UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O’BRIEN

CLOSING REMARKS TO THE ECOSOC HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS
SEGMENT 2015

Geneva, 19 June 2015

As delivered

Thank you all for your active engagement this week. Particular thanks to the many panelists, moderators and participants who ‘ground truth’ our discussions. My very special thanks to Mrs. Fatime Abdoulaye Izam and Mr. Idriss Moussa Saleh for bravely sharing their day-to-day realities and for inspiring and testing our discussions.

This year’s ECOSOC segment has focused on some of the most pressing issues we face. And yes indeed, we do have many of them.

The facts are staggering – more than 114 million people around the world depend on humanitarian organisations for assistance and protection; the number of forcibly displaced people around the world has more than doubled in the past three years to nearly 60 million; 20 million are at risk of hunger in the Sahel – including 1.4 million children who suffer from severe malnutrition. In Syria, 12.2 million people need assistance; 7.6 million have been forced from their homes and 4 million have left their country. In Iraq, 2.8 million people are internally displaced, half of whom are children, as I saw for myself in my most recent visit. In South Sudan, 4.6 million people face severe food insecurity. In Yemen, 11.7 million of the most vulnerable people need assistance. In Ukraine, 1.3 million have been forced to flee violence. Behind every number is a human face. A girl, a boy, a woman, a man.

At the beginning of the week, $18.8 billion was needed to meet the needs of 78.9 million people in 37 countries. One week later, with the launch of the Yemen appeal this morning, it now stands at $19.66 billion to support 82.5 million people.

In the face of these challenges, business as usual is not an option for us.

This was a central theme from this week, and I want to outline some key messages that emerged from our discussions.
We started with the transition event which served as an important bridge between the humanitarian and development segments. From the Ebola and Syrian crises, the discussion drew out some common lessons – first, the importance of national authorities being at the centre of the response; second, that we must break down silos so that humanitarian and development are simultaneous responsibilities, not sequential; and third, mobilizing local communities is a crucial part of an effective response strategy.

These messages were picked up again in the high level panel on humanitarian financing. We also heard that the funding gap will not be closed merely by increasing funding from more sources.

It will take more than just money and require that our collective actions based on coordinated strategies, not cameras or competition.

We need to continue to improve our own effectiveness - we have to be more transparent and accountable, while demonstrating greater flexibility and predictability.

We need to move towards multi-year planning and financing. We need to invest more in prevention and resilience, and a wider range of financing mechanisms like loans, budget support and guarantees. To do this, we have to work closely with development actors.

And of course, there is a moral aspect to all this discussion: it is not enough to save someone’s life only to leave them in extreme vulnerability. The moral imperative extends all the way to reducing and eliminating needs and bringing about self-reliance.

During our discussion this morning on protection of civilians and international humanitarian law, we heard that ordinary people bear the consequences of wars. IHL is their hope and is central to protecting them. IHL still matters and is more relevant than ever. We must do all we can to promote the respect for IHL by all parties to conflict.

We also heard the important link between human rights, IHL and the work of the ICC to protect civilians. Accountability is essential. Ultimately, the enforcement arm of the ICC is the Member States. We need your robust political commitment to ensure compliance and accountability when there are violations.

But we all have a responsibility. We must speak out. As Idriss said, we - the international community - cannot remain on the side-lines. Our political will and leadership must be greater than the suffering of millions of people in conflict.

IHL begins at home and in schools – it starts in times of peace. We must invest in this and heed this call.

With over 20 side events this year, the level of engagement has been strong and vibrant. The organisers of these events have tackled big issues and there have been rich and thought-provoking discussions. We have discussed the very real humanitarian concerns of migration and the humanitarian impact of explosive weapons in populated areas. We
have explored the need for more innovative approaches to meet tomorrow’s challenges including through harnessing partnerships with the private sector, greater collaboration between north and south organisations, and cash programming. The importance of woman as leaders in humanitarian response must be realized and we must invest in capacity of women and girls as humanitarian partners.

I also hope that you spent some time in the humanitarian trade fair. Through documentary film, photos and virtual reality, we sought to create an opportunity to see some of the struggles, hopes and talents of affected people. Through the technology of virtual reality, hundreds of people over the last few days were transported into the life of Sidra, a young Syrian girl living in Zaatari refugee camp.

And we showcased the work of humanitarians who innovate to more effectively and efficiently deliver assistance.

I also commend Member States on reaching consensus on the resolution you have just adopted and the significant progress that has been made. I thank the co-facilitators, Bangladesh and Switzerland, for their excellent work.

I hope the deliberations by Member States will continue in the General Assembly in September.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all of you for sharing your ideas and experience during this Humanitarian Affairs Segment. But of course we don’t stop here.

The World Humanitarian Summit is a seminal platform to address fundamental challenges to humanitarian assistance. We have seen a successful, inclusive and global consultation process, still ongoing, which has already produced a vast amount of recommendations and which will crescendo to the global consultations in this city, Geneva, in October. I urge all Member States to ensure that they are engaged there.

The Summit itself in May 2016 must re-inspire and re-invigorate the world with the fundamental tenets of humanitarian work as a global rallying call for humanity, putting principles and affected people at the centre of humanitarian action. The Summit will be the starting point for progress and initiate a set of actions so that people, countries and communities throughout the world are better prepared for and able to respond to current and future crises.

Thank you, Ambassador Khiari for your distinguished leadership as Vice-President of this Segment, and for Tunisia’s strong stewardship throughout the process this year.

Thank you to the ECOSOC Bureau, our interpreters and sound engineers, the organizers of side events including Member States, and others who have helped to make this Segment such a success.
But may I leave you with Fatime’s and Idriss’ message that came through so lively - affected people want to take care of themselves, their families and their communities and not be dependent on humanitarian assistance. They want to be safe, they want to have the opportunity to live productive, secure lives and contribute to their communities.

That ultimately is our collective task.

Mr. Vice President, thank you.