Remarks to the Council on Foreign Relations Sorensen Lecture series
13 January 2015

Good evening. It is a great pleasure to be at the Council on Foreign Relations, an institution which has provided a platform for critical engagement and discussion into the pressing issues of our time: global governance, conflict, peace, human rights and security. And I am particularly pleased to be joining a list of distinguished contributors to the Sorensen lecture series on the United Nations. The commitment of Ted C. Sorensen, a trusted adviser to President Kennedy, and Gillian Martin Sorensen, to the UN principles is invaluable. And this lecture series is critical because it gives the UN and its senior members the opportunity to reflect on our work, on our principles and the challenges that are facing us.

For me, this lecture comes at a particularly critical time when the world is grappling with a series of challenges which are bringing us closer together and pushing us wider apart. And when we are seeking to redefine the role of the nation state, of Governments and of the United Nations, given the complex set of challenges we are facing. This week alone, horrific events in France and Nigeria have led, for example, to searching questions about the nature of terrorism, security, freedom of speech and religion; the limits or otherwise of press freedom, tolerance, racism, inequality, the impact of social media and the Internet, the lack of connectivity between people and cultures, and the quality of global leadership.

And it is clear that we do not have the answers, as we are dealing with phenomena which are very often outside our experience. In the past week we heard reports of a 10-year old suicide bomber – a young girl; deliberate, targeted killing of journalists/cartoonists whose job it was to challenge us to look at our world in different ways; and anti-Semitic attacks aimed at further fueling tensions between Jews and Muslims. And in the midst of that hatred and brutality, an outpouring of global solidarity even as citizens question themselves and their leaders about the kind of world we are living in, and the kind of future we want to have. Our world seems to be in turmoil. Nowhere is this more evident than in the work that I do, in humanitarian affairs. So many contradictions are played out daily as we see the impact of conflict and crisis on people's day-to-day lives. I have often said that in our work we see the worst of humanity and the very best: Mindless violence; Abuse, particularly of women and children; and in the midst of it all, people sharing what little they have, supporting, protecting and helping each other.
Humanitarian work is under significant pressure as we face growing needs around the world. This year, 2015, 78 million people in 22 countries require urgent humanitarian assistance and we estimate that it will cost $16.4 billion for us to help them. That money will provide urgently needed shelter, essential health care, education, food. It will help people to survive. But what it will not do is help people to rebuild their lives, because without resolution to conflict, people will continue to flee brutality. And without better early warning systems and risk mitigation measures, people will continue to suffer the impact of hurricanes, drought, floods and other natural disasters.

The United Nations was founded to promote global peace and security, to protect people's human rights and to facilitate development. Every year more is expected of the UN and yet it is an Organization which is limited, not by the vision of its founders, but by its members today. These members include 193 countries, each with different interests and perspectives reflecting the changes we have seen in the nearly 70 years of the organization's history. The UN has needed to change as the world has changed and we have seen some significant successes. Just in my work, the UN provides food to 90 million people in 80 countries every year; vaccinates 58 per cent of the world’s children, saving 3 million lives a year; assists over 38.7 million refugees and people fleeing war, famine or persecution; fights poverty, helps improve the health and well-being of 420 million of the rural poor; promotes and protects human rights through some 80 treaties/declarations.

Somehow we forget all that because we focus particularly on the political side of the United Nations. The side of the United Nations which uses diplomacy to prevent conflict: assists some 60 countries a year with their elections. But as with all Organizations, with growth has come more bureaucracy, less flexibility. And we have seen changes in power dynamics between countries and regions reflected in the way issues are debated and discussed, indeed in the way they are resolved.

We see this in humanitarian work as well. More is expected of us than ever before – we are called on to provide life-saving assistance and protection of civilians - but we are not necessarily given the tools to do it. Civilians are killed and injured in targeted or indiscriminate attacks in violation of international humanitarian law, and often with complete impunity. I cannot remember the number of times I have reported to the Security Council and asked them to make strong statements, which they do, about what is happening in the world, but it does not necessarily change what is happening on the ground. 82 per cent of the people who were killed or injured by explosive weapons in 2013 – the last time we had figures - were civilians.

Violence and other forms of persecution force an average of 23,000 people per day – per day - to leave their homes to seek protection elsewhere. Too often, humanitarian organizations are called on to fill the glaring gaps that emerge when States neglect to fulfil their duty to safeguard their citizens. Think for example Syria or South Sudan. Or where, as a result of conflict, the state apparatus has become weak, fragmented or almost nonexistent as in the case of Somalia or the Central African Republic.
Humanitarian actors are increasingly being called on to deal with the consequences of crises that essentially have their roots in a complex set of interrelated factors: poor governance, political paralysis, underdevelopment, rising levels of poverty and inequality. And these dynamics in many countries are overlaid by the growth of terrorist and radical armed groups and challenges to democratization, which create further instability. Add to this mix climate change, environmental degradation, population growth in some parts of the world, and the consequences of increasing levels of internal displacement and forced migration. The average length of conflict-induced displacement is a staggering 17 years. Despite the economic gains we have seen in many countries, inequality is rising, and poverty and instability often go hand in hand. Half of the world’s extreme poor live in fragile states.

We are seeing a convergence of global trends which is increasing the risk of major crises, as well as their scope and complexity. Conflict and complex emergencies drove over 75 per cent of humanitarian response needs last year, and most of the conflicts we are responding to have implications far beyond their borders. The crises in Iraq and Syria have consequences across the whole of the Middle East and beyond. The fall of Moammar Gaddafi in Libya led to major insecurity and the spread of weapons across West and Central Africa, the impact of which is still being felt today.

In many of the conflict zones in which we work, there has been a manifest failure by political leaders to be inclusive in their protection of their people, and to realize that state sovereignty is a responsibility, rather than one of the spoils of being in power. Humanitarian workers, because of the lifesaving nature of our work, need to be impartial; we need to be neutral. We have to be on the side of people, not on the side of governments or armed groups where there is conflict. This means that we operate in highly pressurized and political environments where attempts are made to use humanitarian action to pursue political or security ends. This has become more and more challenging as we have worked to keep humanitarian response separate from political imperatives in places like Syria, Iraq, Ukraine and Gaza. We have a responsibility to be strong advocates for the people caught in the midst of conflict and many Governments don't like what we say. And we are constantly 'under fire' – both literally and figuratively.

Working in conflict zones where international humanitarian law is flagrantly violated, is dangerous. In 2013, violence against humanitarian aid operations hit an all-time high with 251 separate attacks in which 155 aid workers were killed and 134 were kidnapped.

But despite the continued danger, humanitarian groups continue to provide life-saving assistance to millions of people around the world every single day. And we do everything we can to ensure that we can continue our work. We negotiate with governments and armed groups. We use those with influence over warring parties to help us gain access. We use the Security Council to push for resolutions which will make a difference. We have to be operationally effective and we have to be politically astute. We have to be strong advocates. Good communicators. We have to make the case. We have to raise the money. And crucially we have to be good leaders, demonstrating impact and pushing for change.
The mission of the United Nations Office for the Co ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is to mob ilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors.

The challenges facing organizations working in the humanitarian field reflect the wider challenges facing the entire United Nations. How do we live up to the values in the UN Charter? How do we safeguard human rights, protect civilians and help secure a more peaceful and a more just world? How do we promote a more active global citizenship? How do we help the people of the world to connect and see the value of inclusivity as well as of diversity and difference?

From our work we know that the only way to break the cycle of violence, which continues to threaten global peace and stability, is for political actors to work with communities to find sustainable solutions to crisis. The need is greater than ever for States to live up to their responsibility to protect civilians from harm, and when States fail to do so, for others, including multilateral institutions, to step in. The tools available to the international community now appear extremely limited in light of the complex set of challenges we face. We need a stronger, and dare I say it, perhaps a more interventionist global architecture to deal with the humanitarian consequences of conflict. I recognize that this would come with major risks – given global power dynamics and other differences around the world. But I do have to say that after every crisis we say ‘never again’ and yet it always happens again.

We have a body of international humanitarian law, which, over time, has given us the means to tackle the challenges arising from conflicts. The problem is its lack of implementation. We will of course continue to push for civilians to be protected in conflict, be it calling on UN Member States to deliver on their duty to protect their citizens, or highlighting to governments and militaries the devastating impact that the use of explosive weapons has on people living in densely populated urban areas.

Implementation requires stronger vision and commitment from governments and multilateral institutions as well as from humanitarian agencies. It is no longer acceptable that still less than half of one per cent of all international aid is spent on disaster prevention and preparedness. Finding the right approaches to these and other challenges is a priority for the consultations leading up to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the first ever such Summit which has been called for by the UN Secretary-General. At that Summit, we will have a unique opportunity to reshape our approach to humanitarian aid and the way we do humanitarian business.

We all face a choice. We can continue to effect piecemeal change. Or, we can truly transform the way we approach complex problems in a way that better reflects today’s reality. I think we should try to do the latter for the sake of the millions of people around the world today, who frankly deserve better from all of us.

Thank you very much.