Deputy UN Humanitarian Chief Catherine Bragg press statement on Central America floods

8 November, 2011

Good afternoon.

Topical Storm 12E passed through Central America on October 10. In the 10 days that followed, El Salvador received 1.5 meters of rain, what it receives in an average year as a total.

I have just returned from a 4-day visit to Nicaragua and El Salvador, where I saw firsthand the devastating effect of last month’s floods.

The situation there may not have made international headlines, probably because flooding is not dramatic or violent like an earthquake or hurricane, and the current disaster involves small countries with no major or well know cities, unlike what is happening in, say, Bangkok. But for hundreds of thousands of people it is a major disaster – and one that is far from over.

Thousands of homes have been damaged, and hundreds of schools, roads and health facilities are closed. Water borne diseases are spreading, and children are unable to go to school.

Perhaps most worrying, thousands of acres of crops – which were just ready to be harvested - have been destroyed, making it increasingly difficult for people to get enough food for the next six months.

While visiting families on trips in both countries, the one phrase I heard over and over again from people I talked to was – “we lost everything”.

People sometimes get the impression that with flooding, the water comes and then the water recedes, and then everything is fine. But this is not the case. One month later, the water is still in their homes, in their bedrooms, in their living rooms, and they have an enormous struggle ahead of them.

In Nicaragua, close to 10 per cent of the country was under water, and right now 143,000 people need urgent help. Lake Managua is five metres higher than normal– and is not expected to recede for another two years.

In El Salvador, I met with President Funes and members of his Cabinet, and in Nicaragua, I had meetings with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Head of the National Disaster Management Authority, SINAPRED.

A lot of credit has to go to both countries. When the crisis hit, they mobilised immediately and prioritized saving lives. This accounts for the low level of fatality in both countries.
I was also struck by the great work done by emergency responders, as Civil Defense organisations worked alongside government departments and community based organizations to provide immediate relief. We can see that a high level of preparedness saved many lives.

Central American countries are not countries with large resources. Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the region, after Haiti. The scale of the disaster is so large, that it is beyond their capability to manage alone.

This was the latest in a long series of annual crisis, with a cumulative effect, and that many Salvadorians and Nicaraguans have lost their traditional coping mechanisms.

So the UN and the partners recently launched flash appeals, to help the hardest hit people survive the next six months. Unfortunately, the modest $14m appeal for Nicaragua is currently only 22 per cent funded, while the $15m appeal for El Salvador is only 23 per cent funded. We sincerely hope that donors will give more.

For hundreds of thousands of people – some of the poorest people in the Americas – this is only the beginning of a six month crisis. People have lost their homes, and their livelihoods, and they need help.

We must not let them down.

Thank you, and I will now be happy to take your questions.