Informal briefing on the preparations for the 2022 ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment and the Meeting on the Transition from Relief to Development

Remarks on the Secretary-General’s report on Strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations
12 May 2022, 11:30 a.m., Trusteeship Council Chamber

Remarks by Ms. Heli Uusikylä
Director of the Humanitarian Financing and Resource Mobilization Division
United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Thank you, Ambassador, for your leadership of the ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment this year and for your thoughtful approach and support for humanitarian endeavors.

Thanks also to all of you who have joined today for your participation and your support.

As Ambassador Pary Rodríguez noted, this year’s Humanitarian Affairs Segment will have a highly relevant focus on three strategic challenges facing all of us as we look ahead – how to continue to adapt and adjust our work drawing from the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic - especially for women and children who have been profoundly affected; how to strengthen respect for and application of international humanitarian law and ensure humanitarian assistance reaches all those who are in need, and how to better prepare for the increasing humanitarian impact of climate change, draw from good practices and continue to innovate in the face of what is seen as an existential threat by many. We look forward to rich discussions during the HAS and to continue to work with you to help shape our collective humanitarian work.

This Secretary-General’s annual report on the strengthening coordination of humanitarian assistance of the United Nations was issued in all UN official languages this week - A/77/72 - E/2022/50 - covers the calendar year 2021. The report outlines the deeply concerning trend of escalating humanitarian suffering due to effects of conflict, the climate crisis, and the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance rose to unprecedented levels in 2021, and this only continues to rise in 2022 - straining the humanitarian system and highlighting the need for more effective systemic solutions. In 2021, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and an increase in climate and extreme weather events markedly exacerbated humanitarian crises on top of the suffering caused by the highest number of violent conflicts since 1945.
This, in turn, particularly impacted the vulnerable, further reinforcing inequalities. Women and girls continued to suffer disproportionately, after gender equality and women’s empowerment had already seen severe setbacks during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Women were on the frontlines of response - especially local women leaders and women’s organizations - yet were disproportionately affected, with a “shadow pandemic” of violence against women and girls, loss of jobs, limited access to services, inadequate inclusion in decision-making, and a stark decline in girls’ education compared to boys.

Children’s lives and well-being were also at greater risk in 2021 than at any point in the past 75 years. Millions of children have been out of school for prolonged periods, losing not only their access to education but also to lifesaving food, water, health care and hygiene supplies, psychosocial support, and protection from abuse, exploitation and recruitment into armed groups. Protection concerns worsened, including, trafficking, exploitation, increased risk of child labour and forced and early marriage.

The climate crisis continued to exacerbate inequalities and vulnerabilities, compounding existing risks, fuelling tensions, disease outbreaks, environmental degradation, threatening livelihoods and agriculture, and ultimately driving up humanitarian needs. Humanitarian actors are struggling to keep pace with the increasing number and impact of extreme weather and climate-related events, and the consequent rise in humanitarian needs, such as escalating food insecurity and displacement. The number of recorded disaster events increased from 368 in 2020 to 429 in 2021, affecting 101.8 million people and costing US$246.5 billion in economic losses. Millions of people experienced acute food insecurity from the Horn of Africa to southern Africa, to Central America and the Caribbean in the face of slow-onset and sudden climate-related events. Over 30 million were displaced due to weather-related events.

Further adding to the unprecedented humanitarian needs were continued protection challenges and wide-spread violations of international humanitarian law, refugee law and human rights law. Impediments to humanitarian access, including attacks on civilians, civilian infrastructure, and humanitarian and medical personnel in crises across the globe saw in particular national staff bearing the brunt of the violence. The operating environment has become increasingly complex and challenging in many contexts. Insecure and access-constrained environments impacted the ability of humanitarian actors to deliver in a safe and timely manner. Disinformation and misinformation campaigns, spreading hate speech and other rhetoric against humanitarian workers are also impacting the operating environment. Humanitarian personnel were killed, injured, kidnapped, detained, or harassed. National staff continued to bear the brunt of the violence and represented 98 per cent of the fatalities recorded in 2021.
A deeply concerning trend is the continuing sharp rise in **hunger and food insecurity, which reached unprecedented levels in 2021 and continues to rise.** As outlined in the latest Global Report on Food Crises that was launched on 4 May last week - which I encourage you all to read - over 190 million people were acutely food insecure and in need of urgent assistance across 53 countries and territories in 2021, an increase of nearly 40 million compared to 2020. Of critical concern were 570,000 facing catastrophic levels of food insecurity – starvation and death – in four countries: Ethiopia, South Sudan, southern Madagascar, and Yemen. While food crises continue to be driven by multiple factors, conflict remained the main driver in 2021. Almost 70 per cent of the people facing acute food insecurity lived in areas affected by conflict and insecurity. The impacts were disproportionately felt by women and girls, who accounted for 60 per cent of those chronically food insecure globally.

In the Horn of Africa, Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia were the hardest hit by drought and a desert locust upsurge. And as we look ahead, there are deeply troubling trends - including the possibility of a fourth consecutive poor rainy season in the Horn of Africa, which can throw the region into even more pronounced climate-induced emergencies. And for so many countries, the far-reaching spill-over impacts of the war in Ukraine on global food, energy, and fertilizer markets can deteriorate food insecurity levels even further.

**Another deeply concerning trend in 2021 is the continuing rise in displacement.** The number of forcibly displaced persons reached over 84 million by mid-2021, setting a record high, due primarily to protracted conflicts. At the start of 2021, more than 48 million people were living in internal displacement as a result of conflict and violence and 7 million due to disasters, including extreme weather and climate-related events. The number of refugees and asylum seekers surpassed 26.7 and 4.4 million respectively by mid-2021. This suffering and the numbers of displaced people have only continued to rise in 2022.

In the face of these massive needs and challenges, **the humanitarian community focused on strengthening the impact of coordinated humanitarian response as well as innovating and adapting.** For example, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) triggered its system-wide emergency activation protocols for Ethiopia and Afghanistan to effectively respond at scale. In Afghanistan, United Nations and partners stayed and delivered during the rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation, including by supporting health care facilities and providing life-saving health assistance that was enabled by funding from the Central Emergency Response Fund and the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund, at a time when other international funding was scarce. In Afghanistan and other countries, investment in preparedness and prepositioning of relief supplies
enabled the United Nations and partners to respond more effectively and deliver humanitarian assistance to those in need. IASC agencies continued to provide rigorous, transparent and people-centered analysis of humanitarian needs through the Joint Inter-Sectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF), first launched in 2020. The use of multi-purpose cash programming was expanded as part of a social protection response to COVID-19 – with scope for further broadening its use in the future. There were advances in the collaboration across humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors in practical ways in country, with more joined-up planning through complementary Humanitarian Response Plans and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks. Anticipatory humanitarian action frameworks were piloted in more countries, and we continue to learn from experience. Data analysis and forecasting and information management tools continue to be strengthened and deployed to get ahead of disasters, to preposition humanitarian supplies, to provide multipurpose cash and other goods to allow people to move from harm’s way and to recover more quickly after shocks and disasters strike.

While system-wide efforts continued in 2021 to make humanitarian action more accountable, inclusive, localized, and people-centered, we have more work to do. More capacity and outreach were undertaken on Protection against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment to address serious issues in the sector - and more is needed. IASC has prioritized strengthening accountability to affected people as a “non-negotiable”. And it has prioritized IASC Guidance on Strengthening Participation, Representation and Leadership of Local and National Actors, as well as work on operationalizing the IASC Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action. Humanitarian agencies worked to improve their focus and measures for greater gender parity and more equal geographic representation as well as racism awareness and inclusion. We must and will do more on all these fronts.

Member State support to the global humanitarian response remained generous, with $18.7 billion contributed to humanitarian appeals for 107 million people in 2021 at the time of reporting. OCHA-managed Humanitarian Pooled Funds saw unprecedented levels: $638.4 million for the Central Emergency Response Fund and a record $1.13 billion for Country-Based Pooled Funds. As a result, the Funds were able to provide critical support to the most vulnerable in new and escalating crises and underfunded emergencies; as well as support cross-cutting response such as gender-based violence and for people with disabilities.

In 2021, while there was adaptation in the face of escalating needs, humanitarian partners are determined to do more and better - including in critical areas such as protection from sexual exploitation and abuse; protection; climate change, including by reducing our climate footprint and adapting our work; data protection; partnerships with local and regional organizations;
strengthening our capacities to reach people in an agile manner, with ever-increasing effectiveness, efficiency and impact, particularly as the gap between needs and funding continues to grow.

Let me touch on some of the report’s main recommendations:

- **The climate crisis requires urgent and sustained action.** Humanitarian actors must continue to adapt programming and responses to the climate crisis, stepping up response, mitigation and adaptation efforts; reducing emissions; increasing research and analysis; collaborating beyond the humanitarian sector; reinforcing and supporting local leadership, preparedness, responses and resilience; and advocating for ambitious climate action, including for more and better climate financing accessible to vulnerable countries.

- **Lessons learned from the response to the COVID-19 pandemic must be applied,** including tapping into the full potential of multipurpose cash transfers to cover the basic needs of people in a flexible and cross-sectoral manner, enabling local actors at the forefront of the response, and harnessing the potential of new technologies; promoting the role of women and women’s organizations. The vaccination effort must not be forgotten: the most vulnerable people in humanitarian crises need to have equitable and swift access to the vaccines.

- **International humanitarian law must be promoted and respected** by all parties to conflict, including non-State armed groups, to protect civilians. We must stress the need to fight impunity and the importance of ensuring accountability. The use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas should be avoided.

- **Rapid, unimpeded and sustained access of impartial humanitarian relief must be allowed and facilitated by Members States and parties to conflict.** They should also remove barriers, constraints or levies that impede such access, and also simplify and expedite procedures for the entry and deployment of medical and humanitarian personnel, goods and services.

- **Efforts need to be scaled up to ensure displaced persons receive effective protection and assistance and find durable solutions.** At the same time, we must do more to prevent new displacement from emerging.

- **Food insecurity must be addressed urgently to prevent famine.** This requires scaled-up actions and flexible funding to meet immediate needs, while also addressing the root causes of food insecurity and the risk of famine. We must ensure respect for international humanitarian law, including the prohibition on the use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare, and the duty to allow and facilitate humanitarian access in line with Security Council resolution 2417.
• Gender equality and empowerment of women and girls must be advanced, and we need to ensure their meaningful participation in decision-making. Similarly, persons with disabilities should be included in programming, policies and strategies.

• Efforts and funding to respond to gender-violence should continue to be scaled up, to ensure that survivors of such violence have access to critical services at the onset of emergencies.

• More investment in mental health and psychosocial support services is needed as part of humanitarian responses.

• The preparedness and response capacities and efforts of regional organizations must be reinforced, with specialized expertise and complementary responses deployed in their support.

• The impacts of technology on the humanitarian operating environment must be managed. Addressing misinformation and disinformation is essential, especially regarding humanitarian assistance. Operational information and data collected from affected people for humanitarian purposes must be protected and attacks on humanitarian data must be prevented.

• And throughout: the humanitarian principles of impartiality, humanity, neutrality and independence remain essential for our work.

As 2022 has already forcefully demonstrated, progress is illusive unless we individually and collectively work hard to defuse key drivers of need and risk multipliers - conflict, climate and the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic – while also ensuring we are well set-up to ensure an effective humanitarian response in an ever more complex environment. In this context, the ECOSOC HAS will provide an excellent forum for discussing our common priorities and potential for collaboration. I look forward to this important exchange.

Thank you.