Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

Informal briefing to the Member States on the 2021 Humanitarian Affairs Segment (HAS)

Virtual, 3 May 2021, 8:15-9:00am

Statement by Ms Pascale Baeriswyl, Permanent Representative of Switzerland, Vice-President of the ECOSOC and Chair of the Humanitarian Affairs Segment

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year's Humanitarian Affairs Segment will be one of the most important in years.

2020 was dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic and compounded underlying drivers like conflict and climate. Last year presented an unprecedented set of challenges to the humanitarian community at a scale never seen before. And as 2021 began, the world was confronted with several challenges including the continuing pandemic, the looming specter of famine, growing food insecurity, widespread violations of international humanitarian law, the sharpest economic downturn in decades driving millions into extreme poverty and a worsening in the epidemic of violence against women. These challenges - and may I say the many outrages we have seen over the course of the last year - make this year's Humanitarian Affairs Segment (HAS) a critical momentum.

Women and girls are disproportionately affected, particularly by a horrific rise in gender-based violence, coupled with decreased access to education, health care, nutrition and livelihoods, and putting millions of girls at increased risk of child marriage, child labor and other forms of exploitation. And all the while, women have been at the front lines of the response. Women are agents for change.

Thus, this year's HAS is so important because it is an opportunity for us to come together in Geneva as an international community and use what we have learned from 2020. We come together to promote action to address factors driving humanitarian need and to support the people affected by these humanitarian crises and the humanitarian community working to save lives and to reduce suffering. It is also an opportunity to look at how to transform our work in order to respond more efficiently, effectively and collaboratively, in line with the requirements of the ongoing UN reform processes. And it is an opportunity to look at what more needs to be done to reduce suffering in the crises we are facing and to achieve a better future.
As Vice President of the ECOSOC and Chair of the Humanitarian Affairs Segment 2021, I am honored to conduct the preparations for this year’s Segment and to preside it. In order to make this Segment as meaningful and opportune as possible, we – the Swiss Missions in Geneva and New York – organized two informal consultations earlier this year. In February, we addressed the Geneva based delegations and humanitarian community. In March, we addressed the New York based delegations. During these two informal consultations, we solicited your feedback and ideas on the themes and priorities for this year. We are very grateful for your thoughtful contributions. We have listened to you and considered very carefully your helpful inputs in formulating this year’s themes of the HAS.

As decided by the members of the ECOSOC on 20 April 2021, the theme of this year’s Segment is "Strengthening humanitarian assistance to face the challenges of 2021 and beyond: mobilizing respect for international humanitarian law, inclusion, gender, innovation and partnerships".

The HAS this year will begin on 23 June. The program of this year’s HAS comprises an opening session with an interactive panel, followed by three high-level panels under the following themes:

1. Health care in times of COVID: a global protection agenda
2. Innovation as a driver of change: the use of new and emerging technologies and humanitarian data
3. Humanitarian Action and Climate Change: advancing anticipatory approaches, strengthening resilience and enhancing collaboration in response to the climate crisis

The opening session will focus on the overarching trends transforming the humanitarian landscape and propelling humanitarian needs. It will also foreshadow actions that must be mobilized in solidarity with people in need and in order to overcome a further escalation of suffering. The lasting effects of COVID-19 along with emerging and deteriorating conflict and climate crisis will be other areas of focus.

The topic of the first high-level panel is especially timely: "Health care in times of COVID: a global protection agenda". This panel will examine the threats faced by people in need and aspects of the protection of humanitarian and health workers who serve them. It will discuss some of the most urgent challenges, including vaccine equity and ensuring vaccines reach the most vulnerable people on the planet, as well as general access to basic health services in times of pandemic. Discussions will include a focus on the unique and disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and girls, including the rise of gender-based violence. They will also highlight the role of women at the forefront of the response. It will finally explore concrete ways to work more effectively with local actors, best practice in community engagement and risk communication.

The panel will be an opportunity to focus on how to forge a greater collective effort to address these challenges, as well as how to tackle health inequities, causing interrelated and compounding effects, and importantly, to prepare for future pandemics.

A second high-level panel will consider "Innovation as a driver of change: the use of new and emerging technologies and humanitarian data". This panel will discuss concrete ways the humanitarian sector is improving humanitarian effectiveness in a changing landscape using new technology and innovation. Panelists will examine examples of the use of data to better predict and identify needs, new technologies to provide assistance safely and effectively, and new techniques that enable health and humanitarian workers to stay and deliver.

At the same time, the panel will explore the risks associated with new tools and techniques, in particular data protection risks and phenomena like misinformation and disinformation. The panel will also draw on experiences of how technologies can be used to reinforce and support local partners and undertake gender-responsive action.
The third high-level panel addresses "Humanitarian Action and Climate Change: Advancing anticipatory approaches, strengthening resilience and enhancing collaboration in response to the climate crisis".

The climate crisis, an existential threat for many of us, has been one of the main drivers of increasing humanitarian needs over the last decade. Given that, panelists will examine ways to address disaster and climate risks and impacts, build resilience and prevent and address disaster displacement, including through accelerated climate action, resilient pandemic recovery and risk-informed sustainable development. The panel will explore actions to further advance anticipatory action to better prepare and to act earlier to prevent and mitigate impacts on lives and livelihoods. This will include a discussion on ways to scale up best practices and address gaps and bottlenecks. Particular attention will be paid to the disproportionate impacts of disasters and climate change on women and girls. The high-level panel will also highlight on concrete actions to reduce their vulnerabilities and enhance their role as agents of change and leadership as an essential element of effective community resilience, preparedness, and response activities.

On the afternoon of 22 June, immediately preceding the Humanitarian Affairs Segment, the annual joint informal ECOSOC event on the transition from relief to development will be held under the theme "Preventing the looming risk of multiple famines and addressing rising acute food insecurity: taking action to save lives and reduce people's needs, risks and vulnerabilities through closer humanitarian, development and peacebuilding collaboration". Together with the Vice-President of the ECOSOC and Chair of the Operational Activities for Development Segment (OAS), Ambassador Kyslytsya, I will co-chair the two-hour Transition Event on this important and urgent topic. The panel will discuss the current challenges of famine risk and global food insecurity, highlight actions needed by the international community and also consider how the United Nations Development System reform can be operationalized to tackle underlying drivers of food insecurity.

Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, we are clarifying whether the HAS will be held virtually, as it was last year, or in a hybrid format. Our preference would be, obviously, to hold a hybrid meeting with in-person participation from Geneva based member states and panelists. We are following this closely with Switzerland as host country and the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG). We will keep you all apprised accordingly. In both cases, interpretation in all six UN languages is guaranteed. Sign language interpretation will also be provided.

Because of the current circumstances, a limited number of virtual side events will be held during the week of the Humanitarian Affairs Segment - about 13 side events. The side events, organized by diverse stakeholders, will cover a range of pressing humanitarian issues that will enable us to discuss in more detail some of the key operational and policy challenges facing humanitarian actors. OCHA coordinates the side event application process. Information on proposing and organizing side events can be found on the OCHA and ECOSOC websites. Side events will take place between 22 and 25 June. Delegations and partners will be able to contact OCHA and submit proposals for side events. The intention is to avoid overlapping side events to maximize attention and enable engagement in the very critical issues to be discussed.

Finally, I expect that at the closing session of the HAS on 25 June, we will be able to adopt the ECOSOC resolution on strengthening the coordination of humanitarian affairs. The past year has proven both the value and importance of the multilateral humanitarian system.

I strongly encourage delegations to participate in the HAS at the highest level possible, including at the Ministerial level. Humanitarian work plays a pivotal role in saving lives and alleviating suffering. The need for action-oriented solutions to humanitarian challenges, which are now made more pressing by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, is particularly important.