



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O'BRIEN**

**Opening Remarks to the World Humanitarian Summit Regional Consultation
for the Pacific Region
Auckland, New Zealand, 30 June 2015**

As delivered

First of all may I thank our co-hosts, the ministers both of New Zealand and Australia - Your Excellency Murray McCully and Your Excellency Julie Bishop. Also to the Prime Minister of Tuvalu, His Excellency Enel Sopoaga and the Premier of Niue, His Excellency Toke Talagi, as well as my good friend Mr Elhadj As Sy and my colleague Helen Clark who has just spoken so well.

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests and colleagues, I'm very pleased I don't actually have to introduce myself. As you can see the job title is so huge that I don't think I have the capacity to take a deep enough breath to get through it. That's been the problem since I took on this role three weeks ago. Trying to explain the position I have joined, I can never quite get to the end of the job title.

I do want to welcome and thank you all for coming to this seventh regional consultation in preparation for first, the crescendo of these consultations in Geneva. This is a really fundamentally important regional conference and consultation because it's the seventh out of eight but also it does have this unique quality of representing the Pacific challenges and opportunities. It's so important to have that voice heard within our broad sweep right across the world in seeking to engage as many stakeholders as we possibly can with this genuinely inclusive consultation process.

So many of the challenges that have come our way are very much to say... we need our voice heard and this really is both the designed opportunity as well as the chance. So thank you all very much indeed for coming and making sure that you make that a reality. And it's from that that we will be able to take so much of the sharing of best practice and the knowledge and expertise, the experience, the problems as well as the opportunities through to that important Geneva meeting in October, and then we will take that all the way through to our World Humanitarian Summit in May.

And of course I am delighted that the Governments of New Zealand and Australia have agreed to co-host this meeting. But I am also very, very pleased to see so many partners and I think that word partnership is absolutely fundamental to what we are talking about here as well. It's not just government, but also regional governments, regional organisations, for this particular part of the world is going to be a really fundamental area

of learning. I really hope that you are going to explain to us what works at a regional level and how we make that work -- civil society and NGOs, humanitarian practitioners, and very importantly the private sector. The private sector is even more visible in areas of natural disaster than naturally one might expect in the conflict settings.

Above all, I'm really, really pleased to see people who are affected by crises, who are here today to give us their testimony. It is ultimately, responding to the challenge from the Premier of Niue. And that's how we all feel, that we are accountable to the affected peoples and that's what drives our motivation and our action. And it is together that we will be able to set a future agenda for humanitarian action – emphasis on the word action. So as you've heard, the stakes are high. Around the world, humanitarian needs are overwhelming our capacity to respond. Just six months into 2015, the United Nations is seeking to provide life-saving assistance and protection to 78.9 million people across 37 countries. This is nearly double the number of people targeted by UN-coordinated appeals just ten years ago. And this trend shows no sign of reversing.

Around the world, more than 59.5 million people are now forcibly displaced. This is a crisis of forced migration on a scale that we have not seen in the post-World War era. With record numbers of people forced to flee their homes as a result of persecution, of conflict, and of violence, the United Nations Secretary General has called for governments and societies around the world to recommit to providing refuge and safety to those who are displaced.

The majority of these people are fleeing conflict. Yet other factors also play a role. The impacts of climate change, population growth, environmental degradation, resource scarcity and natural disasters contribute to increasing people's vulnerability to disasters and conflicts, and put increasing numbers of people on the move, including irregular migration as millions of people seek safety.

By 2050, up to one billion people could be displaced by the impacts of climate change including more frequent and intense weather events. Most of us cannot imagine a future in which our ancestral homes could be washed away by a storm – yet it is precisely this which is already happening to low-lying and coastal communities here in the Pacific region. We have so much to learn and understand from you.

Apart from the terrible human costs of natural disasters, the economic costs are staggering. Estimated economic losses due to natural disasters worldwide may now be as high as 300 billion US dollars a year, and those are expected to increase.

The Pacific, as you all know, is one of the most disaster prone regions in the world. People are still recovering from Tropical Cyclone Pam, as we've been hearing, which caused widespread destruction in particular Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Solomon Islands, and Typhoon Maysak, which struck the Federated States of Micronesia. The relative scale of these disasters is staggering. In Vanuatu – which according to the world risk index is the country with the greatest risk of disaster worldwide – as we heard some 190,000 people were affected by Cyclone Pam. That is nearly seventy percent of the population.

Flash floods like those that hit the Solomon Islands last year, droughts, increased outbreaks of diseases, food insecurity, and rising sea levels erode people's resilience and

make them more vulnerable. Yet these vulnerabilities can be addressed. Many of these risks are predictable, which means that we can do more to prepare and protect people from their effects.

Colleagues,

Mitigating and adapting to climate change and are among the great tests of our time. And progress is being made. Around the world, the number of deaths caused by natural disasters has fallen dramatically compared to ten or even five years ago. Improved weather forecasting and early-warning systems, combined with advances in telecommunications, better connectivity and evacuation plans have saved thousands of lives in the last year alone, in the Pacific, the Philippines, and India, to name a few. Many of you know what I was like when I was Development Minister in the UK. I became known as the “But for” minister. If only we could prove the counter-factual and all be adamant about how many lives have been saved, how many deaths averted, then we would have much more of an easy story to tell. It is difficult to prove the counter-factual but we are doing collectively a huge amount of good that we need to build on and understand.

The work of governments and National Disaster Management Offices in increasing disaster preparedness and coordinating humanitarian response in this region, with support from, for example, the Pacific Humanitarian Team, is commendable. I would like to pay tribute to Julie Bishop for having announced \$2 million for humanitarian innovation. I think you said it was a challenge. Well that’s H-I-C – let’s hope it becomes H-I-P and becomes a program. I think that would be great and I’m delighted with that initiative today.

Regional mechanisms for early warning, such as the Pacific Tsunami Warning System and the Melanesian Volcano Network, are reducing disaster risk. Civil-military cooperation amongst governments in the region and innovative partnerships with private sector organisations are contributing to more effective humanitarian response, helping improve transport, logistics and telecommunications in the aftermath of a crisis. This region has also pioneered innovative models of risk financing, such as the Pacific Catastrophe Risk Assessment and Financing Initiative.

As in all regions around the world, it is ordinary women and men who are the first responders to any crises, and go to extraordinary lengths to help their communities. And I might just say that Helen was absolutely right to put front and centre that it is women who are often at the forefront of humanitarian responses because they are the most vulnerable and the ones who bear the greatest brunt. I think that designing women and girls front and centre in all our responses, whether it’s in humanitarian or development work, is absolutely vital and unchallengeable.

The role of civil society groups, including the national Red Cross societies, is equally important. The people and communities of this region have demonstrated incredible resilience in their ability to cope and rebuild after disasters, including the tragic earthquake in Christchurch in 2010; the 2013 tsunami that struck the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia; and of course Typhoon Maysak and Cyclone Pam earlier this year.

It is precisely this resilience that humanitarian action must encourage and support in order to deal with the challenges of the future.

These challenges include the effects of climate change, but they extend to the crisis of protecting civilians in conflict and the growing gap between humanitarian needs and the funds available to meet them. Two weeks ago I released the status report on this year's global humanitarian appeal. We have received a total of \$4.8 billion out of the \$18.8 we requested, leaving a shortfall of US \$14 billion. Halfway through the year, global humanitarian action is just 26 per cent funded – the lowest figure ever.

I said earlier that progress is being made. But it is not being made fast enough. And for that, we run the risk of being judged by history as the generation that did too little, too late.

The World Humanitarian Summit, together with the Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction adopted in March this year, the Financing Development meeting in Addis that Helen referred to, the agreement on a new sustainable development agenda in September, the High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing due to report in November and the Climate Change meeting in Paris in December, again as we have heard repeatedly, provide us with a unique opportunity to change that.

In Istanbul next year, building on what we will have done in October in Geneva, we must set an ambitious forward agenda for humanitarian action. We must not waste this opportunity to create a more coherent approach that embraces both sustainable development and investment in disaster risk reduction, preparedness, and response. The Summit [...] is a fantastic opportunity because not only can it, but it must, re-inspire generations to reinvigorate everyone involved in the humanitarian community with the fundamental tenets of our work.

It needs to be a global rallying call for humanity, putting principles and affected people at the very centre of our response. It will initiate a set of actions and new technologies so that people, countries and communities are better prepared for, and able to respond to, current and future crises. And I think it's really important, let us be clear about this, and I speak now as somebody who is in the UN and I am no longer part of any kind of domestic political or elected position as I was, this needs to be backed by total, immutable political [...] global will. And that's where we need to re-inspire new generations to get behind this humanitarian action which is forming part of our overall response as partnerships around the world are improving lives and saving lives. So over the next three days, we must speak openly about these challenges, but we must first and foremost think about the way forward. We have this chance to transform the way we work and create a diverse and truly inclusive global humanitarian system. This is not some form of bid and offer process. This is a summit. This is deliberately designed to draw together all the voices, experiences, technologies, practical solutions together to rise to be the very best that we can be to meet those challenges. I am really struck that this region can really tell and teach the world a lot. I'm listening, I'm learning and I'm determined that, together, over these next three days we'll make this a regional consultation that nobody will be able to ignore and everybody will listen to.

Thank you again for being here, and I look forward to a fruitful consultation.