Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a particular pleasure to be back here in Carlton Gardens, which used to be my office as President of the Privy Council and is now the home of the Institute for Government.

My thanks to Peter Riddell who invited me to speak this evening, and at such an opportune time when the role of the United Nations Security Council in dealing with chemical weapons issue in Syria has been on everyone’s minds.

But the work of the United Nations is not limited to the political dimension. The UN has a much broader mandate, including its role in contributing to the continuation of international peace and security. Whilst events in Syria are the top of the agenda right now, there are many places in the world where we need to keep the spotlight on humanitarian issues, for example Yemen, Central African Republic, Sudan, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Myanmar, DRC and Haiti.

Tonight I want to particularly focus on my area of work: humanitarian affairs in the context of the UN’s work, and how our response as an international community at some key moments in the recent past has determined where we are today and has shaped the understanding of the role of what I will loosely call ‘humanitarianism’, and the role humanitarian work should play in addressing the challenges caused by conflict and natural disasters around the world today.

When pressed to define what we do and differentiate it from development aid, we talk about humanitarian work being life-saving. About its core principles: neutrality, independence, humanity, impartiality. About its universal applicability. Everyone has the right to help if they are in need.

But how those principles can be applied in situations of ever increasing complexity, in war zones, in a world with 24/7 media, where millions of people have mobile phones, where the internet has given us access to swathes of unfiltered information, where comment is free, where millions of people engage directly across continents and cultures and leave their governments behind, where power relations between countries are constantly shifting but where the governance systems of key global institutions remain the same, and where belief can be more important than fact, is challenging us all.
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to go. And states growing stronger in terms of their legitimacy and authority, wanting recognition and respect for that progress and partnership in the way they move forward.

So how do we deal with these dilemmas?

First, we need to put people, particularly women and children, at the centre of our response. We need to listen to what they tell us about what they need. That means reforming the way we do our business.

And technology is helping us to do this. Emerging trends like digital mapping, social media and of course greater access to mobile phones means instant communication with people. In 105 countries in the world there are now more mobile phones than people. Of course that doesn't mean we don't continue to have communication challenges in some countries, but it does mean that people can tell us where they are, what they are short of, what they need. And they can give us instant feedback as well. Not always complimentary but always useful to help us refine what we do.

I remember being told a story by a member of my staff. She visited a small village in the Philippines which had been affected by flooding. Humanitarian organisations were there supporting the local response. She sat down with a group of women who told her that they were grateful for the aid being brought in but that all they really needed was to have the bridge fixed which had been washed away by the floods. Once that happened they could get everything they needed including food and other supplies. We had forgotten to ask them what they needed.

Second, we have to not only recognise that the world has changed, but also look practically at how we can grow a truly global, diverse and more inclusive humanitarian system. Yes, the principles which underpin our work date back 150 years, and we are proud of that tradition. But as humanitarian needs grow across the world—for example, in 1977 the number of people in the world internally displaced by armed conflict stood at 17m, at the end of 2011 it was 26.4m—and as different and more diverse organisations like the military, the private sector and greater numbers of civil society groups become an integral part of humanitarian response, we need to ensure that we believe in the same thing. We may all want the same outcome but have different ways of getting there.

So how do we build the partnerships that will lead to greater buy-in to the principles? And particularly in conflict situations, how do we ensure that we ‘do no harm’ and do not make the situation worse by mixing humanitarian and political messages and responses? It’s really hard to do when everything is so connected.

Third, how can the commitments we espouse to preparedness and capacity building of communities and governments—local and national—and to regional organisations become a truly integral part of the agenda?

We know it works. Governments want to lead humanitarian efforts in their own countries. Countries like Brazil and Turkey have become major donors. Countries want greater investment in training, expertise and support for early warning systems. Bangladesh suffered similar cyclones 16 years apart: in the first 150,000 people died; in the second 4000. The 2010 earthquake in Haiti killed hundreds of thousands of people not just because of its magnitude but because people were living crowded together in poorly constructed buildings that pancaked when
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Fourth, how do we make stronger linkages between different areas of work? As I said at the beginning, humanitarian work is life-saving, but chronic, long term emergencies are the result of a number of factors, for example the impact of insecurity, political fragility, conflict, environmental degradation, chronic poverty, poor infrastructure and corruption.

And there’s population growth. The population of the countries where most humanitarian action takes place is projected to nearly double between 1990 and 2025. Yemen’s population growth rate is 2.3% in a country where half the people are already in need of humanitarian aid and 150,000 under 5 are at risk of death due to acute malnutrition. In Niger, population growth stands at 3.8%. More than half Niger’s people are poor, 34% extremely poor. Every week 8000 children are admitted to therapeutic feeding centres in the country.

We can’t address this scale of crisis, year on year, through humanitarian response alone. Crisis is becoming the new normal in some countries, which is why I welcome what is called the New Deal on fragile states, focusing on a more joined-up response across the humanitarian and development communities. There is too much compartmentalization. We need to work closely with our partners in development to build longer term sustainability.

But we are also seeing trends that pose a threat to the foundations and relevance of humanitarian work. The legal and normative basis for our work is international conventions dating back more than 100 years, including the Geneva Conventions and the Universal Declaration of Human rights. Applying these conventions implies that states take responsibility for implementation. But that is not always the case. There are dozens of examples of repeated denials of access in defiance of international law, particularly in times of war. And we know why.

Conflict has its own logic, its own dynamic; both sides want to win, at all costs. If non-state armed groups are prepared to violate humanitarian and human rights law—for example, by using deadly force against civilians—you can be sure that they are prepared to deny those same civilians access to humanitarian aid. And Governments also do the same thing, sometimes in the name of national sovereignty.

Syria is the crisis which is at the top of my agenda now; a conflict with four major dimensions. The one which has had the major focus in the last few weeks is the use of chemical weapons. Then, the political, human rights and of course humanitarian dimensions. This is a regional, not a Syrian crisis. Inside the country almost everyone is affected by the depreciation of the currency, the destruction of the infrastructure, water and electricity plants damaged, health and education facilities destroyed and a brutality being meted out day by day which is almost unimaginable and very difficult to listen to, but is the reality of people’s daily lives.

Some 6.8 million people in the country—one third of the population—are in urgent need of help. 4.2 million of them are displaced in their own country and have had to leave their homes and communities many times. Two million have left and are registered as refugees. Many more than that have fled. One fifth of the population of Lebanon is now made up of Syrians. If the UK had had to absorb another 20% of people that would be 12 million people. But looking at this from the outside, people don’t know whose side to be on because atrocities are being committed by all sides.
Siege is being used as a tool of war. There are areas under Government control we can’t reach, and areas under opposition control we can’t reach, despite huge efforts.

Despite ongoing fighting and insecurity, we are reaching 2.5 million people a month with food aid; we supported the chlorination of water for 10 million people; we are providing mobile health clinics. We estimate that there are 2 million people in besieged areas we have not been able to reach. I hope that the consensus statement agreed by the Security Council will help us to make progress on this. It has been a painstaking and heartbreaking process.

To give an example: It takes one hour to reach Aleppo from the Turkish border. Instead, aid convoys have to drive from Damascus on a road with more than 50 checkpoints. Half are run by the Government, half by the opposition, composed of different groups. It takes up to four days to make the journey in an insecure and volatile environment.

I hope that political talks will make progress. We estimate that it will take at least ten years to put right the damage, once the conflict stops. But a whole generation of Syria’s children have been subjected to terrible trauma. We may lose a generation of Syria's children. Syria's future.

I don’t think that any one of us has an answer to these dilemmas. And that’s why we need the United Nations. Precisely because it is the place for discussion and debate. The place where we do peacekeeping, peace building, preventive diplomacy. The place where we see human rights as an essential component of human protection.

The Drafting Committee of the Charter underscored that if fundamental freedoms and rights are “grievously outraged so as to create conditions which threaten peace or obstruct the application of the Charter, then they cease to be the sole concern of each state”. We are still wrestling with that and what it means in reality. It’s not a good problem to have, but it’s essential that we continue our work on this. There are 193 Member States, each with multiple perspectives in a world with creeping vulnerabilities, water scarcity, transnational crime, climate change. None of these issues can be addressed alone.

That’s why we needed to set up the United Nations. Now that we have it, we know we have to reform, be innovative, constantly challenge ourselves and be agents of change.

If it was easy, we wouldn’t need the UN.

Thank you.