

**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mark Lowcock**  
**Remarks at the Geneva launch of the Global Humanitarian Overview 2021**

*1 December 2020 Online Briefing*

*As delivered*

A few days ago, I spoke to Adama, a 42-year-old widow in Burkina Faso, whose village was attacked by gunmen last year, leaving her husband and other family members dead.

She described how she had walked for nearly nineteen hours with her nine children, from her village in the Centre Nord region to Kaya, the regional capital.

Though she found refuge and shelter in very cramped conditions in Kaya, she does not have enough food and needs money to send her children to school. She is especially worried about her daughters, who are at greater risk of sexual exploitation the longer they stay out of school.

A couple of days after that, I spoke to twelve-year-old Michael in South Sudan, and his mother, Angelina. They fled their home to a protection site in Wau after her husband was killed. Angelina cannot afford to send her children to school anymore, especially when getting food on the table is such a challenge. And Michael told me he wants most of all to be able to go back to school and learn to write. He told me that he has to finish his education so he can support his mother and family, now that his father is gone.

Nima, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen - welcome. Thank you for joining us today for the launch of our 2021 Global Humanitarian Overview.

This year has shown us, in sharp and sometimes painful focus, that human progress is not an unstoppable or inevitable force.

In just nine months, the COVID-19 pandemic has put decades of human development at risk.

It quickly became clear that it was not the virus itself doing most harm in vulnerable countries. It was the impacts of the global recession and lockdowns.

Rising food prices, falling incomes, drops in remittances, interrupted vaccination programmes, school closures, and heightened risks of gender-based violence.

All this hit the poorest people in the poorest countries hardest of all.

In the most vulnerable countries, COVID added yet another layer of suffering on top of pre-existing humanitarian needs caused by prolonged conflicts, and the intensifying impacts of climate change.

The results have been devastating.

By the end of the year, the number of people facing starvation will have nearly doubled, to reach 270 million across 8 countries.

The annual death toll from HIV, tuberculosis and malaria is set to double.

And as you just heard from the Secretary-General, extreme poverty has risen for the first time in more than 20 years.

Yet despite unprecedented challenges, the humanitarian system remains strong.

Humanitarian workers, local and international NGOs, civil society groups and individuals from the affected communities went above and beyond to help prevent the worst outcomes.

They were able to do this in large part because of the generosity of donors, who have given more than \$17 billion so far this year to the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 and our existing humanitarian appeals.

Funding went further and faster than ever before.

We reached nearly 100 million people with life-saving support. But we must face facts. The outlook is bleak, particularly when it comes to hunger.

The gap between needs and available funds keeps growing.

By the end of next year, 150 million more people could sink into extreme poverty, with women and girls hit the hardest.

Millions of girls may never return to school.

Vaccine interruptions could trigger massive disease outbreaks.

And famine - something we thought we had consigned to history - could once again be commonplace.

None of this is inevitable.

We know what the problems are, and we know what we can do to solve them.

But it will need everyone to put their shoulder to the wheel.

The 2021 Global Humanitarian Overview we are launching today presents the most comprehensive, authoritative and evidence-based assessment of human need across the world.

It sets out costed, targeted and highly prioritized country and regional plans from UN agencies and their NGO and Government partners, to meet these needs.

Next year, \$35 billion dollars is needed to help 160 million of the most vulnerable people in 56 countries around the world.

Numbers that large can feel abstract. But we are talking about real people – like Adama, Michael and Angelina.

Helping them is the right and generous thing to do to.

But it is also in the self-interest of better-off countries to fully fund these humanitarian plans.

Every nation has been hurt by the pandemic. But some need more help than others to get through it.

Investing now will reduce the scale of the challenge and avoid a much higher bill in the years to come.

The faster our response plans are funded, the better.

2021 could be the year of the grand reversal – the unravelling of 40 years of human progress. Or it can be the year we work together and build forward better.

We're at a crucial juncture. The choices we make now matter.

Thank you.

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