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Humanitarian Affairs

The University Scholars Leadership Symposium: Building Dreams

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Your Excellency the Right Hon. Datuk Seri Mohd. Ali Rustam,

Distinguished Speakers and Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good Evening.

I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to speak on humanitarian assistance, as unfortunately, it is an area that is becoming increasingly pertinent to the work of the United Nations, and we seek to increasingly raise public awareness as well as collaborate with other key organizations in order to assist victims of both natural and man-made disasters.

Profound global changes are increasing needs and vulnerability and shaping the humanitarian landscape in new ways. Climate change is already increasing the frequency and intensity of natural hazards, particularly floods, storms and droughts. The global food price crisis is not over in many poor developing countries and is expected to worsen over time. We also have continuing rapid population growth in many poor countries; demographic shifts and growing urbanization which are causing many more people to live in high risk and vulnerable areas; increasing land, water and energy scarcities; disturbance to key ecosystems; the risks of pandemics; and in the shorter term, the continuing impact of the current global economic crisis on the poorest and most vulnerable.

Individually, these mega trends are likely to increase humanitarian crises by creating more inequality, vulnerability, exclusion and even poverty in some instances, higher unemployment, an increased frequency and intensity of disasters; new kinds of conflicts; and major weather driven migrations. Combined, they threaten to create chronic vulnerability on a scale we cannot readily imagine at this point in time.

Globally in 2010, humanitarian needs continued to rise, sustained and triggered in part by armed conflict, but also driven by natural disasters and global structural challenges. This was reflected in a record high initial UN Consolidated Appeal (CAP) request for 2010, of \$7.1 billion for assistance to 48 million people, compared with a CAP for 43 million people in 2009. That has now been revised upwards and risen to \$9.5 billion to help 53 million people, following the mid-year Review of the CAP.

Natural disasters continued to increase humanitarian needs in 2009 and 2010. In the first half of 2010 there were massive earthquakes not only in Haiti, but also in Chile and China. Both the Chinese and Chilean Governments responded rapidly by deploying relief and assessment teams, temporary shelter materials, food, medicine and water to the affected area, with some assistance from the international community. The Haiti earthquake, the second deadliest in Haiti in the last 100 years, necessitated one of the largest and most complex international relief operations mounted in recent years.

Somewhat less high profile but still very significant in their humanitarian impact are slow-onset disasters. In South and East Asia, Africa and Central America, unpredictable and unprecedented weather patterns have become the new norm. In many of the countries in which we work, the impact of climate change is already being deeply felt, often in what were traditionally perceived as development settings. Floods and droughts are not only more frequent but increasingly unpredictable. The rains no longer arrive in large parts of Africa at the times they should. In the Horn of Africa alone, humanitarian workers are addressing the needs of nearly 23 million people severely affected by a drought, which in some areas has lasted for six years.

Sadly, a lot of the UN's work continues to be related to the humanitarian consequences of conflict. Protracted conflicts in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq, the Palestinian Territories, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Sudan show no signs of conclusion. New emergencies in 2009 in countries such as Pakistan and Yemen, as well as new twists to old conflicts continue to preoccupy a very large share of the time and other resources of the United Nations worldwide.

Globally, an estimated 27 million people are now considered internally displaced because of armed conflict, with over 6 million becoming newly displaced in 2009 alone. 10.4 million refugees were meanwhile being assisted by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in 2009, in addition of course to the Palestinian refugees helped by United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Even in countries where we have seen some improvement of the humanitarian situation, such as in Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka, the need for significant assistance will continue for the foreseeable future.

As this is increasingly recognised, countries, UN agencies, regional organisations, NGOs, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and many others will need to continue to work to improve their delivery systems. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) is the arm of the UN Secretariat that is responsible for bringing together all the different UN humanitarian agencies to ensure a coherent response to emergencies. OCHA's mission is to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors in order to alleviate human suffering in disasters and emergencies; advocate for the rights of people in need; promote preparedness and prevention; and facilitate sustainable solutions. OCHA also ensures that there is an agreed framework within which each agency can contribute to the overall UN response effort.

The UN has started to put in place a humanitarian response architecture which can help our Organization cope: this includes stronger humanitarian coordinators, humanitarian country teams, clusters for coordination, and quicker and more equitable collective funding tools. The World Food Programme (WFP) is the world's largest humanitarian agency fighting hunger worldwide. In emergencies, WFP gets food to where it is needed, saving the lives of victims of war, civil conflict and natural disasters. After an emergency has passed, the WFP uses food to help communities rebuild their shattered lives. In 2010

alone, the WFP aims to reach more than 90 million people with food assistance in more than 70 countries, operating from the UN humanitarian response depots located in Italy, Panama, United Arab Emirates, Ghana and Malaysia.

The generosity of donors, be they governments, individuals, companies or foundations, has increased and the most urgent humanitarian needs are usually funded, although significant gaps still remain.

Nevertheless, we need to urgently reflect further on how we respond to chronic vulnerability and to determine how humanitarian workers can be more effective in a world where humanitarian response can no longer be easily defined by the triggers of major natural disasters or man-made conflict. A rethinking of the traditional model which has been focused on saving lives with humanitarian assistance is needed because the current humanitarian toolbox is proving to be insufficient and inadequate in the face of new threats.

The UN's international role supporting government capacity when we are asked to do so and where we can will, no doubt, remain relevant. But given the scale of the challenges ahead, we also need new ways of working if we are to help stem the immense human suffering, mass migration, pandemics and resource-based conflicts which could otherwise overwhelm us.

Such a new model should emphasize prevention and risk reduction at least as much as humanitarian response. This approach would shift the focus towards increasing national and regional preparedness and response capacity, and improve rapid and culturally sensitive action at all stages of the crisis cycle. We need to help create new partnerships among public authorities, civil society and business actors focused on building preparedness and resilience at every level, from the village or town to the district and the country level, but also the regional level. People could work together at building resilience against natural hazards like floods, earthquakes and drought through early warning systems, water management schemes, reforestation, relocation of communities away from disaster-prone places, and the like. But there is also a need for a broader assessment of what allows communities to cope with the sudden shocks which are likely to become more frequent in future. There is a need for some organization to put the key actors together and generate new ways of working. Perhaps, the UN is the most appropriate Organization for this critical coordination role.

The UN has already made a head start on the disaster reduction side. The Hyogo Framework for Action gives the UN a global blueprint for 2005-2015 to help governments and organizations assess and reduce risks through planning, training, and better public education. This includes making investments that can pre-empt the potential future costs of disasters; and making sure that schools, hospitals, and other key public infrastructural facilities meet certain safety standards. Some 168 governments signed Hyogo in 2005, but many have failed to follow through on the practical measures Hyogo proposes.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We must all recognize that we are currently tackling problems that respect no boundaries, and that do not fit the model of the crises we have faced in the past. We must shape our future practices accordingly. It is no longer enough to see the UN humanitarian agencies, and the humanitarian community at large, just as a sort of international fire brigade, turning up whenever and wherever the flames become too high. While we will certainly still need the fire brigade in future years because disasters caused by climate change and other major disasters like the Asian tsunami and the Haiti earthquake are unlikely to be preventable in the future, the focus needs to fundamentally shift towards building local, national and regional capacities to deal with these problems with an emphasis towards prevention, preparedness and disaster risk reduction activities.

The point is not that the humanitarian system should or can take on all global challenges in the fight against poverty and underdevelopment. This is obviously well beyond humanitarian mandates and capacities. But the UN must find new ways of working closely with others to help tackle chronic and acute vulnerability. We need integrated and coherent developmental and humanitarian strategies. We also need to ensure that national and local authorities and partners on the ground are in the lead wherever possible, and need to assist in the strengthening of their capacities.

At the same time as needs are growing, the ability of humanitarian workers to reach those in need is increasingly constrained in many places. Violent attacks on humanitarian personnel are increasingly frequent and brutal. The sad truth is that, in some areas, a UN, NGO or even in some instances a Red Cross/Red Crescent flag no longer offers protection for those flying it, but instead invites attack. 2009 was statistically the deadliest year yet for humanitarian workers. The number of deliberate deaths, kidnapping and attacks are particularly worrying in contexts such as Somalia and Afghanistan, as well as in Pakistan. Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan are also becoming increasingly dangerous, though in a less deliberately targeted way, being more a focus of banditry than ideology. Humanitarian workers in these high-risk environments are entitled to look to member states and their employers for understanding, support, and protection.

At the global level, OCHA has launched a study on operating in high risk environments. This is an attempt to learn from recent experiences and codify best practice. In the field, OCHA and other actors are trying to change perceptions about aid work by driving home the messages that humanitarian assistance is genuinely neutral and independent, responding only to needs on the ground. Also, that UN humanitarian assistance does not reflect any kind of wider Western or Northern political or security agenda, but only universal values; and that UN humanitarian agencies and NGOs are ready to help all in need, independently of Western Governments. For the effectiveness and safety of humanitarian operations and for the sake of access to those in need, we need to be ready to engage in dialogue with any and all armed groups so as to promote their compliance with international humanitarian law and seek their understanding and acceptance of our neutrality, independence and impartiality.

Access to the people we are trying to reach is not, of course, just restricted by threats of violence, but in many operating contexts also by bureaucratic delays or impediments. We, and more importantly the beneficiaries, depend on the cooperation of the affected States to facilitate and expedite humanitarian aid. Slowing it down or blocking it entirely, or making artificial distinctions between the provision of goods and services and equally essential protection work designed to prevent abuses and save lives may be frustrating for us, but ultimately hurts those in need. The point here is that access for humanitarian workers should be viewed as a fundamental principle and right.

The second ever annual World Humanitarian Day will be commemorated this year on 19 August. It provides the UN with an opportunity to explain what we do and, perhaps more importantly, who we are, to a very wide constituency. The focus this year is on communicating what it is that humanitarian aid workers do to the public, around the theme, "I am a humanitarian aid worker". In line with the spirit of the UN General Assembly Resolution that established the World Humanitarian Day, we will also reflect upon the colleagues that we have lost or who have been injured as a result of their commitment and dedication to the humanitarian cause and, of course, continue to highlight the fact that we do our work with the aim of improving the lives of the people we are assisting.

I have presented some of the realities of providing humanitarian assistance to you, not to discourage but to inform and challenge you to think out of the box on how together, we can provide solutions to prevent disasters and strengthen national and local capacities to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance from international agencies. We should all aspire to make this world a better place for those affected by disasters, whether natural or man-made. These are the thoughts I wish to leave with you as you embark on your journeys. I wish you success in helping build sustainable dreams and better futures for the people who are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Thank you.