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The Horn of Africa Crisis-The Humanitarian Response

Key Note Speech

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I am really honoured to be here and over the next few days I look forward to sharing the many different perspectives on Africa that this Conference has brought together. Today I'm going to talk about the humanitarian work of the UN Refugee Agency and its current operations in the Horn of Africa. As you know I head up Australia for UNHCR which raises funds for the UN Refugee Agency.

UNHCR operates in 116 countries, with 80% of its staff working directly in the field often in remote areas of conflict such as Darfur, the DRC and Somalia. UNHCR's mandate is to provide protection and assistance to refugees and displaced people who have been forced to leave their homes because of conflict and persecution.

Australia for UNHCR's mission is to make a life changing difference to refugees .We provide funding for refugee support such as food, water, shelter and health and medical support .This is often very basic - a plastic sheet to keep the rain off a family, a gerry can to hold the water that you collect from the camps water point once day, cooking utensils to make a hot meal from the daily rations of wheat or maize and vegetable oil.

All often very simple things that can be life saving.

My experience in Africa is relatively recent by some standards. I first visited Chad in 2004 interviewing refugees who had just crossed over the border fleeing the horror of Darfur. Four years later in 2009 I was invited by UNHCR to visit the infamous Dadaab refugee camp in North East Kenya ,then already the worlds' largest refugee camp and today in 2011 with over 460,000 Somali refugees Kenya's third largest 'city.'

Since then I have visited refugee camps in North Kenya a number of times, as well as being a regular visitor to Nakivale refugee settlement, home to 56,000 refugees near the DRC border in south west Uganda,. Australia for UNHCR has funded a number of key projects in Nakivale, including the first ever secondary school in the settlement and most recently a computer centre including an internet café. This was a challenging project to say the least given its deep field location - but also an incredibly rewarding one with in one day alone 900 young people signing up for the offered computer training.

Most recently I was in Galkayo in Somalia meeting with medical staff at the Galkayo Medical Centre, which is funded by Australian donors. This hospital is one of the few hospitals operating in Somali providing reproductive health services and is headed up by a dynamic Italian / Somali gynecologist Dr Abdulkadir M Giama who has

expanded the hospitals services to include outreach clinics into the many IDP camps around Galkayo.

The majority of Australia for UNHCR 's support is directed to funding UNHCR's emergency operations and one only has to look at the last 12 months to see how extensive these operations are.

It's probably an understatement to say that for UNHCR and indeed for all international humanitarian agencies, 2011 has been an extremely challenging and dramatic year.

UNHCR estimates there are now 43.7M people uprooted due to conflict and persecution, the highest number in over 15 years. ¹

Driving much of this displacement is what the High Commissioner for Refugees Mr Antonio Guterres has described as the five major " global megatrends "— population growth, urbanization, food and water insecurity, natural resource scarcity and climate change. ²

It also won't be a surprise to anyone here that many of the displaced are in Africa. But until recently, these numbers were on a steady decline due in part to large-scale repatriation in regions of West Africa, the Great Lakes region, Angola and Southern Sudan as well as local integration of thousands of refugees throughout the region. However resurgence in conflict and instability in East Africa has led to new outflows of refugees in the region.

At the start of the year, UNHCR was providing emergency support to thousands of refugees fleeing Cote d'Ivoire crisis after disputed elections with many hundreds of thousands internally displaced.

As the Cote d'Ivoire crisis reached boiling point, the so called "Arab Spring" produced a new refugee emergency.

As the uprising against Colonel Gadaffi gained steam a staggering 1.5 million people crossed into Tunisia and Egypt.

In this mix of refugees and displaced people were thousands of migrant workers who also needed assistance to get home.

¹ High Commissioner's Opening Statement to the 62nd Session of ExCom Palais des Nations, Geneva 3 October 2011 pg 3 www.unhcr.org

² Responding to the Challenge of the Next Decade. Statement to the Berlin Symposium for Refugee Protection by António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Berlin, Germany, 15 June 2010 www.unhcr.org

In an incredible humanitarian effort, UNHCR, the IOM and its parties organised more than 1600 flights evacuating over 157,000 people to their home countries in a matter of weeks.³

But more was to come. UNHCR and other agencies had been sounding the alarm on the deteriorating situations in Somalia and the Horn of Africa.

Since 1991, Somalia has been divided largely along clan lines and commanded by various groupings of warlords. A third of Somalia's population of 7.5 million is estimated to have been uprooted.

Since the beginning of 2011, continuing insecurity and drought have brought more displacement, with nearly half of the population inside Somalia – an estimated 3.7 million – affected.

There are currently 940,000 registered Somali refugees and asylum-seekers in neighboring countries, with Kenya, Yemen, Ethiopia and Djibouti hosting more than 90 percent of them -with 318,000 new arrivals this year alone.

Within Somalia itself nearly 1.5 million Somalis are internally displaced, mostly in south-central areas.

I was in Somali visiting our projects in Galkayo, when Famine was declared by the UN in parts of Southern Somalia on 20 July this year.

Galkayo like the rest of Somalia affected by drought is like a moonscape, very rocky, very barren.

Every day new families arrive from the south - many of them having trekked hundreds of miles in search of food and security.

The tracks to the IDP camps that have sprung up around Galkayo are strewn with discarded blue plastic bags – the “Galkayo flower” as it is referred to locally. The camps themselves are squalid. Dotting the landscape are ragged shelters people have made out of twigs and rags and cardboard. They are barely able to keep out the never-ending wind and sandy grit that clings to everything.

In one camp I visited, a newly arrived family worked against the clock to get their shelter up before night. Their meager belongings, carted many hundreds of miles from their village in the south, lay strewn on the ground around their camp site. They had gathered together a collection of used vegetable oil tins which they were going to use as a bed base. Next door a woman had gathered rocks together as her base and she cried as she told me she had never thought her life would lead to this

³ High Commissioner's Opening Statement to the 62nd Session of ExCom Palais des Nations, Geneva 3 October 2011 pg 2 www.unhcr.org

situation.

The displaced population in Galkayo is either refugees from war, famine or both. People tell stories of failed crops, of whole flocks of sheep and goats dying from thirst and lack of feed. Many had fled Mogadishu after seeing family members killed in missile attacks or caught in cross fire.

One woman arrived only days before, still in shock after learning that both her brother and father had been killed in the family home after staying behind to protect their window fittings and roof sheeting from looters during missile raids. Another young woman showed me remnants of shrapnel in her hands and legs.

Across the border 80 km inside Kenya, UNHCR was reporting that Dadaab refugee camp was receiving more than 1500 new arrivals a day.

Having visited Dadaab a number of times it is hard for me to imagine what it must be like to be there now with nearly half a million people living within a 50km range in what is a desert in summer and a muddy bog when the rains arrive.

In Dollo Ado in Ethiopia, family after family were arriving with tragic stories of children dying on the journey. You will recall the very sad news images of families burying their dead and tiny children struggling to survive. Up to two-thirds of newly arriving children were acutely malnourished, and in one camp the daily mortality rate exceeded 10 deaths per day for children under 5.⁴

Responding to the Emergencies

You can appreciate I am sure the operational pressure these rolling emergencies across Africa put on UNHCR and the humanitarian community as a whole.

During the first nine months of 2011, UNHCR deployed more than 600 emergency staff to 36 countries. That's two and a half times as many as in previous years. At one point in June, some 300 members of staff were deployed at the same time – 60 more than during the entire year of 2010. UNHCR has airlifted an average of 70 tons of shelter and other relief items each week in 2011, more than tripling the volume dispatched in 2010.⁵

UNHCR's Response –Kenya, Ethiopia Somalia

While the speed of the uprising in Libya and the resulting humanitarian crisis took many by surprise, there were many signs that the situation in Somalia was becoming dire.

While access to Somalia prior to the declaration of Famine was limited aid groups had been monitoring the impact of the drought. FEWS-the Famine Early Warning System Network had been issuing regular report about the growing crisis based on

⁴ UNHCR Regional Updates-Somalia Displacement Crisis 17 August 2011, www.unhcr.org

⁵ High Commissioner Opening Statement. pg 3Op cit

its analyses of crop condition and agricultural production within Somalia, often using satellite-based information, and on-the-ground monitoring—through household surveys and observation—of local socio-economic conditions.⁶

UNHCR had also been monitoring the deteriorating condition of new arrivals of Somali refugees into camps like Dadaab. In June 2011 an assessment on the outskirts of one of Dadaab's camp sites found extremely high malnutrition rates among new arrivals.

It was clear by July that the drought in Somalia had turned the corner into something more catastrophic. Failed rains in the previous year had led to further crop failures in March. This in turn led to extremely high food prices for basic staples. What food aid was available was very hard to access within Somalia because of the conflict.

The UN uses a five-step scale, called the [Integrated Food Security Phase Classification](#) (IPC), to assess a country's food security.

Stage 5 – “famine/humanitarian catastrophe” – means that more than two people per 10,000 are dying each day, acute malnutrition rates are above 30%, all livestock is dead, and there is less than 2,100 kilocalories of food and 4 litres of water available per person per day.

At the time famine was declared in Somalia the UN estimated the death rate was at least 10 people per 10,000 per day, with acute malnutrition rates above 50 %, and extremely limited access to food due to conflict and prices.

Impact of Declaration of Famine Drought

The impact of the Declaration of Famine was to shift emergency relief into high gear and focus global attention on the disaster.

Greater media attention encouraged greater donor commitment although funds continue to still be far less than required.

The Australian government was one of the first to respond and its total funding in response to the drought and famine in the Horn of Africa now stands at \$128 million - including \$98 million in humanitarian assistance and \$30 million for the region's long-term food security.⁷

Within Somalia itself an important development was the withdrawal from Mogadishu and surrounding areas of Al Shabaab which opened a humanitarian window for relief.

In Somalia UNHCR responded by organizing three airlifts into Mogadishu- the first such flights in five years -providing non food items such as blankets, tents, cooking sets and, gerry cans. WFP provided food aid and UNICEF provided medicine,

⁶ www.fews.net/somalia

⁷ Ausaid Website: [ausaid.gov.au/Horn of Africa crisis](http://ausaid.gov.au/Horn%20of%20Africa%20crisis)

nutrition and water based supplies.

In camps in Kenya and Ethiopia the sheer numbers of new arrivals people initially overwhelmed humanitarian resources on the ground .However by August the supply and distribution aid channels had significantly improved.

Some key highlights to date of humanitarian effort include:

- Improved registration of Somali refugees in camps like Dadaab. On arrival, asylum seekers are interviewed, wrist-banded, medically screened and provided with initial assistance which includes ready-to-eat high energy biscuits. After that, they are transferred to Kenyan Government offices for registration, issued with ration cards, given an emergency aid package including a food ration gauged to last till the next general food distribution and then relocated to one of the established camp extensions.
- Again in Dadaab UNHCR and partners have successfully relocated the vast majority of Somali arrivals who for lack of other options, were forced to settle on Dadaab's precarious outskirts. The new homes are in the newest extensions of the Dadaab complex, Ifo 2 East, Ifo 2 West and Kambioos.
- Enhanced health and nutrition intervention in Ethiopia have resulted in a notable decline in the crude mortality rate in the Dollo Ado complex of camps, most notably, Kobe camp which experienced its worst mortality rates in July with up to 10 children dying every day. The crude mortality rate in Kobe now has reduced drastically from 4-5 deaths per 10,000, to 0.4 deaths per10, 000 daily.*
- Supplementary and therapeutic feeding programs are reaching the most vulnerable, resulting in a decline in malnutrition across all camps in Dollo Ado to an average rate of 35 percent. This is an improvement from early July when more than 50 percent of children arriving in Ethiopia were seriously malnourished. However, this is still well below the UNHCR established emergency standard of below 15 percent. Malnutrition among children under the age of two remains a concern.
- The recently completed measles vaccination campaign has resulted in a sharp decrease in the number of new cases and deaths attributed to measles. Families who previously had no access to medical services are now accessing mobile health teams.
- Transit centres have been established at key points on the Somali border with new arrivals now receiving hot meals, high energy biscuits and dry food rations. In Ethiopia, UNHCR commenced blanket feeding all children under five, pregnant women and lactating mothers.
- Nutritional assessments were undertaken on all new arrivals, identifying children who are severely malnourished by measuring their mid-upper arm circumference. The most severe cases are transferred to hospital for tube

feeding while others receive sachets of ready-to-use-therapeutic foods that can be safely administered by families in their own shelters.

In Somalia where access is most restricted, the conditions remain extremely difficult.

- Estimated mortality rates among children under age five continue to be alarmingly high with an average of 15.43 deaths per 10,000 individuals daily. Malnutrition rates have also worsened during the same period.
- UNHCR has conducted fact-finding missions to some of the over 180 spontaneous IDP settlements in the Somali capital where aid has been distributed. Ten such missions are planned weekly to the settlements.
- Access to many parts of Mogadishu however remains difficult in spite of improved security. Outside the protected compound of the Mogadishu International Airport, UNHCR staff moves with secured convoys.
- UNHCR has distributed thousands of units of Shelter materials including extra-large (4m by 7m) plastic sheeting for protection in the rainy season. These can completely cover the traditional huts will provide additional protection for IDPs who are mostly in Mogadishu and Lower Shabelle.
- With the drop in temperature that accompanies the rains, some 60,000 additional blankets are being distributed in Mogadishu for distribution to the most vulnerable; particularly children who tend to face the risk of hypothermia.⁸

Overall since famine was declared UNHCR and other agencies have reached hundreds of thousands of families with emergency relief and assistance. According to Mark Bowden, UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia. "In only three months, the UN has managed to triple the number of people receiving food aid to 2.2 million, and reach over half a million more people with clean water." This is indeed a remarkable achievement.⁹

Nevertheless, more than 1000 people continue to arrive at UNHCR camps in East Africa every day and the famine situation in Somalia continues.

When I was in Somalia in July I spoke to the Galkayo based representatives of United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) whose job is to mobilize and coordinate humanitarian action in Somalia about the various future scenarios.

They warned back then that even with the best case scenario resulting in the Deyr

⁸ UNHCR Regional Updates-Somalia Displacement Crisis 17 August 2011, 21 September 2011, www.unhcr.org

⁹ Media Statement, UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia, Mr. Mark Bowden 5 September 2011 Nairobi, Kenya www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/horn-africa-100-days-after-famine-declaration

rains falling in October, crop production would not recover until at least 6 months. In that time they feared the world community would become apathetic again over the crisis, the media having moved on, the rains seemingly fixing the immediate issue of drought and the required funds to feed and support the millions internally displaced not forthcoming.

The good news is that rain has indeed arrived and that the massive scale up of emergency response since September/ October has also had a significant impact on both acute malnutrition and mortality.

The most current assessment from the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit Somalia and the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (18 November) is that Famine is not expected across Somalia in 2012 with the potential exceptions of some IDP camps.

However given the significant impact of the 2011 Famine on livelihoods, health and cereal availability, and current expectation of a late and possible below average 2012 Deyr harvest large areas of Somalia are likely to remain in Phase 4 – Emergency until the August 2012 Gu Season harvests. (Emergency level food security is characterized by substantial household food deficits, a GAM prevalence above 15% and elevated mortality levels of CDR >1/10,000.)

The size of the population in need of emergency assistance to save both lives and livelihoods will likely remain near current levels (4 million) for the coming months. In addition the risk of large scale disease outbreaks remains and could lead to very high levels of excess mortality due to the compromised nutritional status of children in the region.¹⁰

So What Kind of Response is Needed?

In the immediate term, the humanitarian priority is to provide a sustained large scale multisectoral response to prevent additional deaths and to support livelihoods, especially for poor agro pastoral households. FEWS reports that while access remains a concern, the flow of local and donated cereals to markets across the south and subsequent reduction in prices demonstrates the strength of Somali markets, indicating that continued market based interventions (cash vouchers, monetization) are feasible and effective ways to improve food security even in areas where access is constrained.

In the longer term aid agencies are calling out for a new focus on “resilience” which they argue will be essential to prevent this type of disaster occurring again and to reduce the vulnerabilities of the Somali people.

This resilience is based on things like:

- Better food security through investment in African food production.

¹⁰ Somalia Food Security Outlook January 2011 to June 2012
www.fews.net/docs/Publications/Somalia_OL_01_2011_final.pdf

- Tackling the impact of climate change in vulnerable environments like sub-Saharan Africa.
- Providing more aid and budgetary investment in physical infrastructure.
- Improving social protection providing food throughout the year.¹¹

Political Situation

Ultimately improvement in the political and security situation would significantly change the current scenarios.

But the situation in Somalia is extremely complicated and is characterized by multiple conflicts involving a host of actors from local clan leaders, the Transitional National Government to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), Al Shabaab, independent and semi autonomous states such as Somaliland and Puntland and the global and regional states who all have competing interests in Somalia.

While some commentators suggest that we need to look at alternative political solutions for Somalia such as decentralized power sharing,¹² the international community is broadly supportive of what is described as “the new political road map” for Somalia which emerged from the High Level Consultative Meeting in Mogadishu in early September 2011. In addition to drafting a new constitution and promoting political reconciliation, the roadmap lays out timetables for improving security in Mogadishu and other parts of southern Somalia, and improving governance including tackling rampant graft and corruption.¹³

While stating that the Somalia Road Map was a positive development, the High Commissioner Mr Guterres has also spoken out about the possibility of UNHCR playing a “catalytic” role in finding solutions to the long-running Somalia refugee crisis. He indicated that areas the international community could look at included increased burden-sharing and support for host countries and communities, including economic development.

As he commented recently at the end of the Executive Committee meeting in Geneva in October, “Those communities are paying a high price supporting refugees and they need solidarity and burden-sharing in relation to their own economic and social development needs. And that is why it is so important that development cooperation becomes a key instrument in the solutions for refugee problems.”¹⁴

¹¹ Provost Claire, “Fixing Famine: What Will it Take”. 15 August 2011 www.smh.com.au/world

¹² Samir Elhawary, Research Fellow, Overseas Development Institute UK as interviewed in Guardian Focus podcast: Famine in Somalia, Presented by Madeleine Bunting, produced by Vivienne Perry and researched by Claire Provost www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/audio/2011/aug/18/famine-somalia

¹³ Consultative meeting on Ending the Transition in Somalia, Mogadishu 6 September 2011 Somalia End of Transition Road Map, <http://unpos.unmissions.org>

¹⁴ Media Release: UNHCR chief seeks more international support to solve the Somali

Conclusion

So while a political solution may be some way off we must continue to find creative, practical and effective ways to deliver humanitarian support to the region.

Sometimes we could be excused for thinking that aid delivery has a lot in common with the ancient Greek Sisyphus who in Greek mythology was damned by the Gods to push a marble block to the top of a hill only to have it topple back down time and time again just as it reached the crest.

It's clearly going to take a concerted, sustained and multisectoral effort to keep pushing Somalia in the right direction. The question remains whether there is the political will to prevent this type of humanitarian disaster happening again. In the meantime UNHCR and other aid agencies are calling on the international donor community to continue sustained support to the Somali people and to look at long term solutions to the region's challenges.

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