



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

As delivered

Assistant-Secretary-General Kyung-Wha Kang

Opening Remarks at Lee Kwan Yew School of Public Policy
Singapore, 14 April 2015

Professor Mike Douglass, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here today at the Lee Kwan Yew School of Public Policy. My thanks to the School, to Professor Douglass and Caroline Brassard for inviting me and for your kind introduction.

I come here at a time when Singaporeans, and many others around the world, is still mourning the passing of the great leader whose name this school bears. So, may I begin by offering my deepest sympathies and condolences. The late prime minister was indeed a towering figure, and at a time when the global community is looking for bold and inspiring leadership to help steer the course out of the many violent crises around the world, his absence is particularly missed.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Less than a year ago, the UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos, spoke here about the challenges facing the global humanitarian system. I re-read the speech while preparing for today's engagement. I hope that you remember what she said, as it was a very comprehensive and poignant overview of the humanitarian emergencies around the world and the challenges humanitarian actors are facing in trying to bring live-saving assistance to those caught up in these crises. During the past year, the situation has further deteriorated, with more people in need of assistance and protection, stretching even further the limited capacity of humanitarians to deliver. The emergence of violent extremist groups, such as ISIL in Syria and Iraq and Boko Haram in north Nigeria, who have gained ground while meting out extreme violence on civilians and triggering massive displacements wherever they strike, has exacerbated the challenge of protecting civilians caught up in armed conflict. More recently, Yemen has plunged back into violence, further endangering the population, 60% of which had already been dependent of humanitarian aid for survival even before the flare-up of war.

So when one is in the business of trying to help people caught up in these crisis situations, it is easy to be disheartened these days. So we try extra hard to keep up our spirits, and redouble our resolve every day to live by the humanitarian imperative, which is to do what we can, with what we have, no matter how difficult and tough the circumstances, while making ardent appeals to the warring parties and political leaders

with influence to stop the violence and find a way back to peace so that people can return to normal lives.

But taking a step back to the full spectrum of humanitarian challenges around the world, we are also heartened by positive developments, especially on the natural disaster preparedness and response front. So today, I would like to discuss some key developments which are having a direct impact on improving our capacity to respond effectively to large-scale natural disasters in the Asia and the Pacific. I also want to talk about the increasingly complex and difficult task of safeguarding the provision of humanitarian assistance in situations of conflict.

Let me start with some observations about the overall international humanitarian architecture, and the strains currently placed on it.

Almost 24 years ago, on 19 December 1991, the General Assembly adopted resolution 46/182 on strengthening the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations. This initiative was influenced by world events at that very significant moment in history, just after the end of the Cold War and in the throes of a realignment in international politics, which called for new arrangements to strengthen multilateral humanitarian action.

46/182 created a system centred around the Emergency Relief Coordinator as the top UN official in charge of coordinating international humanitarian response, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) as the forum where the coordination takes place, and a set of established core and guiding principles. The IASC is comprised of UN agencies, IOM, ICRC, IFRC and three NGO coalitions. Twenty-five years later, the humanitarian landscape has changed dramatically. More actors are engaged in more emergencies with growing intensity and outpacing the temporary solutions that our short-term tools can offer. Thus, while the fundamental principles enshrined in that General Assembly Resolution has continued to guide our work, there is a pervasive sense among humanitarians, old and new, that our system is stretched, the existing tools are not good enough to meet the present and future challenges, and a radical changes in our business model is called for.

In the last ten years, there have been moments of strategic revisions aimed at making humanitarian action more efficient and effective. In 2005, in the aftermath of the Indian ocean Tsunami, the unpredictable nature of what humanitarian agencies would and could bring to a disaster prompted the then Emergency Relief Coordinator, Jan Egeland, to launch an independent review of the global humanitarian system. This resulted in some significant adaptations for improved system-level preparedness and response. It put into place the cluster system, which strengthened operational coordination and assigned “provider of last resort” responsibility to a number of agencies, and it ensured rapid access to initial start-up funds for sudden-onset crises through the half-a-billion dollar Central Emergency Response Fund, widely known by its acronym as CERF.

Again in 2010, the response to the Haiti earthquake and the Pakistan floods exposed a number of weaknesses and inefficiencies in the international humanitarian response. Thus, the IASC “Transformative Agenda” was launched in 2012, introducing a set of concrete operational steps to improve the timeliness and effectiveness of our collective

response, by empowering leadership, developing clearer “all of system” protocols to respond to large scale crises, and ensuring that accountability and transparency of operation, especially to the affected people, was more clearly systematised.

But despite these achievements, humanitarian needs have continued to grow, humanitarian funds have become stretched to the limit and the response rate to our appeals have continued to drop. Humanitarian work has become extremely dangerous, with aid workers themselves being directly targeted and attacked. Political actors and parties conflict have no qualms about exploiting humanitarian aid as a political tool, and the fundamental tenets of humanitarianism continue to be flaunted in conflicts. Under the circumstance, the Secretary-General has launched a process of global, inclusive dialogue on the present and future challenges to humanitarian action, which will culminate in the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016.

Since mid-2014, regional and thematic consultations have taken place around the globe in the lead-up to the Summit. What we are hearing through these consultations over the past year is that stakeholders want the Summit to be a pivotal turning point, setting a change agenda for the future of humanitarian action.

In conflicts, the persistent call is for a renewed commitment by the powers-that-be to their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law, and accountability for their violations, and to the impartiality, humanity and independence of humanitarian aid and those who deliver it. Sadly, there is little sign that the tide is turning for the better in the many conflicts around the world, including in this region. Thus, the WHS must send a powerful reminder about the accountability of political and security actors, whose actions and inactions can prevent, stop or resolve violent conflicts. This includes the UN Security Council, which is failing in fulfilling its Charter responsibility for maintaining international peace and security.

In natural disasters, the call is for bold changes toward stronger national ownership, in more diverse partnership with other actors who have a role to play in disaster preparedness and response: local authorities, development actors, military actors, business entities, academia, national and subnational NGOs, and most importantly, the people and communities affected or prone to be affected by crisis.

What might this look like? A recently published report on the future of how the system will be financed perhaps provides some food for thought: In future, much of the cost of providing humanitarian assistance will be borne by local, domestic and regional actors, including affected governments.

The costs of financing supplementary international response will continue to be met as they have been. However, there will be far greater diversity amongst donors, including the rising middle classes in middle-income countries (MICs), through voluntary giving. The interests and concerns of rising and emerging donors will challenge and reshape both modes of assistance and the relative influence of actors within the existing system, and will support the rise of new responding actors.

Crisis-affected individuals will receive a ‘bundle’ of financial and material assistance, including via commercial savings, loans and insurance; cash and material assistance from

relatives and local collectives; government cash transfers and welfare payments; temporary access to subsidised or free goods and services provided by the domestic and international private sector; and finally cash, material relief and access to services provided by domestic civil society organisations (CSOs) international NGOs and the UN. Responses will be coordinated primarily by governments and regional organisations and will draw on international humanitarian standards and emerging norms. They will use new communications technologies.

Elsewhere, international actors will continue to provide classic principled humanitarian assistance in contested settings where there is conflict, political instability or persecution of minority groups, substituting for a lack of domestic capacity or will to assist affected populations.

This vision is not so far-fetched. We are seeing elements of it here in Asia:

- People are making use of technology to give money.
- Foundations are increasingly engaged in supporting humanitarian action for disaster response.
- National NGOs are assuming increasing responsibilities, including on the international stage.
- Mobile money was a key tool used in the response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.
- ASEAN has established its regional coordination centre.
- Disaster affected people are making strategic use of social media to call out for help when they are affected by disasters, and to ensure their voices are heard in situations of conflict.
- Militaries are playing an ever-more important role in disaster response - as we saw most recently in Vanuatu after Cyclone Pam - and, of course, the private (business) sector's efforts, which have always been among the first in responding to disasters, are now being recognised as a key enabler of recovery following disasters.

In keeping abreast of these developments, OCHA's regional office is re-positioning itself as a provider of technical advice and support to Governments and regional organisations on preparedness, response coordination and a number of other areas.

But let's go back to the conflict-related, protracted crises, where people remain displaced inside their countries or across borders as refugees for years, even decades; where humanitarian access to people is contested by the state and non-state parties, who attempt to exploit humanitarian aid for political or military gains. To varying degrees, these barriers to humanitarian action is also found in Asia, which, by some measure, is host to more than a quarter of the world's conflicts. We need to do more and better to identify and meet the specific needs of people caught up in conflict situations in this region.

In this regard, some key recommendations were put forward by participants at the WHS Regional Consultation for North and South East Asia in Tokyo last year:

- we need to develop region-specific guidance on civil-military coordination in conflict settings,
- we must strengthen regional capacity on conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding,

- the region needs to develop regional conventions on the protection of internally displaced persons and migrants.

Many of these changes will not be easy to obtain, as they get the core of the authority and responsibility of sovereign states. But we must keep up the advocacy for these changes, while continuing to press for the protection of people caught up in the conflicts of today and for the integrity of impartial and independent humanitarian action.

We must also be mindful of the transformation unfolding in the broader political context in which we do our work. Having a keen understanding of the political dynamics is crucial to effective and independent humanitarian work. The relative wealth and power of nations is moving, from west to east, and north to south. The era when the international humanitarian system was dominated by a few countries and aid agencies from the west is ending. We see a proliferation of donors, aid organisations, technologies and fresh ideas – offering, perhaps for the first time, the prospect of a truly global response system.

Thus, for both natural disasters and conflicts, as well as every situation in between where people are suffering in crisis, we have a long way to go if we are to make the leap towards greater efficiency and accountability. And it's clear that the change must have the wholehearted buy-in of those who do not have a vested interest in the current system.

Given the breadth of the discussion and debate, let me home in on a few areas where we are trying to build on the positive momentum that have been generated over the years.

As we are gathered here today, a Global Forum on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination in preparation for the World Humanitarian Summit is taking place on the other side of Singapore, at the Changi Regional Humanitarian Assistance / Disaster Relief Coordination Centre. More than 100 delegates from around the world are engaged in what I hope is a relatively robust debate on how to make civil-military coordination work better in both natural disaster response operations and when providing humanitarian assistance in complex emergencies. Since this Global Forum is being conducted specifically in preparation for the Summit, its recommendations will have the potential to contribute to further shaping a vision for the future of humanitarian action that is fit for future.

Another area of concerted action building on the gains so far is in disaster risk reduction. In Asia and the Pacific, Governments have been very active in developing national disaster preparedness and response capacities since the adoption by the UN of the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) ten years ago, which served as the global blueprint for disaster risk reduction efforts, until the adoption of the new Sendai Framework for Action in Japan last month. The new Framework recognises that national authorities have assumed a more central role in leading emergency preparedness and response activities. It firmly places Governments at the centre of action on disaster management while recognising the need for an 'all of society' approach. In disaster response work, regional and international humanitarian actors will play a supportive role, when national authorities are overwhelmed and seek external support.

Many countries now have a suitable legal framework in place for disaster management – including preparedness and response – seen as the area of the HFA where the most

progress has been made in the last 10 years. For large scale disasters, where national capacity might be overwhelmed, there are now clear protocols on how assistance would be accepted from outside. Ten years previously there was no law, no national disaster management authority, very little in the way of regulations, and capacity was limited. Quite a change in ten years.

Another encouraging trend is the increasing diversity of actors willing, able and ready to partner in disaster preparedness and response. As already mentioned, there is no doubt that the combined capacities of military actors have made and will continue to make vital contributions in responding to natural disasters, especially at the initial phase. At the regional level coordination is being improved and strengthened between militaries and between them and their civilian counterparts to support national authorities and humanitarians respond to initial needs while longer-term and more structured operations are being established. A new regional consultative forum on civil-military cooperation was established in 2014 to get civilians and military personnel together to plan how they will work together on the ground in large scale disasters.

The private sector also encompasses a range of institutions, from multinational corporations to national and regional industries and local businesses, that are eager to engage. Similar to the regional initiative on civil-military coordination, we are making progress in this field as well. Regional Business Consultations were held in Bangkok in December 2014, co-hosted by OCHA and the Philippine Disaster Recovery Foundation (PDRF) established by private businesses. During this consultation, business and the private sector agreed to take concrete measures to enhance engagement with governments and humanitarian agencies in preparing to respond to disasters.

And then there are, of course, the increasingly influential regional inter-governmental organisations, which are playing a stronger role in disaster management and response. In particular, I would like to highlight the key role played by ASEAN to promote one comprehensive approach to emergency response preparedness and response based on synergies and unity of effort. "One ASEAN, One Response".

Actors in the multilateral humanitarian "establishment", such as traditional donors and IASC organizations, must approach this increasingly crowded field with humility and readiness to adapt.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To sum up, the emerging conclusions from the ongoing consultations in the lead up to the World Humanitarian Summit seem to be suggesting that when it comes to natural disaster preparedness and response, huge strides have been made in the last ten years. Every country in this region now has a national disaster management office. Countries, governments, civil societies are working hard to ensure that they have top quality, international best practice legal frameworks in place to facilitate their own ability to prepare for and respond to disasters, and to govern how they accept and make use of offers of assistance coming from outside. In most countries this is part of a much larger and more comprehensive disaster risk reduction programme or framework, which is firmly rooted in the development agenda. When disasters do occur Governments are meeting their statutory obligations and managing response.

Regional and international assistance is provided rapidly and for a brief period at the front end of the response if it is needed while rapid efforts are made to recover and return to the development trajectory. And usually the funds for that rapid response are made available quite quickly – from an increasingly broad variety of sources. Raising money for longer-term rehabilitation and recovery is more challenging but by no means impossible.

But in conflict-related humanitarian crises, the outlook remains bleak.

For example, one hundred and twenty thousand people remain displaced, the majority being the Rohingya Muslims, three years after the outbreak of communal violence in Rakhine State. Thousands more still live in camps on the Thai/Myanmar border. Thousands more have made their way to Malaysia where they live precariously on the edge of the law. Despite the nation-wide cease-fire agreement ready for signing, armed clashes continue in Kachin and Shan states, leading to new displacements. In Afghanistan, the number of civilian casualties is on the rise again, as the multinational forces withdraw. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, which remains frozen in a state of perpetual conflict, 23 million people are living on the edge, provided with only the bare basics upon which to survive, supplemented by minimal international assistance.

How do we better assist and protect people caught up in these protracted crises? How do we press the state and non-state actors to abide by the distinction between civilians and combatants and the proportionality of means to ends in military action, which is the basis of international humanitarian law, and the inherent dignity and equality of all human beings, in peace times as well as in war, which is fundamental basis of international human rights law. These are weighty matters that require our continuing and consistent, and principled advocacy. But this task is not just for humanitarians, but calls for the active engagement and commitment of the whole of the global community, particularly those with influence to shape the course of global events. Surely, the world cannot be on the right course when the number of our fellow human beings in need of live-saving assistance continues to grow every year, largely due to conflict and violence. What would it take to curb this trend and we start seeing those numbers going down. That is a question that we hope to see more vigorously debated in the final rounds of consultations leading up to the WHS.

So - where do we go from here? There is no doubt that humanitarian needs are increasing and humanitarian actors are being asked to do more, for more people and at a greater cost than ever before, compelling us to find new ways of working to ensure that needs are met. We are working on the answers but need help.

So I want to ask you to help us. The academic world has so much to offer. The “Natural Disaster Management in Asia Pacific” publication, recently released following the event that your school ran in May 2012 in cooperation with the Kennedy School is an excellent review of the state of disaster management in this region. I would like to ask you to do something similar focusing specifically on conflict and humanitarian action in Asia and beyond.

Help us to rekindle interest in and respect for international humanitarian law. Help us to raise the profile of humanitarian action in conflict settings. Help us to hold parties to conflict to account through evidence-based research and advocacy on the need for rights to be respected. Help us to think creatively on how we can identify and share solutions to our most pressing humanitarian challenges.

Thank you.