Let me start by offering my thanks to our hosts, the Government of Japan, and to China and Myanmar in their role as co-chairs for this important inter-sessional meeting on disaster relief. It’s really a pleasure to be here again.

Let me start with some observations linked to the subject on which I have been asked to speak: Regional Frameworks, Activities and Cooperation on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). Our collective aim, if I am not mistaken, is to support ASEAN centrality on HADR capacity and to ensure that our collective efforts support ASEAN’s ambitions. But here I think we have to acknowledge that while much progress has been made there are still some significant challenges.

- As is the case with the patchy development of the so-called international humanitarian system, regional progress in developing a regional HADR system has at times been driven by major catastrophes, making for sometimes fitful progress. For example, the 2004 tsunami prompted ASEAN to dramatically accelerate the drafting of the Agreement on Disaster Management; subsequent ratification was also accelerated by Myanmar’s Cyclone Nargis.

- We see, and understand very clearly the reasons why countries in this region are reluctant to call upon others for assistance in natural disasters. The government's performance in natural disasters is a strong marker of political legitimacy – something that cannot be overlooked and which we need to be sensitive to. But we see also growing mutual confidence in regional arrangements – ASEAN’s AHA Centre, the EAS toolkit, ERAT and a number of other tools and mechanisms.

- Member States in this region prefer a narrow definition of ‘HADR’, and this trend is unlikely to change soon. When humanitarian crises are caused by political or ethnic strife, reaching consensus on how to proceed remains very challenging – as it does in other fora, as we see all too well in the Security Council and within other Regional and Sub-Regional Organisations.

But perhaps a key issue is that humanitarian response to natural disasters is an increasing focus in ASEAN's security pillar, as well as a key element of the socio-cultural work of the Association. Likewise HADR is a growing priority in South-east Asia's external partners' defence policies. HADR has thus become a key element of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting’s broader goal of strengthening regional security cooperation, with the creation of the ADMM-Plus Expert Working Group on HADR. Apart from the disaster relief benefit, the HADR Working Group is intended to forge new communications channels among states to reduce the risk of confrontation in other areas. This makes eminent good sense.

But, from the perspective of the people that our collective endeavours aim to support – and let’s not forget them - and unless we are collectively careful, HADR stands a significant risk of becoming an arena for competition. In this vein I was particularly taken with a recent article I read as part of the Oxford Analytica Daily Brief. The article made reference to the need for “Disaster and HADR Diplomacy in South-east Asia”. The key advocacy message of the article was that there is a need to consciously and very deliberately AVOID making HADR an arena for strategic competition in ASEAN. In this briefing HADR Diplomacy referred to the importance of promoting a comprehensive approach to HADR operations based on synergies and unity of effort. The term also alludes to HADR as a regional capability that is critical for the promotion of ASEAN centrality within this region as well as in its outreach with external strategic partners. It seems to me that this forum is the right place to make sure that we remain true to these ideals – to the recognition that there are principles attached to the work that we do and that we have a collective role in upholding those
principles for the sake of the people that are the recipients of the assistance that will be provided as part of our deliberations, using mechanisms and systems for which we are at least partially responsible.

With these opening thoughts, let me now update you on some of the regional frameworks and activities that OCHA is involved with that are fostering synergies and promoting, I hope, the kind of holistic approach to HADR evoked by this interesting and perhaps rather useful term, HADR Diplomacy.

Firstly, I am pleased to confirm Adelina’s view expressed yesterday that the relationship between the AHA Centre and OCHA continues to mature. We sat down together in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan to discuss lessons learned during the response. We have since been jointly implementing these lessons.

One example is the way in which the AHA Centre and OCHA demonstrated increased interoperability in our core functions during the recent flooding in Malaysia. The AHA Centre team deployed from Jakarta and initiated a situation report upon arrival, which continued - as normal - throughout their deployment. However, upon departure, rather than discontinuing their product the AHA Centre kept it going as a service to the agencies responding in Malaysia. Rather than issue a duplicative report, OCHA asked our partners to report through the AHA Centre. This kind of seamless collaboration on functional roles, while still quite modest and low-key, is the future of the AHA Centre-OCHA relationship where we operate on the principle of dynamic simplicity – identify an issue, discuss it, resolve it, and move on. One day we might get to the point where we need to sign an agreement on how we work together, but for the time being we’re quite content to feel our way forward on this interesting ASEAN-led adventure.

Between emergencies, we continue to train and exercise together. Two AHA Centre staff were trained as members of the UNDAC Asia team in May 2014, and OCHA provided a facilitator for the duration of the ERAT team training in June 2014, and will do so again in 2015. Moreover, we are committed to supporting the second class of the ACE Programme training in 2015, as we did the inaugural class in 2014. We maintain very close daily contact and exchange information in real time on disaster monitoring across the region.

At the political level the ASEAN Secretary-General has met with both the Emergency Relief Coordinator and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator during the last 12 months to discuss complementarity of respective roles, including on civil-military cooperation – where we applaud the steps that have been taken to establish the technical working group on civil-military coordination under the Joint Task Force on HADR – and stand ready to support this initiative. Letters have been exchanged between our Principals on ways in which we can continue to enhance cooperation between ASEAN and OCHA.

Secondly, turning to the broader collaboration between ASEAN and the UN on disaster management and disaster risk reduction, we have jointly revised our Strategic Plan of Action, updating it to address the ASEAN priorities for the second phase of the AADMER Work Programme 2010-2015 and laying the groundwork for a new joint strategic approach between our two systems in the post-2015 period. There is a lot to do and to facilitate. To intensify the necessary collaboration with ASEAN, OCHA will be establishing a liaison office to ASEAN in Jakarta in July this year. This follows the deployment of a liaison officer by the UN’s Department of Political Affairs at the end of last year. These two liaison staff will collaborate closely.

Thirdly, another important process that has greatly contributed to strengthening regional synergies and unity of vision was the World Humanitarian Summit Regional Consultation for North and South-East Asia that was held in this very building in July last year. Co-hosted by the Governments of Japan and Indonesia, and OCHA, the regional consultation brought together 140 participants representing Governments, organizations and, most importantly, individuals based in the 16 countries of North and South-East Asia. The consultation resulted in a renewed vision of humanitarian action in the region in which the main focus was on affected communities, where local civil society organizations (CSOs) were seen to play a central role in response, and where host governments were in the driving seat. Against this backdrop, participants recognized the importance of collective action in strengthening and improving the effectiveness of humanitarian response in this region to meet the needs of affected people. It's often all too easy to forget that we are here to serve the people - not each other.

Coming out of the regional consultation was a series of bold recommendations on how to improve humanitarian action. For example, the importance of better-leveraging the unique capability of military
actors, business and the private sector, academic institutions and other stakeholders in humanitarian preparedness and response.

In preparation for the World Humanitarian Summit and, in this region at least, as part of our ongoing engagement, the UN and its partners from IOs, NGOs, and the Red Cross/Crescent Movement have been working to adopt different ways of working which recognise that the so-called international humanitarian system is not, in fact, the centre of the known universe. As part of this dialogue on how to enhance the effectiveness of immediate response operations, and as discussed at some length at the WHS Regional Consultation here, it became very clear, very quickly, that two key actors have unique capabilities and assets that can contribute significantly to disaster relief efforts: military forces and the private sector.

There is no doubt that the combined capacities of military actors in Asia-Pacific countries have made and will continue to make a very important contribution in responding to natural disasters. In the immediate aftermath of a disaster it is often militaries which, possessing standing forces and often unique capabilities and assets, can deploy rapidly to support initial response operations and enable national authorities and humanitarian responders to identify and respond to initial needs while longer-term and more structured operations are being established.

The private sector, which encompasses a range of institutions from multinational corporations to national and regional industries and local businesses, can add significant value in meeting humanitarian needs due to its technical knowledge, access to data, and its ability to rapidly respond, provide financial support and concentrate on immediate relief and long-term investment. In the first days after major disasters, local and national businesses can play a crucial role in the humanitarian response and many already prepare for such situations through risk management and business continuity practices. They also set the stage for recovery and a return to development. Frankly speaking the private sector drives these processes – not international agencies and Governments; we need to understand our place.

So how can humanitarian agencies support moves to operationalise some of these relationships, recognising that we support nationally-led response; we do not supersede it. Militaries and humanitarians work well together during response operations, but we coordinate less well when it comes to response preparedness. We need better coordination and coherence in our collective efforts, so that when the call comes, we make the best use of our collective experience, assets and prior planning in order to provide the right support when it is needed the most.

You will recall the Asia-Pacific series of Conferences on Military Assistance to Disaster Relief Operations (APC-MADRO) that took place over a five-year period. At the end of this process, the APC MADRO Guidelines were finalized and endorsed. Building on the outcomes of those Conferences, the ASEAN-U.S. Informal Defence Forum, held in Hawaii in April 2014, highlighted that civilian and military personnel engaged in disaster management in the Asia-Pacific region need to work more closely together. Our Assistant Secretary-General proposed to organize a civil-military coordination workshop on the subject of disaster preparedness and coordinated operational planning in response to this call.

This proposal was agreed and so we hosted a regional Civil-Military Coordination Workshop on 16 and 17 October last year, in Bangkok with 72 participants from 20 countries. In addition to clear acknowledgement by participants of the need for better coordination, and agreement on how better joined up planning could be achieved in critical areas of disaster response, a key outcome of the workshop was the creation of a multi-stakeholder Regional Consultative Group (RCG) on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific - to take this planning forward at a practical level. The RCG will be the regional forum that brings together the humanitarian, civilian and military actors involved in disaster response preparedness planning and disaster response, including aspects related to civil-military coordination and the use of foreign military assets. I am glad to announce here that concrete progress is being made; the Introductory Session of the RCG on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific will take place on 15 April 2015 in Singapore.

Similarly, a Regional Business Consultation was held in Bangkok in December 2014, co-hosted by the Philippine Disaster Recovery Foundation (PDRF), Accenture Development Partnerships and my office. During this consultation, business and the private sector agreed to take concrete measures to enhance
engagement with governments and humanitarian agencies during the preparedness phase, including by advocating for direct engagement of businesses in government-led humanitarian response planning processes at the national and local levels; increasing companies’ familiarity with national and international coordination systems and structures; and working with governments and other partners to identify the key immediate needs that are likely to emerge in the first days of an emergency and disseminating information on standard quality, packaging and transportation of key relief goods. We also agreed to the establishment of the first private sector humanitarian “hub” in the Philippines – which should be stood up some time during 2015.

These are exciting and forward-looking times; I am very satisfied about our collective focus on creative thinking about how to use resources more efficiently, maximising the capacities of those that can contribute to humanitarian action and help scale-up disaster preparedness and response initiatives.

Finally, I wanted to return to the issue of simulation exercises and the thoughts I put forward last year in relation to the 2015 ARF DIREX. A most opportune time for these reflections following the Final Planning Conference for the 2015 ARF-DIREX last week, on which we received the very useful briefing yesterday.

We agree that disaster response simulation exercises are used as a means to enhance preparedness, either to test the state of preparedness of the participants or to put into practice and train the implementation of response plans and systems, or both. Most often, response simulation exercises are part of a broader preparedness planning and capacity-building process. This is definitely the case for my office, where exercises are a built-in element of OCHA's Preparedness Initiative and are used as a tool to test the various components of preparedness support and capacity building that we provide, to measure the overall impact of interventions, and suggest follow-up preparedness activities to be undertaken.

Last year we discussed and I stressed the importance for simulation exercises to be developed through an inclusive process. Whilst we recognized that each international response exercise cannot cater for full-fledged participation of all those that would in reality be involved in a given emergency situation, we agreed that there was significant room for improvement in the level of participation of many exercises in view of achieving a more coherent and integrated set of common core objectives.

It was therefore good hear that both the Initial and the Final Planning Conferences of the 2015 ARF DIREX were inclusive processes that saw participation from a broad range of stakeholders: officials from national governments, regional organisations, as well as representatives of the “international humanitarian community”. The active contribution of all of these actors will ensure that the 2015 ARF DIREX is anchored in reality and developed taking into account national preparedness plans and legal frameworks, the principled delivery of humanitarian assistance, as well as the possible use of international tools and services. The combination of these elements will also ensure that all the partners who have participated and contributed to the 2015 ARF DIREX will maximize the benefit and return on investment of this exercise.

On multiple occasions, we have also called for better coordination and prioritisation of the increasing number of exercises in the region. Last year we agreed that we needed to do this for a number of reasons: firstly, to increase coherence between the various simulation exercises that take place each year; secondly, to put scarce resources to best use; and frankly, to have enough time to share expertise and discuss what we learn from each exercise so that we are not constantly re-inventing the wheel. Thus the announcement of the exercise planning workshop in Kuala Lumpur in April is very much welcomed and OCHA looks forward to active participation. This is an important step in joining up simulations so that there is national, regional and international ownership of the findings and that we all have enough time to learn the lessons from simulations and translate them into concrete operational action during response events. OCHA stands ready to continue to support the development of simulation exercises as and when this proves useful.

Once again, thank you for the invitation to speak here today. We very much appreciate the ongoing dialogue between the ARF and the United Nations on disaster relief and humanitarian assistance and for our ongoing inclusion in your agenda.