



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien

Opening Statement to High-Level Event on the Lake Chad Basin

New York, 25 September 2015

As delivered

Good afternoon and welcome to this High-Level Event on the Lake Chad Basin. I am pleased to be here with you to discuss the humanitarian crisis that is unfolding in the region, and to consider how we can best support millions of people whose security and livelihoods are at risk.

With so many other humanitarian crises on the international agenda, we hear relatively little about the horrors taking place in the Lake Chad Basin. And yet this is the scene of the fastest-growing displacement crisis in Africa, with 2.3 million people forced from their homes since May 2013. That's about the population of Qatar and half the population of New Zealand or Ireland -- forced to flee for their lives.

Although most of these people are in Nigeria, Boko Haram have caused mayhem with indiscriminate attacks on villages, killing men and abducting women and children in all four countries.

One woman in Dalori camp in Maiduguri told my colleagues her seventeen-year-old son was killed in front of her by militants, who then dragged her fifteen-year-old daughter away with them. Sadly, her story is not unusual. We must ensure that there is accountability for these horrific acts of violence.

A quarter of a million people have fled across borders. Many have walked hundreds of kilometres from Nigeria to Cameroon, Chad and Niger, in the most appalling conditions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

People in the Lake Chad Basin are some of the poorest and most resilient in the world, and now the region has also become an epicentre of violence and terror.

Droughts and floods hit the region repeatedly. Malnutrition and disease outbreaks hover at emergency levels. Some 5.5 million people do not have enough to eat, or cannot get hold of nutritious foods. Cholera is a regular threat, with 37,000 cases and 760 deaths in Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria last year.

The emergence of Boko Haram has pushed them over the edge.

This crisis is having an appalling impact on women and children, who are being abducted, abused, raped, exploited, trafficked, and forced to work as porters and lookouts. Children as young as six years old have been used as suicide bombers.

Over the past five months, a sharp increase in attacks by Boko Haram has uprooted 500,000 children, bringing the total number of children on the run in northeast Nigeria and neighbouring countries to over 1.4 million. Many of these children are now out of school.

And the future looks even bleaker, as farmers are unable to tend their fields and trade in some areas is at a standstill. According to some estimates, business activity in the regions affected by violence is down by 80 per cent.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We must do more for these people and communities; not only because it is our duty, but because this region is at a crossroads that links North Africa, the resource-rich Gulf of Guinea, and the entire Sahel region from the Atlantic to the Red Sea.

It is a region I know well and which I care about deeply – most importantly the peoples of this region who have shown me nothing but generosity, kindness and hospitality on my many visits over the last 36 years in all the Chad Basin countries of Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria.

Entrenched poverty and the disproportionate impact of this crisis on young people should make it a priority for the international community.

If we disregard the huge scale of humanitarian needs, we could all pay a high price.

Thank you.