

Remarks for Ramesh Rajasingham

Closing Session of the ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment

In-person format

Geneva, 25 June 2021,

15:00-17:00

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we conclude the 2021 ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment, I would like to express my enormous thanks to the Chair and Vice-President of the HAS, Ambassador Baeriswyl.

Your leadership has provided a key opportunity for Member States, the United Nations System, humanitarian partners, regional organizations, development actors, the private sector and academia to discuss how to strengthen humanitarian assistance to face the challenges of 2021 and beyond. This year our discussions have included the important focus on mobilizing respect for international humanitarian law, inclusion, gender equality, innovation, and partnerships – They are all key to effective humanitarian action.

As the Secretary-General highlighted, we came together this week at a time where the pandemic continues to inflict profound suffering on the world's most vulnerable people for well over a year.

At the same time, in the shadows of the pandemic, we are also witnessing prolonged conflict, the climate crisis, escalating food insecurity and famine, historic levels of displacement, widening inequalities and economic fragility.

Last year saw new conflicts erupt in several countries, triggering violence, hunger, mass displacement and trauma for hundreds of thousands of people.

To face these multiple crises, the Secretary-General has called for a global ceasefire and urged for scaled-up climate action, prevention, and humanitarian action which is anticipatory to reduce suffering and save lives.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have a humanitarian system that continues to adapt and deliver in the face of these daunting challenges. Together, we save millions of lives and reach more than 100 million every year with assistance and protection.

During the past 12 months since we last met in ECOSOC, humanitarians across the world rose to the challenge. Governments, the United Nations agencies, humanitarian NGOs, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement partners and communities scaled-up delivery of humanitarian assistance - including health, food, cash, nutrition, water and sanitation and protection - to people at greatest risk and need.

Despite increasingly frequent attacks against health and aid workers, we stayed and we delivered. And we adapted - especially working with local partners and communities as movement and other restrictions became more challenging operationally due to the pandemic.

Yet, as with all things in life and especially now, we must continue to innovate and do better for the people we serve. That means we need to make the humanitarian system ever more efficient and accountable, working with all our partners to maximize impact and results, without compromising quality, and following fundamental humanitarian principles.

Over the past few days, we heard many recommendations of what the humanitarian community can do. If you will allow me to highlight in person, a few are:

First, **community engagement and localization** of response must be reinforced. We need to recognize and bring local actors, especially women-led local organisations, more into our response, which needs to be flexible and continually adapt to meet local needs. Communities and affected people are crucial in the frontline response and must be heard and empowered. As was said yesterday during one of the excellent side events: “We should recognize that the leadership is with and by the people”. The UN must thus facilitate the participation of local humanitarian non-governmental organizations and actors in decision-making. It is especially critical to recognise the **important role of women leaders and women’s organisations** as we saw during the segment and we see on the ground every day. We have to engage in capacity building to build their capacities.

Second, in all aspects of humanitarian action, **inclusion is** required and special attention must be paid to include persons with disabilities and older persons.

We must do better to recognize and include **women and girls in decision-making**. We heard throughout the week about the gendered impacts of humanitarian crises on women and girls and the disproportionate impact on them. Given the humanitarian challenges ahead, it is even more critical that we strengthen gender analysis and increase women's participation in decision making. We must recognize and value and allow hearing from and amplifying women's experiences and leadership. And we need funding and resources to scale up the capacity of local organisations, in particular women's and women-led organisations.

Third, most urgently the mitigation, response to and prevention of **gender-based violence** is urgent. This means we need to include gender equality and gender-based violence prevention, mitigation and response programming in every humanitarian response from the start; and to increase focus, funding, and programming to ensure survivors are protected and have access to survivor-centred support.

Fourth, **Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support (MHPSS)** should be an integral part of our humanitarian response. COVID-19 serves to underscore the importance of MHPSS. It will not only reduce needs but also increase resilience.

Fifth, we must do more to ensure our **accountability to the people we serve** - so that the humanitarian system is delivering what people want versus what they receive.

And sixth, it's time to come out of the piloting phase for **anticipatory action**. We must mainstream the approach and expand it. To work together collectively to reap the benefits of anticipatory action for a faster, cheaper, and more dignified response for affected people. A response that also protects hard-won development gains.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, one in 33 people worldwide needs humanitarian assistance or protection. I don't need to repeat here the sheer scale of human suffering in all the numbers we heard this week. Nor do I need to repeat that funding is woefully inadequate to meet those needs.

The truth is unless we address the causes of crises – conflict, climate change and COVID-19 s – needs are going to grow, and funding will be insufficient to meet those needs.

Humanitarian agencies can only ever respond to the symptoms of global crises. We will never be a means to play the largest role in solving their root causes. We can only alleviate the

suffering caused by crises – but we cannot stop them from happening. The primary responsibility to end conflicts, fight climate change and achieve the SDGs rests with the Member States.

Yet, specifically for humanitarian affairs, allow me to summarize a few key points emerging from this week where we look to the Member States and others to help make the humanitarian system more effective and efficient.

First, I echo the Secretary-General's call to urge all leaders to generously support the **COVID-19** response in the most vulnerable countries, including by doubling the production of vaccines and ensuring equal access and distribution through the COVAX platform. COVID-19 Vaccines must be a global public good.

Second, , as we heard throughout this week, humanitarian principles and humanitarian space are under growing pressure. With so many in need, **humanitarian access** is crucial to an effective response. For millions of people in need, their already acute vulnerability is compounded by weak health systems and travel restrictions, which are severely impeding access to lifesaving humanitarian assistance. Countries must facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid and release any restrictions for humanitarian staff and supplies.

Third, it is imperative to ensure compliance with and respect for international law, including **humanitarian, human rights, and refugee law**. It is only through upholding human rights and international humanitarian law and refugee law that we can protect civilians and affected people and ensure respect and protection for health and humanitarian workers and infrastructure. This is especially important in the current fight against COVID-19. Robert Mardini from the ICRC made an excellent point when he pointed out that “just when protecting healthcare is of utmost importance, it is under attack. This is unacceptable.”

Fourth, most immediately we have millions of people in six countries facing the threat of **famine**, or are already in famine-like conditions, bringing with its mass suffering, starvation, and death. We have not seen these levels of hunger in 10 years. This is a stain on humanity. It is entirely preventable. The time to help those people is now - we need access, respect for IHL and we need the urgent funds to act **now**.

Fifth, I call on all Member States to urgently provide the \$36 billion to **finance** the global humanitarian response to stop more human tragedies from unfolding. Millions of people

are looking to us for their survival and protection. We must stand in solidarity with them by fully supporting all Humanitarian Response Plans to sustain existing life-saving operations.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The challenges before us – famines, conflicts, climate change, the pandemic – are interconnected and accentuate vulnerabilities. We have no choice but to face the challenges head-on while also ensuring the humanitarian system is becoming ever better in serving people at risk and in need.

Once again, I thank you all, Madam Chair for your stewardship of the HAS this year, the IASC colleagues, humanitarian partners, and the Member States, for your thoughtful and productive recommendations during this successful ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment in Geneva. I especially want to express gratitude to our humanitarian colleagues working on the ground in the most challenging of circumstances doing indispensable work.

Allow me here, at the end to quote what Fatimah, a Syrian refugee student living in Jordan said earlier; “Children dream about getting back to school and doing what their parents could not”. We must live up to the expectations of the children. We have no time to waste, let’s turn our recommendations from this week into action.

Thank you.