Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

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

Virtual, 7 June 2021, 8:00-8:45am

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,

Thank you for joining us today. This year’s ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment (HAS) promises to be an exceptionally important session, given the scale and complexity of challenges facing the humanitarian community in 2021. At this point in history, there is an opportunity - and responsibility - for us all to step up, to act with greater ambition in the way we work together to tackle today’s challenges, save lives and reduce the suffering of people caught in the dire humanitarian situations.

As we get closer to the HAS, it is clear that the conversations we plan to have will be more important than ever. This year’s Humanitarian Affairs Segment is an opportunity for us to set the course for more effective humanitarian action in the face of growing needs and challenges.

Today’s briefing will focus on the organizational arrangements for the Humanitarian Affairs Segment in Geneva from 23 to 25 June 2021. My UN colleagues, my colleagues from the Permanent Missions of Switzerland in both Geneva and New York and I recognize there is huge interest in attending the HAS and we have some updates today, and more to come shortly.

Allow me to first recap the program. As I have outlined in our previous briefings and informal consultations, 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”. This theme is highly relevant to the global humanitarian context.

The formal program of this year’s HAS will begin with the Opening session on Wednesday 23 June, in the morning. The Opening session will provide a forward-looking discussion about global trends in the humanitarian landscape. Several high-level speakers will share their thoughts on how the UN and humanitarian partners are adapting and responding to the challenges they face now and anticipating the ones that lie ahead.
As we outlined in our 3 May briefing, the HAS comprises three high-level panels:

The topic of the first high-level panel is especially timely: "Health care in times of COVID-19: a global protection agenda". This panel will be held on the afternoon of 23 June and will examine the threats faced by people in need as well as by the health and humanitarian workers who serve them. It will discuss some of the most urgent challenges, including vaccine equity and ensuring vaccines reach the most vulnerable people, as well as general access to basic health services in times of pandemic. Discussions will include a focus on ways the pandemic impacts women and girls and will highlight their role at the forefront of the response. It will also highlight ways to work more effectively with local actors, best practice in community engagement and risk communication, and partnering in vaccinating vulnerable communities.

The 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 be held on the morning of 24 June. It will discuss concrete ways the humanitarian sector is improving humanitarian effectiveness in a changing landscape using new technology and innovation. Panelists will examine cases of the use of data to better predict and identify needs. They will consider new technologies to provide assistance safely and effectively as well as new techniques that enable health and humanitarian workers to stay and deliver. The discussion will also highlight some risks of the misuse of new technologies, such as misinformation and disinformation.

The third high-level panel is "Humanitarian Action and Climate Change: Advancing anticipatory approaches, strengthening resilience and enhancing collaboration in response to the climate crisis". The panel will be held on the afternoon of 24 June. It will explore ways to further advance anticipatory action as well as 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.

On the afternoon of Tuesday, 22 June, immediately preceding the Humanitarian Affairs Segment, the annual joint informal ECOSOC event on the transition from relief to development will be held. I will co-chair this event with my colleague Ambassador Sergiy Kyslytsya of Ukraine, Vice-President of ECOSOC responsible for the Operational Activities for development Segment. This year’s Transition Event theme is "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". The panel will discuss the urgent steps that must be taken to aid those on the brink of starvation, with particular emphasis on the importance of compliance with International Humanitarian Law and the importance of peace. It will also consider how the United Nations development system reforms can be operationalized to tackle underlying drivers of food insecurity.

I am pleased to announce that I will chair a high-level event on gender equality, focused on leadership, decision-making and participation of women and girls in humanitarian settings. This event is scheduled to take place in the morning of Friday, 25 June. It will be an occasion to showcase emerging good practices, examples of working with refugee women and girls, impacts of their engagement in humanitarian decision making, and good practices of leadership of women’s rights organizations and women led organizations in humanitarian action.

Now turning to the format and modalities for the formal sessions of the HAS. As I mentioned before, Switzerland, as host country, and the UN Medical Director and United Nations Office in Geneva agreed that in-person meetings can resume, with some restrictions. The detailed modalities are currently being developed to ensure compliance with necessary requirements and to offer the possibility of in-person as well as virtual participation.
The official meetings of the HAS will be hybrid, with both participants in the room, and others joining virtually. At present, we hope and expect at least some 100 people - and possibly more - to be allowed to convene in conference room 20 in the Palais des Nations with the necessary distancing requirements in place. Delegations should be able to access the Palais as they normally would, but in limited numbers, due to COVID-19 restrictions. Meetings with interpretation can only last for 2 hours because of the virtual component due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

Seats will be available for all of ECOSOC’s 54 members with one representative per delegation. In addition, we will plan for delegations and humanitarian partners to also be able to join in person. A limited number of additional seats will be made available for Member States not members of ECOSOC. As in previous sessions, Member States not members of ECOSOC will be asked to confirm their attendance to be provided with a seat. These requests will be made through a form that will be circulated in due course. Virtual participation will be possible for everyone. Delegations intending to speak should indicate this in the registration form that will be shared. All official meetings will be broadcast live on UNWebTV with interpretation.

As last year, the general discussion will not be held as part of the program. Instead, delegations may submit written or pre-recorded video statements for the general discussion until the closing of the HAS on the afternoon of Friday, 25 June. These statements will be posted on the website.

We will provide an information note elaborating further on the arrangements including with respect to in-person and virtual attendance. Please carefully review the information once circulated.

As the situation is evolving and more information becomes available, details will continue to change and we will keep you updated through the ECOSOC HAS 2021 website and through ECOSOC Place. I strongly encourage everyone to keep checking the official website, which is updated regularly.

I am very pleased to announce that the HAS will have 17 side events. These side events enrich the HAS and elaborate on key areas of focus that we expect to be discussed throughout the Segment. They are planned for the full week beginning 21 June and ending on 25 June, before the closing session of the HAS. The side events will be held virtually due to space limitations and restrictions. They will cover a key set of themes that are critically important to our work at this time.

Several side events will discuss COVID-19 and its implications, how the humanitarian system has responded and worked with others, lessons learned as well as what more is needed in the face of this pandemic. The side events will also consider the pressing issue of equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. Related themes include the crucial role of local actors and what more needs to be done to reinforce local actors, women actors and women-led organizations who have been at the forefront of the response. The side events will also consider pressing protection concerns, including in sexual and gender based violence, child protection, and the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian settings. They will also focus on education in emergencies, impact of counter-terrorism measures for humanitarian space, consequences for children and respect for International Humanitarian Law. Side events will showcase some of the lessons and best practice on anticipatory action and strengthened use of data. Importantly, side events will focus on the urgency and imperative to prevent famine and address rising food insecurity, to examine the threat of climate change and urgent action needed in humanitarian settings and to prevent escalation of humanitarian impacts and suffering in the future, including the topic of climate resilience and the role of women led actions.

This is not a complete list but it gives you a flavor of the broad work of the sector - and more importantly will be forward looking on solutions and actions ahead.

Information on the side events - including the schedule of events and links to join them - is on the website and will be updated regularly.
We will conclude the HAS on Friday, 25 June, listening to the voices of the people the humanitarian system serves and looking at the future with ambition and commitment for solutions and needed actions ahead. These people will be speaking to us from areas affected by ongoing emergencies and reminding us of what needs to be done for the system to better meet their needs in 2021, building on the takeaways from the HAS discussions during the week.

Finally, at the Closing session we will adopt the draft HAS humanitarian resolution on strengthening the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the UN you have all been working on so diligently and with a spirit of cooperation and the constructive engagement.

I strongly encourage delegations to participate at the highest level possible, including at the Ministerial level, given the critical importance of humanitarian work in saving lives and alleviating suffering. I also encourage all delegations to focus our discussions and actions on solutions to save lives and indeed transform the lives for those caught in humanitarian situations and work with ambition to modernize our work and our methods to get ahead of crises and reduce humanitarian suffering.