

ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL KYUNG-WHA KANG
BRIEFING TO THE AFRICAN UNION PEACE AND SECURITY COUNCIL

THE HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES OF EL NIÑO:
IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE, SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT

ADDIS ABABA, 19 NOVEMBER 2015

As delivered

Ambassador Sakine, Chairperson of the African Union Peace and Security Council,
Madam Commissioner, Excellency Aisha Abdullahi,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the UN OCHA, it gives me great honour and pleasure to have this opportunity to address you about this year's El Niño, which is already having a severe humanitarian impact across the continent.

Projections suggest that this year's El Niño will be of similar strength to the 1997-98 event, which claimed an estimated 23,000 lives and displaced 100 million people globally. The climatic phenomenon which severely disrupts weather patterns is now gaining in strength, and forecasts indicate it will reach peak intensity towards the end of 2015 and into early 2016.

Changes in rainfall patterns and temperatures have already affected food security, water availability, the occurrence and spread of diseases, and people's ability to earn a living, across a large swathe of eastern and southern Africa. People are already on the move as a result of floods, droughts and the effects on their livelihoods.

In East Africa, Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti and Eritrea are experiencing drought-like conditions. There has been a massive spike in food insecurity in Ethiopia, where the number of people in need of support has risen from 2.9 million at the beginning of 2015 to 8.2 million today. Across the region, food insecurity is expected to increase from 12 million at the start of this year to 22 million by the start of 2016.

In the coming months, East Africa is expected to experience heavy rainfall and flooding, as part of the La Niña phenomenon which sometimes follows a strong El Niño event. Some 132,000 people in Somalia have already been affected by floods. In Kenya, over 800,000 people are at risk and across the region more than 2 million people could be affected.

Moving to Southern Africa, poor rainfall is likely to result in worsening levels of food insecurity until March 2016, especially in Malawi, Zimbabwe and Madagascar. It is estimated that some 4.9 million

people will become food insecure during the lean season, including 2.8 million in Malawi and 1.5 million in Zimbabwe.

Apart from the immediate humanitarian impact, there is also concern about the effect of these extreme weather events in volatile security situations, particularly in Somalia. Flooding has already led to displacement, disease outbreaks, loss of crops and property in parts of south central and north east Somalia that are mainly controlled by Al Shabaab, where humanitarian access is extremely difficult.

On a larger scale, we are only beginning to understand the correlation between climate stress and conflict. Many of today's conflicts are taking place in locations that have suffered from droughts. In the past 40 years Darfur, for example, has registered 16 of the 20 driest years on record.

We need to do everything in our power to prevent and prepare for the effect.

Now is the time for action, to prevent a clearly foreseeable tragedy that would unfold within months.

That means concerted endeavours to shore up people's resilience to shocks and strengthening their ability to cope.

The response to El Niño and La Niña events in the past has tended to be too little, too late. Despite many alerts of impending drought in the Horn of Africa, more than 250,000 people died from famine and food insecurity in Somalia between October 2010 and April 2012.

We must not repeat this mistake.

We now have a small window of time for concerted action by communities, local authorities, Governments, regional organizations and international development and humanitarian organizations can save lives and reduce the need for a larger humanitarian undertaking at a later stage.

It is very encouraging to see the countries hardest hit proactively responding to the crisis.

I welcome in particular the leadership of the Ethiopian Government, which is the largest donor and responder to the drought crisis unfolding there.

The United Nations is working closely with affected governments and regional bodies to address and reduce the impacts of El Niño. I am pleased to see that the Deputy Chairperson has asked the AU Commission's departments to work on mobilizing resources.

The AU and the international humanitarian community must join forces to tackle this slow onset crisis and respond to the humanitarian needs that El Niño has already generated. United Nations humanitarian agencies stand ready to support you.

We must also front-load longer-term investments in reducing risk and vulnerability.

In particular, we must act to mitigate the possibility that a La Niña event could materialize before the region can recover from the effects of El Niño. For this reason, disaster risk reduction, preparedness and resilience-building activities should continue beyond this El Niño period.

On the African continent and around the world, armed conflicts, extreme poverty, growing inequality, rapid unplanned urbanization and natural hazards are putting more people at risk. Climate change is causing increasing humanitarian stress.

It is time for a shift in how we anticipate and respond to devastating crises that lead to massive loss of life, displacement and humanitarian needs.

In Sendai earlier this year, the international community committed to a new global framework for disaster risk reduction. In New York in September, Member States unanimously endorsed the Sustainable Development Goals and pledged to leave no one behind. In a few weeks, in Paris, I hope that world leaders will commit to ambitious targets to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

But these commitments mean little if they do not improve the lives of the most vulnerable. The Secretary-General of the UN is convening the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016 and calling upon the leaders of the world to turn these commitments into concrete actions. The World Humanitarian Summit, in year one of the SDGs, will be the first litmus test of whether or not we will deliver on these ambitious and universal goals.

We cannot achieve a world of safety and dignity for all without addressing the plight of millions of women, children and men affected by humanitarian crises.

We count on your support and participation at the highest level to ensure that the World Humanitarian Summit delivers the success that our humanity needs.

Thank you.