Ghada Eltahir Mudawi, Acting Director, Operations and Advocacy Division,
opening remarks for the High-Level Panel on reaching people in need, supporting humanitarian assistance for all in times of conflict and promoting good practices in the application of international humanitarian law

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--As Delivered--

I join you in all belief that we'll have and are promised an interesting session with frank discussions.

I know most of the names and faces in this panel, and I know them for their first-line experience and strong views on the subject matter.

Excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It’s a great privilege to be part of today’s panel and to be joined by so many distinguished professionals.

I look forward to learning from your insights on the complex matters we are discussing today.

As we open this discussion, I take the opportunity to make some opening remarks and observations.

Let us start with what should be a given: Civilians trapped in armed conflict have a right to relief and protection. And humanitarians must be allowed to reach those civilians without obstructions.

This is what international humanitarian law foresees. Yet, we are also seeing that in many complex emergencies the conditions on the ground are hugely challenging and far from this ideal.

When people in places such as Central Sahel, Ethiopia, the Lake Chad basin, Ukraine or Yemen need us the most, we often find ourselves unable to reach them.

As violent conflict drives up the need for aid, it also frequently drives humanitarian organizations out of the places they need to be and prevents people from getting the aid that they require.

There are many reasons for this. The first is conflict itself.

According to the Aid Worker Security Database, 58 major attacks against humanitarian workers and assets have already been reported this year. Thirty-eight aid workers have been killed. Sixty-two have been kidnapped and 37 wounded.

Most of these victims are our national staff, the very backbone of the global humanitarian workforce.
When attacked or threatened, we are forced to temporarily relocate or scale back our response.

The result is that people have less access to assistance, services and protection. It’s frustrating and it’s heartbreaking.

We also experience limitations or conditions on humanitarian activities put up by parties to the conflict.

When the bureaucratic red tape is rolled out, our operations are slowed down or stalled altogether.

Instead of delivering relief, we’re dealing with endless layers of approvals for humanitarian movements; arbitrary fees and taxes; visa restrictions; NGO registration procedures. The list is long.

More and more frequently, counterterrorism and sanctions measures generate additional and considerable hurdles beyond the strictly legal ones. They stop us with risks of heavy fines and even criminal penalties. Instead of assistance based on need alone, they influence decisions about where, what and how to fund humanitarian action. They influence banks’ and companies’ willingness to work with humanitarian organizations. And they can increase costs and delay implementation.

Humanitarian exemptions from such measures should be the norm and not the exceptions negotiated on a case-by-case basis. And exemptions should shape the policies of donors and the private sector.

Perhaps the most complex of all constraints is the increasing politicization of humanitarian assistance.

Aid recipients must not become pawns in military strategies, and aid groups must not become pieces in these political dynamics.

All these access challenges are core priorities of OCHA and for the humanitarian community. We look forward to your leadership to help find creative ways to address them.

Together, there are many good practices: ways of engaging with non-State armed groups; negotiating days of tranquility for vaccination campaigns; and getting humanitarian exemptions during COVID-19 lockdowns.

As we go forward, we must invest even more in these practices to continue to reinforce our humanitarian negotiation skills and to find predictable, workable solutions to ensure we reach people in humanitarian need and to reduce human suffering.

I look forward to hearing from our eminent panellists about how we can together tackle all these challenges that we are discussing today.

Thank you.