Ambassador Leendertse, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a real pleasure to be here today. I would like to thank Germany for co-hosting this important event on a topic that has been front and centre on our agenda over the past few months. We have a diverse panel from the humanitarian and development communities, each of them representing organizations that are deeply involved in the ongoing response and averting famine.

As the Ambassador stated, confronting the complex challenges facing the world today, including this crisis, requires a holistic approach. Our approach must be multi-sectoral, delivering food at the same time as we protect civilians, vaccinate children, restore basic services, and rebuild livelihoods. It must cut across the humanitarian-development nexus, meaning we complement immediate life-saving activities with longer-term action that reduces vulnerability and risks, and builds resilience. We must demonstrate, very clearly, that investing in preventative approaches today means reducing the very need for humanitarian assistance and thereby the long-term costs of emergency response.

A holistic approach also means stepped-up political action to end conflict, the root cause of these crises, and to promote respect for international humanitarian law. Each of us – whether we work for a UN agency, development bank, NGO, regional organization, the private sector, or indeed donor agencies – each has a critical role to play. Only by working together, with new ideas and new partnerships, can we avert famine and put people on the path to recovery, health and well-being.

Before we move to the panel discussion, I would like to share a few key points to frame the discussion.

First, despite the robust humanitarian response in north-east Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen, the situation remains, as we speak, dire. Famine has been prevented from spreading for now, but needs have not decreased and all four countries remain in crisis.

We see this happening today in South Sudan. Food insecurity and overall humanitarian needs have severely deteriorated across the country, despite some gains in Unity State. The number of people in IPC Phase 4 – that is one step away from famine – has increased
from 1 million to 1.7 million, and the number of severely food insecure people has increased from 5 to 6 million. Across South Sudan, more people are on the brink of famine today than they were in February.

What we do know is that humanitarian assistance works and can pull people back from famine. The new IPC assessment in South Sudan, which was just released today, shows that famine is no longer occurring in Leer and Mayendit counties, and that further deterioration into famine was averted in two other counties in former Unity State. This was the result of immediate and sustained multi-sector humanitarian assistance carried out since March. When donors support robust humanitarian actions and we have access in spite of conflict, we see improvements in the lives of people in need. I urge caution, however, as this does not mean we have turned the corner on averting famine. The situation remains extremely vulnerable in South Sudan and approximately 45,000 people are still expected to be facing IPC 5 – or humanitarian catastrophe – in Unity State and Ayod County in former Jonglei state. We must sustain the response, and in fact continue to scale up to meet increasing needs through our brave field humanitarians, in and beyond the UN. And yes, they are not a target – convoys, medical facilities, civilian infrastructure like pumping and power stations – they need protection.

Second, we must immediately mobilize additional funding to support the ongoing response across all four countries. Since the Secretary-General’s call to action in February, less than 40 per cent of the US$4.9 billion required has been received, so thank you to all who contributed. Of the $1.1 billion pledged at the High-Level Pledging Event on Yemen in April, just over half has been provided to date. Another $1.5 billion has yet to be mobilized, amidst additional requirements to combat the spreading cholera outbreak, which is eye-wateringly severe. And four months after the Oslo Conference on Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region, over $150 million in pledges remain to be committed or disbursed. I call on all Member States to urgently convert the pledges they have made into real cash contributions that can be used to support immediate-life saving interventions. As three of the four countries enter the peak of their lean seasons, when food is even scarcer and conditions even harsher, we must make good on our commitment to act now before famine is declared. We still have a massive job to do to avert famine.

We are already seeing the very real consequences of underfunding. In north-east Nigeria, at least 300,000 people are without food assistance and livelihoods support tonight due to funding shortages. In Yemen, lack of funds means that only 3.3 million people out of 17 million in need are receiving full assistance tonight.

Third, we must support the efforts of humanitarian and development actors as they operationalize the New Way of Working. For donors, this means providing more flexible and risk-tolerant funding for development programmes to be implemented in fragile and conflict-affected areas, and more multi-year funding for humanitarian assistance to maximize impact and build resilience in protracted contexts. For the United Nations and our partners, this means we must break down silos within and across organizations and think creatively of how to provide medium-term assistance to reduce vulnerability and
impoverishment, even in areas with ongoing conflict. We need to look at new ways of sharing data and conducting joint analysis, and of reaching the most vulnerable first, within the broader framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. We must focus on the programmes that can pull people back from the brink of famine – our internal process changes are important, but they are meaningless unless they deliver measurable improvements in health, nutrition, and livelihoods. And take people back up the scale away from famine and the threat of famine by reducing needs and vulnerabilities.

Lastly, it is essential that the international community does all it can to end conflict. The crises in each of these four countries, even if exacerbated by drought, are primarily man-made and they are all preventable. The severity of needs stems from armed conflict and there is a direct correlation between food scarcity and protection risks, particularly in situations of displacement. Without an end to conflict, the suffering will continue. And of course in Yemen, there is no drought – it is all deliberately man-made.

The assistance that Governments and aid agencies are delivering on the ground is making a real difference. We are reaching nearly 10 million people each month, but the risk of famine does remain acute. Twenty million people remain at risk, and 10 million more could join them without sufficient funding and improved access. Pockets of famine-like conditions have been identified in Borno and Adamawa states in north-east Nigeria.

Cholera is spreading at an unprecedented rate across Yemen, with over 150,000 cases and over 1,000 associated deaths over the past six weeks. Nearly 700,000 people in Somalia have been forced to leave their homes in search of food and water, and in South Sudan violence continues to push people towards the brink of famine. Across all four countries, more than 5.4 million children are malnourished. These are not just statistics; I have visited many, and these are real people.

With that, I would like to turn to our panelists. I encourage an open exchange of views, from all panelists and participants. It is important to hear all perspectives as we tackle the immense challenge in front of us. But I am deeply confident that together we can, and with the right political will and more access and more money, we will avert these four famines.

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