Opening Remarks to the Global Consultation for the World Humanitarian Summit

Geneva, 14 October 2015

As delivered

Good morning to Ambassador Bessler and to all of you here in the hall, packed as we are from ground level and up in the gallery, a very warm welcome to you all to the Global Consultation of the World Humanitarian Summit.

My thanks to the Government and people of Switzerland for hosting this very important event; for their substantive contributions to the World Humanitarian Summit process so far; and for their strong record in global humanitarian action both as a participant and as a donor.

It is completely appropriate that the final round of this consultation process is taking place here in Geneva, the humanitarian capital.

I thank all of you for being here today, for participating in this milestone event on the journey to the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit. I would particularly like to acknowledge those of you who have travelled long distances from Sri Lanka, from Colombia, and even Kiribati, to represent people and communities affected by crises. We need to hear those voices now more than ever.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We are here today at a time of staggering humanitarian needs. This year alone, over 100 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection. If that were a country, it would be the 12th largest in the world.

Every day, thousands of men and women dedicate themselves to helping communities cope with and indeed recover from the impacts of wars, disasters, displacement, hunger and disease. Humanitarian action is reaching more people in more places than ever before.
Yet the number of people in need continues to escalate. Year on year, the scale and the cost of meeting humanitarian needs is outpacing our capacity to respond – even while donors give more generously.

Drought, storms and other extreme natural events are affecting millions. This year alone, in March, Cyclone Pam devastated the Pacific – in some countries, nearly 70 per cent of the population were affected. In April and May, two massive earthquakes rocked Nepal, killing thousands of people and causing millions of dollars’ worth of damage. In the Sahel, 20 million people are facing the prospect of food insecurity, among them, nearly 6 million children who are in grave danger due to malnutrition.

Apart from the terrible human costs of natural disasters, the economic costs are staggering. Estimated economic losses due to natural disasters worldwide may now be as high as [US$300 billion] a year, and are expected to increase. In some context – as we noted during the Consultations in the Pacific – the total number of people affected by disaster may be low, but their individual needs are equally important and the impact on their already very vulnerable community may be even higher.

If we do not act now, projections indicate that the future could be even worse. As populations rise, along with extreme poverty, growing inequality and rapid unplanned urbanization, more people are at risk from natural hazards. Climate change is also causing increasing humanitarian stress and threatens to cause massive internal displacement and cross-border movements in the coming decades.

These natural hazards are devastating. But armed conflict is by far the greatest driver of prolonged humanitarian need in the world. The absence of political solutions is leading to more protracted crises and unprecedented levels of displacement.

The human cost is staggering. More than 60 million people around the world have been forced to abandon their homes due to violence and persecution - more than at any time since the Second World War. Half of them are children. Just three conflicts - in Syria, Iraq and South Sudan - account for more than a quarter of the people displaced around the world.

In far too many cases, displacement means years of insecurity and instability, and dependence on governments and aid organizations. The World Bank estimates that 1.5 billion people live in countries trapped in repeated cycles of violent conflict. The cost to the global economy is some US$14.3 trillion per year - 13 per cent of the world’s GDP.

What a terrible waste of human potential.

For millions of women and girls, it can mean the end of education, followed by early marriage and a sharp reduction in life chances. These women, children, and men are the reason we are here today. So before we begin, I would like us all to take a moment to pay tribute to them. And let us recognize the hundreds of thousands of people who have lost their lives in conflicts and disasters. Let us remember the aid workers who risk their lives
and their health every day to help others in need, sometimes paying the ultimate price. And let us pay tribute to the millions of people affected by crises, who often show the greatest ingenuity and humanity in their own struggle for survival.

So, if you will allow me, can I ask you to please stand and join me in a moment of silence for these women, men and children.

Thank you.

Excellencies, Ministers, Ladies and gentlemen,

Eighteen months ago we embarked on a journey to consult people on the future of humanitarian action. This journey has taken us around the world, including literally, with regional consultations held in Abidjan, Tokyo, Pretoria, Amman, Budapest, Guatemala City, Auckland, Dushanbe, to listen to the needs of people in crisis. Thematic consultations have taken place in other countries as well. We have also held consultations online, and with the corporate sector. In total, more than 23,000 people in over 150 countries were reached through this process which has provided a solid evidence base and built the necessary trust to move forward.

The Synthesis Report is our best endeavor to reflect the priorities and critical aspirations of everyone who has been consulted and who has contributed their views. The conclusions of the report have been divided into five action areas: dignity, safety, resilience, partnerships and finance.

Over the next three days, you will have the opportunity to discuss the proposals and ideas that underpin each action area.

I am counting on you to continue in the spirit of the consultations, and to put people affected by crises at the heart of your discussions. I am counting on you to make these three days count for the people who need it most.

Before I hand over the floor to my co-host, Ambassador Manuel Bessler, I want to express my very deep gratitude for the work, personal effort, commitment and conviction of Dr. Jemilah Mahmood in bringing us to this point. As you all know, she will be stepping down as the Chief of the WHS secretariat to take up the exciting new post as ASG at the IFRC. I would like you to join me in paying tribute to all that she has done.

And I am now pleased to announce her successor. We promised that there would be no gap in leadership, and after an extremely competitive process from around the world, Antoine Gerard has been appointed. He will be known to many of you already. He has a wealth of experience in senior management positions within the United Nations both at Headquarters and in the field and has previous leadership experience working with NGOs, with government and indeed in the private sector. So I hope you will extend a very warm welcome to Antoine. Thank you.
So, I am now delighted to repeat my warm welcome to each and every one of you, and to all the countries, the stakeholders, and above all the peoples who, with their hopes, are represented by you in this packed hall here today.

We carry the hopes of many on our shoulders. So let us get down to business and make this Global Consultation the crescendo of an extraordinary, inclusive, global process, which has brought us to this point and has given us so many inspiring ideas to work with.

So, over to you Manuel and thank you all very much.