

**Opening Session of the ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment  
Wednesday 23 June 2021, 10:00-12:00 Geneva, Hybrid format**

**Opening Remarks for H. E. Ambassador Pascale Baeriswyl, Permanent  
Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations  
and Vice-President of ECOSOC**

*Check against delivery*

Excellencies, Representatives, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I welcome you to the 2021 Humanitarian Affairs Segment of the Economic and Social Council. I now call open the first informal meeting of the Segment.

Debate will be held in a hybrid format, that is, online and in presential. The debate will end on the afternoon of June 25 with a formal session. I urge participants to be mindful that working remotely is an additional source of difficulty for interpreters and to deliver their statements at normal speech speed. I apologize in advance for any technical difficulties we may encounter.

The debate on humanitarian affairs is one of the four most important debates of the Economic and Social Council. It is the only one that is held in Geneva every other year. The debate is an essential platform for discussing activities and issues related to strengthening the coordination and effectiveness of United Nations humanitarian assistance. It offers Member States, the United Nations system, development actors, the private sector and other humanitarian partners a unique opportunity to discuss current and emerging humanitarian challenges, priority themes and share experiences and the lessons learned.

During the three days of the debate, we will reflect on the general theme that has been chosen for 2021, namely “*Strengthening humanitarian assistance to face the challenges of 2021 and*

*beyond: mobilizing respect for international humanitarian law, inclusion, gender, innovation and partnerships”.*

This year, the debate unfolds at a time when the whole world faces urgent humanitarian challenges. These three days thus give us the opportunity to take stock and chart the course towards a more efficient and effective way of dealing with current and future crises and disasters.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I now invite the Council to consider agenda item 9, entitled “Special economic, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance”.

I now give the floor to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, His Excellency Antonio Guterres, who will make an opening statement by video message.

I thank the Secretary General for his statement. As the Secretary-General pointed out, the challenges are enormous. We must take inspiration from the Secretary-General’s vision and from the work of all the humanitarian organizations and communities who every day are making a difference for people in need of protection and assistance. We must use our deliberations to drive for change.

I now invite the Deputy Secretary of State of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of my country, Switzerland, Mr. Johannes Matyassy, to make an opening statement.

I thank the Deputy Secretary of State of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs for his remarks which underscore Switzerland strong commitment to the humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law. We heard about the importance of innovation to respond to humanitarian needs and the need to accelerate anticipatory action approaches, in an inclusive manner that promotes the active participation of people in need and in particular women and vulnerable groups.

This year's Humanitarian Affairs Segment is of particular importance as it represents an opportunity to exchange views on the "new normal", the post-COVID-19 normality for the humanitarian community. It is the first large multilateral meeting that Geneva is hosting after the semi-lockdown. I would like to thank all of you present in this room.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues,

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for humanitarian action are profound and far-reaching, as we heard from the Secretary-General. The pandemic, together with conflict and the effects of climate change, means that some 238 million people need humanitarian assistance and protection, a 40 per cent increase from a year ago. This is an unprecedented level of humanitarian need which requires an unprecedented response. Human suffering is profound - and unacceptable. Displacement is rising, food insecurity is escalating and famine looming, among other deep sufferings.

To tackle these crises, the global humanitarian response coordinated by the United Nations requires \$36 billion dollars to help 161 million of the most vulnerable people in 56 countries. Donors have been very generous and provided more financing, but unfortunately, the gap between resources and needs continues to widen.

As we predicted during our last year's Humanitarian Affairs Segment, COVID-19 has proven to be one of the main drivers of humanitarian needs over the past 12 months.

COVID-19 has been brutal for the most vulnerable in the world. Schools remain closed and where they opened, not everyone made it back to the classroom. More than half of the 63 countries included in last year's Global Humanitarian Response Plan had at least one vaccine-preventable disease immunization campaign postponed, which means that millions of children were left vulnerable to potential disease outbreaks. Extreme poverty rose for the first time in more than two decades; and more than 160 million more people are at risk sinking into extreme poverty by the end of the year.

In the shadows of the pandemic, we see disturbing trends unfold: an epidemic of gender-based violence; increased protection challenges, and most urgently today the imminent threat of multiple famines and escalating global food insecurity. This is why the Transition Event was dedicated to the particular topic of famine.

The World Food Programme estimates that up to 270.5 million people are acutely food insecure or at high risk in 2021. Particularly worrying is that women and girls represent 70 per cent of those world's hungry. Warning of the drivers and multiplying risks that have resulted in surging food insecurity and deepening hunger, with 41 million people at risk of falling into famine in 43 countries in 2021.

Women and children, persons with disabilities, IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, youth - are affected most severely. A whole generation of children, especially girls, are facing increased protection risks, missing meals, dropping out of school, being forced into marriage, and being trafficked. And we are facing mental health and psychosocial impacts to an unprecedented extent and scale.

Climate change is another major driver of needs. The relentless climate emergency means that we are seeing the effects of increasingly intense, record-breaking climate-related disasters - more category 5 storms; more flooding; more heatwaves; and deeper droughts. The number of climate-related disasters has nearly doubled, from 3,656 events recorded between 1980 and 1999 to 6,681 events between 2000 and 2019.

Conflicts are increasingly characterized by persistent disregard for international norms - and serious violations of international humanitarian law, refugee law and human rights law. Most importantly, the way hostilities are conducted lead to attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including on hospitals, schools, water and sanitation facilities; the use of starvation as a weapon of war; the use of explosive weapons in populated areas with indiscriminate impacts on civilians and civilian infrastructure; attacks on the sick and wounded, on humanitarian personnel and medical and health workers and obstruction and

delay in humanitarian access. Humanitarian access of and to those in need is all too often obstructed or restricted. Many of these acts take place in an environment of impunity.

In addition, we have seen new conflicts erupt. And we have seen the even more increasing levels of displacement - from conflict and violence, as well as from climate-induced displacement. The pace of displacement has continued to rise. In 2020, conflict and disasters triggered 40.5 million new internal displacements across 149 countries and territories.

Our distinguished panellists in the debate this morning reflect the breadth of commitment in the international community and the conviction that we can tackle these challenges, and that multilateralism will have an impact. I hope our discussion will allow us to receive advice on ways in which we can bolster humanitarian action in these unprecedented times. I am convinced we will be successful.

Our panels also demonstrate our desire to include local organizations and affected people who are at the front lines of the COVID-19 response. We have worked to involve national and local actors in the overall humanitarian system.

Before I conclude, allow me the liberty to paraphrase a section of the preamble of my home country's constitution: "the strength of a community is measured by the well-being of its weakest members". We shall strive to strengthen and to serve those in need, including the most vulnerable. The humanitarian ecosystem and its partners must and should be able to rely on political decisions, which allow them to be more efficient and effective. In this sense, it is worth remembering that the humanitarian system saves millions of lives every year and provides assistance, protection and dignity to millions of the most vulnerable people in need.

I want to thank all the humanitarian partners for their effort, dedication and professionalism in helping those most in need. Sometimes this comes with the highest price. You make our global community a better place. Merci.

