Under-Secretary-General Stephen O’Brien

Remarks on current humanitarian landscape and the future of humanitarian response

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It is a pleasure and a privilege to be here with you to today to discuss the current humanitarian landscape, where we are headed – both globally and in this region - and the new approaches we need to deliver people out of aid.

To be clear, we associate humanitarian action with fast-onset emergencies, but now, in addition to natural and conflict-driven emergencies, we also have protracted crises where there is both an immediate and long-term need for life-saving, life-supporting and life-protecting aid.

Let me first turn to some humanitarian trends that we are seeing today. In short, exponential demand is putting an almost intolerable pressure on the humanitarian ecosystem, but brave humanitarians are never deterred, even in the face of often insuperable challenges.

In this region as in other parts of the globe, conflict continues to drive the vast majority of humanitarian suffering, while the impact of this conflict consumes the bulk of precious, hard-won humanitarian resources. Conflict-driven crises accounted for over 80 per cent of humanitarian funding appeals in 2015, to meet needs in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, the Lake Chad Basin, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen.

Conflict has forced a record 65 million people from their homes, two thirds of them displaced within their own borders.
Some of the forces shaping these conflicts are an increased factionalisation of fighting parties, a growing inter-connectedness between regional and global terror and crime networks, growing inequality, and a pervasive lack of opportunities for youths. Many of today’s conflicts are characterized by a pervasive disregard for the protection of civilians by both State and non-State actors, with civilians not only caught in the crossfire, but deliberately targeted by violence, as well as being besieged by fighting parties.

Most of these conflicts last years, as national, regional and international solutions remain elusive. Of the 37 countries receiving humanitarian assistance over the past decade, six: in Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, the occupied Palestinian territory, Somalia, and Sudan, have launched appeals for 10 or more years in succession.

Humanitarians cannot be a substitute for State-led basic services to support life, but they have to be where these services are not delivered or when normal access is dangerously impeded by corruption and bureaucracy preventing development funds reaching people in early recovery.

The mounting scale of need is already over-stretching the capacity of humanitarians to respond: in 2015 the humanitarian appeal experienced its largest funding gap, with just under half of requirements unmet. This year, OCHA and its partners have sought their largest ask to date: $20.1 billion to help 88 million people in 37 countries, which marked a 600 per cent increase since 2005. As of October this year, 44 per cent of these needs had been met – the same figure applies to funding received for the conflicts that dominate this region: Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya and the occupied Palestinian territories.

We are sadly heading to yet another record funding gap, despite donors’ generosity. Funding for OCHA has flat-lined for five years but we were expected to deliver a nearly 40 per cent productivity gain in that period. Even the harder value-for-money advocates among you – and I am one myself, being from the private sector – would regard that as unreasonable and unreachable.
Looking ahead, this global humanitarian resource gap is anticipated to stay steady or grow wider, unless we find a radically different way to not only stem suffering but to reduce needs at their source.

The conflicts of the future will increasingly take place in the heart of cities – we will see more Sana’as, more Aleppos, and more Homs – which will put civilians in the direct line of fire and will further test the respect of international rules and norms of war to its very limits.

Climate change will take on a more central role to fuel conflict and catalyze humanitarian suffering and displacement. To feed nine billion people by 2050, global food production will need to increase by half. Factor this against the prediction that crop yields will have dropped by more than one quarter, and we will be facing a global food insecurity of truly alarming proportions.

These challenges demand better solutions. Recognizing this, the Secretary-General launched an ‘Agenda for Humanity’ at the World Humanitarian Summit held in Istanbul in May, calling for a commitment from leaders to deliver better for the world’s most acutely vulnerable people. Only by putting crisis-affected and otherwise vulnerable people at the heart of political decision-making, humanitarian and development responses, will we successfully deliver on the promise set out in the Sustainable Development Goals, to “leave no one behind.”

At the Summit, 9,000 participants gathered to make more than 3,000 commitments to deliver on the Secretary-General’s Agenda for Humanity. Gulf donors’ and aid groups’ active engagement in the Summit was widely welcomed and influential with the multilateral architecture. The United Arab Emirates set a high bar when it committed to double its unearmarked multi-lateral funding and to increase its humanitarian aid to 15 per cent by 2020, as well as to help mobilize private sector funding through the Global Humanitarian Impact Fund. The UAE also robustly supported the ‘Every Woman Every Child Everywhere’ initiative. I am determined to work with each of you to translate the Istanbul commitments into concrete actions. That is what we mean by partnership.
Gulf States have shown not only a steadily increasing generosity but also greater engagement with the multilateral humanitarian system at all levels. OCHA is proud of the partnerships that we have built with you and we commit to taking these further over years to come. OCHA facilitates and makes the delivery of humanitarian assistance more efficient across UN agencies and beyond including by working with NGOs in across the humanitarian ecosystem.

Some of the key action areas to emerge from the Summit resonate in particular, for this region.

There was a universal push to recognize the critical role played by local and national actors in every aspect of humanitarian action, and widespread support was directed at devolving more funding directly to these groups.

Leaders and agencies pushed for a global shift to anticipate, not wait, for crises, by investing in preparedness, early warning and risk analysis, including through the launch of the Global Preparedness Partnership, signed onto by 43 at-risk development nations.

The Summit generated strong momentum to achieve gender equality and gender empowerment in humanitarian crises including by launching the “Every Woman, Every Child Everywhere” initiative.

Recognizing that we cannot leave our global youth in crisis, at the Summit leaders launched a Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action will help ensure youths have a say in shaping response.

The displacement figures in this region are alarming: 11.3 million Syrians have been displaced, three-quarters of them internally; 3.3 million people are internally displaced in Iraq; 2 million are displaced by violence in Yemen; some 6.5 million Palestinians are displaced. These people will remain displaced, on average, for 17 years. Short-term assistance is not the right long-term answer. In the case of the internally displaced, ultimately it is governments that must work with development partners and others to adopt policies, legislation and assistance programmes that enable IDPs to not just survive but to thrive.
Another central theme at the Summit was the need to show millions of conflict-affected people who live in constant fear and danger, that we will stop at nothing to protect them. Grave violations of international law unite all of the crises in this region. From Aleppo to Sana’a, from Gaza to Baghdad, civilians are deliberately or recklessly killed, maimed, tortured, sexually assaulted and abducted. They are killed by barrel bombs, napalm, suicide bombs and sniper fire. Children are forcibly recruited and starved to death. Enough is enough. Our common humanity demands that we do everything in our power to prevent and end these violations and hold the perpetrators to account. There are no military solutions. I call on each of you here today to exert your leadership to ensure that fighting parties comply with the international humanitarian and human rights laws they have signed up to and to sound the alarm when they are not. It is no longer an option for weapons exporting nations to fail to factor into their decisions, an assessment of whether these weapons will be used to commit serious violations of international laws. And I call on each of you for support in launching a collective campaign to demand greater respect for international humanitarian law as our collective moral and legal duty.

Lastly, I return to the issue I raised earlier – how to more effectively respond to situations of protracted conflict and vulnerability. In this region as elsewhere, humanitarians are called on to deliver life-saving aid year on year, keeping people alive but never addressing the root causes that perpetuate need. At the Summit, leaders from across the humanitarian spectrum gave their resounding support for a new way of working in which humanitarians, development actors and others will not only save lives but work together to reduce vulnerability and build resilience over time.

The conflict in Syria has been raging for almost six years, and has forced 13.5 million people into dependence on assistance. Families in Iraq have experienced 13 years of intermittent violence and conflict, which has led to 10 million to need aid. In Libya, 40 per cent of the population is now in need of assistance. In the occupied Palestinian territories, nearly a decade of closures and restrictions from Israel as well as rounds of hostilities between Israel and Hamas have led every single Palestinian in Gaza to be affected by the protection crisis and have left one in two people in need of assistance. Many of these people were once economically thriving. They
owned businesses, healed the sick, practiced law. They do not want handouts - they want to live with dignity and independence once again.

To be clear, we will adopt this approach only when it does not compromise humanitarian principles of impartial, independent, neutral assistance to the most vulnerable groups in need, whoever and wherever they are. This is our license to operate – to rise above the competitive interests of states and the tunnel vision of non-state actors to secure their goals. Leaders in this region have already made great strides in transcending the humanitarian-development divide. In Lebanon for example, the Government, the UN, and its partners are working to meet emergency needs, including education in emergencies, while also reinforcing national capacities to do so. The biggest change we now need donors to make is to ensure better complementarity between their emergency and development funding by identifying a few goals they could reach if the right type of programme is funded at the right time, according to the context.

And finally, to become fit for the future we need to invest in humanity. We welcome the increasing engagement from Gulf Donors in aligning their support through the multilateral system, including through humanitarian response plans and the CERF, which we have committed to double to US$1 billion. Providing more support to country-based pooled funds, which target a significant proportion of their funding directly to local and national NGOs, is a good way to do this. And where you do not come through the UN or the multilateral system to ensure efficiency and optimized impact, do tell us what you are doing, through OCHA’s Financial Tracking System, so others can concentrate on filling the gaps.

Prior to the Summit, a High Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing launched a number of recommendations, proposing a ‘Grand Bargain’ between aid groups and investors to create a more efficient, transparent, accountable and effective way of financing response. Strong leadership is fundamental to meet the expectations of the Grand Bargain and we welcome the UAE’s demonstrated commitment on this front.
The World Humanitarian Summit was a point of departure and an accelerator for the world’s ability to be humanitarian. The commitments made at the Summit, if implemented, will better safeguard humanity and promote human progress as the drivers of our collective action. Our collective test now is how we implement the promises we have made. The Secretary-General has laid out his vision for the next steps including tools to report, track and measure our ongoing progress. By ‘our’, I do not just mean the UN but all of us – States, multilateral actors, civil society, NGOs, the private sector, and academia. At this critical juncture, I look forward to your support, not only in delivering on your commitments and enabling others, but in holding all of us to account to do the same.

To be engaged in this is without self-virtue. It is not being holier-than thou. It is what leadership requires. As information about crises flies around the world in half a nanosecond, we cannot duck it. We are all always on notice. Not to act is shameful. To act is to reach a fellow human being in a crisis not of their own making; who is at risk or in peril. It is not only our duty but our right; it us ab opportunity and a responsibility. We have the tools and the techniques. Give us the resources, and we will just do it.