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Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (HNPW): Opening Remarks for UNDAC Advisory Board Meeting

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As delivered

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured and privileged to open the 2020 United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) Advisory Board Annual Meeting. It is my third time I am here at this event and I am happy to see so many familiar and new faces.

We are honoured to have representatives and focal points from UNDAC member countries, regions and organizations here today, including the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movements, the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations. I also warmly welcome UNDAC’s many operational support partners who are also joining us today.

As we step into a new decade, the humanitarian sector is facing a number of complex challenges. Global humanitarian needs are on the rise. Protracted conflict, natural disasters and climate shocks mean that 168 million people on our globe – 1 in every 45 people – need humanitarian assistance this year. This is the highest figure since OCHA began collecting the data, which we announced in the Global Humanitarian Overview in December last year. If current trends continue, and if governments do not better address climate change and the root causes of conflict, more than 200 million people could require humanitarian assistance by the year 2022.

Millions of people are stuck in wars, caught in natural disasters and affected by climate shocks. Millions remain displaced from their homes, cut off from livelihoods and uncertain of where or when they will get their next meal.

As these needs rise, effective humanitarian action is more important and more necessary than ever.
The good news is that we have made a lot of progress on this front. We are more coordinated, comprehensive and inclusive. We are better at understanding and responding to people’s needs, including women and girls, people with disabilities and other groups.

We are also quicker to respond, with strengthened surge support allowing us to rapidly scale up to unpredictable, sudden-onset crises.

UNDAC has contributed to these improvements. Within hours of a disaster hitting, UNDAC teams are ready to deploy to help governments respond, in these situations, UNDAC sends coordination teams, experts to assess needs, trainers in emergency preparedness, and strategists to plan joint response operations. In all of these endeavours, UNDAC draws on its unique strengths: its diverse membership, its strong partnerships, and its versatility, which enable it to adapt its solutions to a wide variety of emergency contexts, from earthquakes to oil spills and droughts.

Last year, Cyclone Idai left a path of destruction in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi, killing over 1,000 people; injuring 2,300 and leaving more than 3 million in need of emergency assistance. Cyclone Idai was closely followed by Cyclone Kenneth, which brought even more destruction.

Within hours of Cyclone Idai striking, UNDAC teams scaled up to support Government-led efforts, alongside UN agencies and partners. UNDAC deployed search and rescue teams and helped the authorities coordinate the response, while other humanitarians delivered life-saving assistance. This response focused on empowering local action, complementing the efforts of both the local authorities and the communities who are on the front lines.

These cyclones were a stark reminder of why joint inter-agency preparedness systems are so important. I visited Mozambique three months after Cyclones Idai and Kenneth had struck to see how recovery efforts were going. The widespread destruction was still evident – entire villages had been washed away – but it was encouraging to see the strong collaboration I saw between the Government, the Southern African Development Community, UN agencies, and international and national NGOs.

Mozambique was one of six emergencies where UNDAC deployed last year. When Hurricane Dorian hit the Bahamas, UNDAC helped the Government and regional partners with needs assessment and coordination – including civil-military and regional coordination. When an earthquake rendered thousands homeless in Albania, UNDAC supported damage assessment and coordination. And when a shipwreck caused an oil spill in the Solomon Islands, UNDAC supported environmental clean-up efforts.

Each emergency response gives UNDAC experts a chance to apply new lessons learned. UNDAC is currently focusing on improving evidence-based collaborative assistance, by
working with partners – including ACAPS, MapAction, UNOSAT, the European Union, IFRC and REACH – to improve system-wide crisis mapping and analysis.

Another key focus for UNDAC in coming months and years will be to identify how it can best support and empower national and regional response and risk management. As this work progresses, the focus of UNDAC’s role in many cases will shift from being operational to becoming an adviser. This is crucial, as communities and local authorities are the first to respond when crisis strikes, and are there to stay. They also have a stronger understanding of the local context and better access to populations.

This year will be full of challenges and opportunities. As the climate crisis worsens, we will likely see more weather volatility, chronic drought, flooding and other shocks, which will bring higher humanitarian needs.

In light of these challenges, humanitarian organizations will need to continue to improve their effectiveness and efficiency, to ensure that we get the very most out of every dollar invested. We need to expand cash and voucher responses, which make assistance cheaper and quicker while empowering people and respecting their dignity to make their own choices. We must also continue to strengthen collaboration among Governments, humanitarian and development actors to address the root causes of vulnerability and humanitarian needs.

UNDAC will be there every step of the way. Today’s annual meeting will be an important opportunity to discuss how UNDAC and other humanitarian networks can help governments and regional partners navigate these challenges.

I wish you a very successful meeting and look forward to hearing your insights and lessons learned as we chart our path forward.

Thank you.