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'Humanitarian challenges in the 21st Century' Presentation

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Ladies and gentlemen,

The current global financial and economic crisis worries us all, but we often ignore the particular impact the crisis has for the developing world, the potential of a dramatic rise of unemployment and the reduction of remittances, investment levels and development assistance for these countries. It could translate into increased poverty and deprivation amongst the majority of the world.

The crisis could reverse years of poverty reduction efforts and undermine achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. But even this understates the risks it represents. As the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr António Guterres, pointed out in his annual report to the UN General Assembly in November 2009, the full significance of the crisis can only be appreciated when it is viewed in conjunction with the adverse impact of the world's mega-trends, which are themselves increasingly interconnected.

Firstly, population growth. At present, there are approximately 6.7 billion people on earth. By 2050, we are expected to surpass nine billion. Almost all of the population growth will be in the developing world.

Secondly, urbanisation. Already, a majority of all the people in the world live in cities. By 2050, the proportion is expected to reach 70 per cent. Services and jobs are already failing to keep pace. Displaced populations, like others, will increasingly be urban. Just to give you one example, the population of Kabul has increased sevenfold since 2001, mainly caused by the settling of returning refugees and IDPs.

Thirdly, climate change. Global warming threatens to contribute to massive displacement. The increase in extreme weather events also make natural disasters approximately twice as likely today as they were two decades ago.

Fourthly, food, water and energy insecurity. Today, more than a billion people are likely to suffer from hunger and malnutrition. World food prices have dropped from their peaks but the food crisis has not ended in many poor countries. Starvation levels have risen especially in Africa. Competition over increasingly limited resources (like land and water) will potentially intensify internal conflicts.

Fifthly, migration. The world has more than 200 million migrants. The principal factors driving migration are demographic and economic, they are likely to grow in their complexity and unlikely to ebb. Environmental degradation is also an increasingly relevant push factor.

All these five mega-trends are more and more interlinked, reinforcing each other and driving insecurity and displacement. The response to this therefore requires a multi-disciplinary approach. They are a global reality and need a global response. Unfortunately, this has not been the most common approach of the international community, whose analytical and policy tools have essentially been fragmented.

Mirroring the impact of the aforementioned mega-trends, contemporary forms of displacement have, as a result, become more complex. Conflict, climate change, extreme poverty, poor governance, food and energy crises taken together have evidently accelerated the rate of displacement.

At the end of 2009, there were 43.3 million people uprooted – the highest number since the mid-1990s, whereas the number of refugees under UNHCR's mandate remains 10.5 million – the same level as in previous years.

The number of people displaced in their own country because of conflict grew to an estimated 26 million of whom only half can be reached by UNHCR protection and assistance activities.

What are the challenges for a humanitarian agency on the ground?

Today, humanitarian action generally takes place in an operational environment where patterns of conflict and forms of displacement have become more complex. This is a result of various factors, including the reduction of humanitarian space, restrictions on access, a greater reliance by States on the sovereignty question, and demographic and urbanisation trends.

There are more actors in today's conflicts. The respect for humanitarian principles has diminished greatly in the last few years. The blurring of lines between humanitarian and military interventions has further exacerbated the issue. To demonstrate this, three UNHCR colleagues and many other UN staff members were killed in service during the last twelve months.

While shrinking humanitarian space represents a major challenge in operational theatres in the developing world, shrinking asylum space, mostly but not exclusively in the developed world, has been an equally major concern in recent years.

A number of developed countries are limiting access to their territories in ways that do not respect the rights of asylum-seekers and refugees under international and regional law. Pushing asylum-seekers back to where protection is not available or further burdening developing countries, which already host 80 per cent of the world's refugees, is neither moral nor acceptable.

Two thirds of all the refugees of today are situated in an arc of crisis stretching from south west Asia through the Middle East to the Horn and Great Lakes of Africa. In this arc we see fewer solutions and more protracted refugee situations. Addressing these situations is a major objective for UNHCR.

Traditionally, the international community has responded to disasters and displacement in 'humanitarian emergency mode', establishing camps, distributing food and water, building schools and clinics.

We must reconsider some of our approaches. The billions of dollars spent on international relief over the past three or four decades have generally not achieved the sustainable improvements to local capacity that one would have hoped for.

UNHCR has developed a Global Plan of Action on protracted refugee situations, supported by a multi-functional support team at headquarters. The Plan contains six key elements:

- Enhanced support to voluntary repatriation as the preferred solution;
- A revised education strategy, with an enrolment target of 95 per cent for primary education by the end of 2012 and significantly enhanced opportunities for secondary education and vocational training;
- Multi-year strategies for self-reliance currently developed for operations in Bangladesh, East Sudan, Malaysia and Yemen;
- Significantly enhanced support to refugee affected and hosting areas, conducted under the acronym RAHA in Pakistan, and mobilizing the whole of the UN system, such as in northern Tanzania and Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh;
- Priority attention to protracted situations in the use of resettlement, as is the case in Nepal; and
- An increased emphasis on partnerships with Governments, NGOs and sister UN agencies such as UNICEF and WFP and with the development partners such as the World Bank, ILO and UNDP among others.

In summary, relief and development actors have to collaborate more closely to stabilise populations. People who have been displaced need a hand up and not a hand out, if they are to find lasting solutions to their plight.

Thank you.