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“Emerging Humanitarian Challenges and the UN's Role in Humanitarian Action”

Today I would like to discuss two humanitarian topics. The first is that we are confronting global issues which defy our long-established view of humanitarian assistance and which cannot be addressed by states and organizations alone. About 70% of humanitarian assistance seeks to deal with the consequences of conflicts, and these conflicts resemble not so much conventional disputes between states as more complex civil wars. Climate change, food crises, population issues, urbanization, shortages of land, water and energy, and destruction of ecosystems are among other humanitarian issues threatening people on a global scale. Food crises and malnutrition are rampant in Africa due to droughts and population growth. Farmers are distressed by more frequent and unpredictable floods and droughts. Rising poverty and unemployment, recurrent disasters, the outbreak of new conflicts, and migration due to climate change are some of the factors heightening the need for humanitarian assistance.

These changes in circumstances have been acknowledged, and governments and international organizations are flexibly addressing them. However, humanitarian needs are also changing rapidly and traditional approaches at times prove inadequate for bettering situations. The damage due to climate change is particularly difficult to forecast and identify, causing problems in timing humanitarian assistance. Policies are now needed that do not simply address situations after they arise but that place greater priority on prevention, i.e., avoiding or mitigating crises. The cooperation of states and regions is essential in this regard, but partnerships at the individual and citizen level are perhaps even more important. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has served a functional role in cooperation with other international and regional organizations.

The second topic is that humanitarian assistance activities are increasingly restricted by safety and access issues. Such activities were previously accepted and protected by the parties to a conflict, but recently there have instances in which personnel engaged in humanitarian assistance have been intentionally targeted. Assistance providers have also seen their access restricted by governments and groups that dislike international involvement. OCHA has insisted that humanitarian assistance is neutral and independent, and has pursued dialogue with conflicting parties. While such dialogues are inherently

fraught with difficulties, there are no other means available of resolving the matter. Dialogue is safer than adopting physical means of defense, and is also an approach suited to our objectives and roles. Indeed, such dialogues have proven successful on more than one occasion.

OCHA's activities are now becoming progressively more crucial. We must acknowledge the issues we are confronting and devise new measures to address them. The problem resolution capabilities of states and regions should be enhanced in future, with the focus on prevention and preparation prior to disasters/crises and risk mitigation activities. OCHA's role lies in removing the obstacles hindering humanitarian access and ensuring the safety of humanitarian assistance providers, and we are committed to continuing our efforts in this regard.