I am very pleased to be here today at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia to share some thinking on the future of humanitarian action.

Just as Universiti Teknologi Malaysia is working to become a global organisation by attracting international students and linking with other universities around the world, we in the humanitarian system are keen to expand our network of partners to include universities and other institutions. I was particularly impressed by your humanitarian initiative in Sudan last year. We need greater involvement by students and young people in humanitarian action --and from civil society, the private sector, faith-based organizations, the military and others.

The global humanitarian system as a whole is at a crossroads. It is time to take stock and reshape our thinking around humanitarian response, so that it is fit to meet the daunting challenges we face.

Today I would like to discuss these challenges with you. I hope many of you will leave with the sense that you have a role to play in humanitarian response efforts; that we can overcome barriers to cooperation and collaboration and develop a system that is truly global, inclusive and accountable.

Let me say a few words about the humanitarian landscape, which has changed beyond recognition in the past 20 years.

Global challenges like urbanization, population growth in some countries, environmental degradation, conflict, climate change and resource scarcity mean that humanitarian needs are rising beyond the capacity of the global humanitarian system to cope. Disasters do more damage, last longer, and have a tendency to recur. And costs are rising too.

Between 2004 and 2013, the number of people targeted for humanitarian assistance through inter-agency appeals – that is, the UN's humanitarian agencies and our partners – rose from approximately 30 million to 70 million. And the costs of funding those appeals doubled from $6bn to over $10 billion per year.
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The crises we are facing this year, in Syria and Iraq, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Yemen, the occupied Palestinian territory and many other countries, means that we need to raise $16.5 billion this year to help the most vulnerable people in the world. But it is the human cost which is so heartbreaking.

For example, the countries in the Horn of Africa have been buffeted from crisis to crisis over the past two decades. More than 200,000 people died in the famine in Somalia in 2013.

In the Sahel region of West Africa, even in a good year for rain, half a million children die from nutrition-related causes.

Over 12 million people in Syria need urgent assistance and practically every Syrian is affected by the economic collapse of the country and the destruction of vital infrastructure such as clinics, hospitals and schools, and by damage to the electricity and water supply. There are some parts of the country where people receive only 2 hours of electricity per day, and over 200,000 people are in communities that are besieged, mainly by the Government. We can’t get in to help them and they can’t get out.

A further 3.6 million are in areas controlled by ISIS.

It is ordinary children, women, men who are facing the brunt of this crisis. Families and communities torn apart; women raped and murdered just because they are women; children recruited to be child soldiers. The litany of atrocities is staggering.

We face multiple challenges which contribute to a country's fragility and vulnerability.

Population growth means that crises are likely to persist and to get worse as people compete for space, resources and recognition. The population of the countries where most humanitarian action takes place is projected to nearly double between 1990 and 2025. Among ASEAN member states, the population has doubled since 1985. In the Philippines, which is perhaps the most disaster-prone country in this region, the population is expected to grow by more than a third – by thirty million people – in the next fifteen years.

Meanwhile the effects of armed conflict are also growing. Although the number of conflicts has declined over the past 20 years, more people than ever are being uprooted by violence. At the end of 2013, more than 50 million people were displaced -- six million more than in 2012. The annual Heidelberg Conflict Barometer rated the Asia Pacific region as the most conflict-prone part of the world in 2013. In the past week alone, there have been reports of tens of thousands of civilians fleeing the latest fighting in Myanmar’s Shan State.

80 per cent of humanitarian work is now in countries and regions affected by conflict. The crises are protracted and political solutions elusive. We work hard to save people's lives, but the majority have little prospect of a secure future.

At the same time, smaller-scale crises continue to demand global resources. 140,000 people have been displaced from their homes in Myanmar and are living in tents in Rakhine State, many in very poor conditions. Nearly three years on, there is still no solution in sight and most people are surviving on humanitarian aid or getting on boats and finding a way out, many of them coming here to Malaysia.
In this country, the reality of climate change and the influence of urbanisation and environmental degradation are being felt. You recently faced your worst floods ever.

In addition to these growing demands, there are more and more people involved in humanitarian assistance. Many are doing excellent work in preparedness and recovery: regional organizations, private technology companies, people involved in academia.

Organizations and agencies from the global south and the Islamic world, many of which have existed for decades, are taking on regional and international roles, as we see in Somalia and Syria. These partners are bringing expertise, experience and a different way of looking at the work that we do. There is no 'one size fits all' approach.

But that diversity comes with challenges as well as opportunities, because if we don't work together and co-ordinate effectively, chaos and fragmentation can ensue - with duplication of effort and lack of a coherent approach. I chair a committee which was established by the UN General Assembly to bring together UN humanitarian agencies and major NGOs, but it is striking that there is little to no involvement with organisations from the Global South or from Gulf countries, despite their significant contribution to the global humanitarian effort. We have to change this.

Malaysia has contributed to international humanitarian assistance through its NGOs, playing an important role in international NGO fora, where the voice of Mercy Malaysia is heard loud and clear in the International Council for Voluntary Agencies. We need to work more closely together to engage southern-based organizations.

We need to be challenged and we need different perspectives to be at the heart, not the periphery of our discussions.

This brings me to some of the major issues confronting us as a humanitarian community. As I said earlier, the majority of our work is now in conflict-affected countries, which means that every day we have to work extremely hard to uphold, promote and implement the values and principles which are the heart of the humanitarian endeavour.

We don't take sides in political disputes and conflicts, although we will be strong advocates for the people who suffer as a result. Our neutrality, impartiality and independence are what safeguard us and make our work possible in difficult and dangerous places.

But it is becoming harder, because those values and principles are not necessarily respected by those with whom we have to deal or to negotiate to get to the people who urgently need our help: non-state armed actors - even terrorist organisations who hold territory, terrorize people and hold them capture.

But in the absence of political deals required to end conflict, attempts are made to politicize our work; to use humanitarian information to make the case for one side or the other; to deny us access to people who need us; to turn to us to provide the solution to the problem.

For example, if we are to help those who are caught in the midst of conflict, humanitarian workers must be free to talk to everyone, whether we are in Syria, Somalia or Myanmar. We
must put the protection of civilians, the ordinary people, at the centre of our work. If we bow to pressure to favour one side or another, it becomes impossible for us to do our job. Survival should not depend on which side one supports, which ethnic group one is from, or what religion one adheres to.

If humanitarian agencies align themselves with one party to a conflict, they lose credibility and, crucially, the ability to get to the people most in need. They can also put their own staff in great danger.

Heated debates have taken place over how the humanitarian principles should be applied in complex and difficult situations. Where do we know the limit? In Syria, we have seen local ceasefires negotiated by the Government without UN help which the opposition says require the surrender of local communities. We then get to help people - poor, malnourished, exhausted, desperate. Are we guilty of colluding with the Government because we bring aid after these local ceasefires have been negotiated?

Perceptions of the UN are also changing. In some places, we are not seen as impartial and neutral because the UN is an organization with multiple roles in peacekeeping, diplomacy, human rights and development aid.

Right now, for example, humanitarian workers are working with UN peacekeepers to protect civilians in South Sudan. Many of them fled to the UN’s peacekeeping bases when fighting broke out in December 2013 and specific ethnic communities were targeted. In Libya and Yemen, there are complex ongoing political processes involving UN Special Envoys. We hope they succeed but our main focus must remain on the humanitarian consequences of conflict. That's how complex our work has become.

And whilst dealing with the ongoing operational challenges, particularly gross violations of human rights and the safety and security of our personnel, we must think about the future. We are now facing crises the type of which we have never seen before.

For example, what kind of emergency response would be needed if there was an earthquake in the Kathmandu Valley, for the long-predicted Manila Bay earthquake, for another tsunami in Padang, or a cyclone even bigger than the one that hit the Visayas last year? We need to plan for a humanitarian response, one that links scientific knowledge and understanding with policy and practice. In addition to our work at the global level, we must strengthen the capacity of local communities to respond to shocks.

We need to put people, particularly women, young people and children, at the centre of our work and listen to what they tell us about what they need. Providing information and two-way communication are now an integral part of humanitarian response. Information is Aid.

Technology is helping us here. In 105 countries, there are now more mobile phones than people. That means that in many cases, people can tell us where they are, what they are short of and what they need; and we can tell them how to access it. We used Twitter to communicate with affected people during the Philippines floods in 2011, and after Typhoon Haiyan, we focused on communicating with the people that we were serving rather than to them. In Haiti after the earthquake in 2010, people buried under the rubble were able to text their location for help, and telecommunications partners played an essential part in the early recovery efforts.
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But we can do more to harness technology to help us to deliver. We can give people choice and also help them to keep a sense of dignity with mobile money programmes and voucher schemes. They also help to restore people's livelihoods and kick-start local economic activity. We also need to have a more coordinated and coherent approach, focusing our resources on the most vulnerable, working together rather than in competition.

And crucially, humanitarian agencies need to build the longer term sustainability of communities with development partners. Too often, information and analysis are not shared and there is a lack of joint strategic planning. Six-month long humanitarian programmes meet five-year long development timelines and the medium-term activities - like supporting livelihoods and disaster preparedness - fall through the gap.

There have been high-level moves to bridge the divide. Recognising the susceptibility in the Sahel region of West Africa to food insecurity and potential famine, the UN's humanitarian and development agencies, regional organisations, and financial institutions put in place an integrated strategy bringing together security, development and humanitarian objectives. We are slowly beginning to see the results of its implementation.

We have worked at the global level to ensure that the successor frameworks for the Millennium Development Goals, and the Hyogo Framework for Action on disaster resilience, make the crucial link to humanitarian work. People living in vulnerable communities don't care whether a programme is labelled humanitarian or development. They just care about the results – and so should we.

One of the most important ways we can meet people's needs and make resources go further is through preparedness.

Governments want greater investment in training, expertise and support for early warning systems, and we know that this saves lives and saves money. Bangladesh suffered similar cyclones 16 years apart: in the first 150,000 people died; in the second 4,000. We saw further evidence of preparedness bearing fruit last year when India and the Philippines were hit by mega-storms. Without early warning and evacuations, many more people would have been killed.

We need to persuade donors to channel their money into prevention and risk management as well as emergency response. Investing one dollar in prevention saves an estimated seven dollars in response costs later on.

And we are not directing the limited resources we do have to where they are most needed. The countries that face the highest risks are not necessarily the ones that receive the most humanitarian and development aid. The Central African Republic, for example, ranks third for risk but 78th for the amount of aid received. We have to change the mindset of donors so they see preparedness and risk management as investments for the future.

For humanitarian organizations, being better at preparedness will mean placing more emphasis on managing the risks of crises, instead of responding to their consequences. We know from experience that when humanitarian relief is delivered quickly and critical needs are addressed immediately following a disaster, communities are better placed to focus on recovering from the initial shock and getting back to normal as quickly as possible. Coping mechanisms remain intact.

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and the ability to bounce back is strengthened - building long-term resilience, especially for communities facing recurrent disasters.

Here in Malaysia, preparedness is not the responsibility of government alone. Civil society and the private sector are already involved. I hope the academic community will also get engaged for example through research and gathering evidence. This university can use its experience and knowledge base to identify problems, innovate and find creative solutions to recurring risk.

So how should we deal with the ongoing attempts to politicize our work?

Our work is based on international conventions dating back more than 100 years, including the Geneva Conventions and the Universal Declaration of Human rights. Violations of these conventions, together with pre-existing vulnerabilities, are some of the principal causes and consequences of humanitarian crises.

These conventions imply that states take responsibility for implementation. But as you know, particularly in times of war, there are dozens of examples of denial of access to people in need. The UN’s relations with Member States, the application of state sovereignty and international humanitarian and human rights law, are at the heart of many of the dilemmas we face.

We see this today in Syria, with the use of barrel bombs by the government on its own people. The conflict is fueling a regional crisis: just under 4 million people have fled to neighbouring countries. One fifth of the population of Lebanon is now made up of Syrians. If Malaysia had to absorb the same proportion of refugees, that would be an additional six million people.

We estimate that even if the conflict ended tomorrow – which is not likely to happen – it will take at least ten years to put the damage right. It is imperative that the political talks resume as soon as possible. But meanwhile, humanitarian agencies are doing everything they can to support everyone who needs help.

More than 30 members of our partner organization, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, have been killed since the start of the conflict. Syria is a difficult and dangerous operating environment.

We have learned some important lessons about responding to people’s needs while defending the vital principles on which our work is based.

We have more power when we work together; we take a common approach and share information. This has already had positive results. For example, in the occupied Palestinian territory, the Humanitarian Country Team made up of UN agencies and NGOs developed a common approach to negotiating access, using the same arguments and data with all parties, and set up an Access Coordination Unit to track violations and incidents to add weight to negotiations. We are hoping to replicate this model in other operations.

We can also reduce the risk of politicisation by establishing collective red lines. In Somalia, one of Al-Shabaab’s primary ways of raising money used to be through imposing a “tax” on humanitarian organizations. By establishing common ground rules with UN agencies and others, we managed the situation and prevented it from escalating.

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We need to make decisions based on strong information and analysis. We at OCHA are currently developing more sophisticated methods of analysis, for example, a mapping tool to analyse denial of humanitarian access in 12 countries, which looks at whether access problems are a result of military operations, bureaucratic obstacles, or other factors. Getting to a common understanding of the facts enables humanitarian agencies to focus on designing the best response.

Another challenge to our impartiality has come in the form of counter-terrorist legislation introduced over the past decade that has prevented humanitarian agencies from negotiating directly with certain groups.

We see this happening now in Syria, where NGOs fear prosecution if they work in areas controlled by terrorist groups. This is having a direct impact on humanitarian action and means that more people will die for lack of medical supplies and other support. We are making the argument with UN Member States that these laws must change.

I welcome the debate we are having around these difficult issues of sovereignty, human rights and humanitarian action. The opening preamble of the United Nations Charter refers to “We the Peoples” - putting people at the heart of the UN’s peace, development and human rights agenda.

How do we do that in a world in which the UN's founding principles are constantly being eroded? Where the basics of human protection are not respected?

The Secretary General is hosting the first ever World Humanitarian Summit 2016 in Istanbul.

The purpose of the WHS is to set the future agenda for humanitarian action. There are four overarching themes which are the basis for a series of eight regional consultations in the run up to the summit: humanitarian effectiveness; reducing vulnerability and managing risk; transformation through innovation; and serving the needs of people in conflict. It is a multi-stakeholder process where everyone has a voice. Everyone involved in humanitarian action will be able to shape the agenda and express their views through eight regional consultations, an online debate at the World Humanitarian Summit website, and numerous preparatory discussions and events.

We need your ideas. We are aware of some of the changes we need to make: broadening the base of our partnerships; listening to what people affected by disasters tell us; harnessing technology to help deliver more quickly and effectively.

I hope that the government and people of Malaysia, the businesses community and civil society organizations, will help us to continue to think through these issues. I hope that everyone in this room will play their part. There are some key questions which Malaysia can help us answer.

What role might be foreseen for ASEAN, beyond its current focus on disaster management? What role can Malaysia play in this, given its Chairmanship of ASEAN this year, and the leadership it shares with Singapore on the ASEAN Working Group on Preparedness and Response? What role is there in the Asia-Pacific region for the emerging and increasingly vibrant NGO, civil society and business communities? How are they organizing themselves? How is the region learning from the humanitarian challenges it faces every year?
Disasters affect everyone and prevention is everybody’s business. That’s why it is so important not only for humanitarian agencies to plan and act, but for the business sector, government, academia, militaries and all sectors of society. We need to join forces to address these challenges, today and in the future. I hope some of you here today will be inspired to help us think these issues through.

Humanitarian action is at the heart of the UN’s mission around the world. With your help, and despite resource and capacity constraints, you can make a difference to people's lives.

Thank you.