about our limits and establish our collective red lines. This year in Chad OCHA negotiated safe access to crisis areas so that permanent humanitarian field operations would be established in remote locations where refugees and Chadian returnees were arriving in large numbers, fleeing fighting in South Sudan and the Central African Republic.

The last two years have been a huge challenge in this regard. Making sure we understand the political context in which we are working but keeping humanitarian response separate to political influence in for example, Syria, Iraq, Ukraine and Gaza has been particularly difficult.

And we face an additional challenge. The continuing undermining of international humanitarian and human rights laws. Flagrant violations go unpunished raising questions about the accountability of elements. We need to find a way to address this.

After every major conflict we say ‘never again’ and yet what I see every day is an inability to halt the violence. We need to find political solutions. But we also need greater sense of active, global citizenship to deliver the more peaceful, more just world that we would all like to see. Let’s work together towards that goal.