

62nd Meeting of the Standing Committee
Emergency preparedness and response (EC/66/SC/CRP.3)
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Introductory Statement of Ms. Terry Morel,
Director, Division of Emergency, Security and Supply (DESS)

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Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen

Today our international humanitarian system is being seriously tested by the dimensions of the crises we are facing. Regardless of the challenges, solidarity and kindness have prevailed among the communities receiving those fleeing from conflict within or across borders. Our humanitarian emergency response must build on and reinforce the extraordinary generosity and capacity of hosting communities and states.

As we speak, four Level 3 inter-agency system-wide emergencies remain active – Syria, South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Iraq. All of these have generated large refugee outflows into neighbouring countries.

Already this year, the High Commissioner has declared UNHCR Level 2 emergencies for the Ukraine and Nigeria situations. Renewed violence in the Central African Republic has displaced close to 50,000 people, with the total number of IDPs and refugees now approaching 900,000. South Sudan continues to be a source of concern. This weekend another 16,000 Nigerian refugees were reported crossing into Cameroon.

In 2014, our Division organized 441 deployments to emergency situations and for preparedness activities, 276 came from our standby partnership arrangements. We delivered almost 79 million USD worth of core relief items from our global stockpiles by sea and road, and undertook 101 airlifts to support emergency responses in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Ethiopia, and Cameroon among others. Our headquarters based

security staff undertook 38 missions to high risk situations to guide our colleagues on security measures to keep staff safe. But accessing and delivering to those affected and making sure we maintain a dialogue with them is the hardest and yet the most important.

For UNHCR, the increasing demands and challenges have meant taking a careful and self-critical look at what lessons we can draw from past emergencies, and using this knowledge to adapt our emergency response.

Over the last twelve months, we conducted extensive internal and external consultations, and took stock of the findings of recent UNHCR evaluations and inspections of our emergency operations and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Operational Peer Reviews.

Our emergency field missions, and those I have undertaken with the Inter-Agency Emergency Directors Group, to Mali, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan, have provided us with a rich source of learning.

The consultations and missions have enabled us to reflect both on UNHCR's work, and equally importantly, to learn from the work of our sister agencies and NGOs. Our strong history of partnership comes from working together in emergencies in the field and it is critical that we nurture this sense of collective endeavour.

Based on this, in 2014 we reconfigured and strengthened our Emergency Services Team. We now have permanent standby teams led by senior staff members, and a new section for Emergency Policy and Capacity Development to ensure that learning and training are based on real time assessments of our successes and mistakes in the field. Effective emergency response depends on good partnerships, and our reinforced Partnership and Deployment Unit will focus on this.

So what have we learnt and what changes are we making?

First, the people we are here to serve and protect must be at the centre of our emergency response. The first step must be to engage directly with refugees and

internally displaced people to understand their protection needs and to learn how they are coping. In this way, we build a response that fits their specific profile and circumstances. At the same time, when needs are so obvious and people are desperate, we must be ready to deliver critical assistance from the very onset of the emergency.

We need to check that the people most in need receive the right support and that we are responsive to their evolving protection needs and assistance. For this to happen our staff and partners must maintain a two-way dialogue with all people of concern taking into account age, gender and diversity. This is critical to ensure sexual and gender based violence and child protection matters can be identified and addressed. Only by doing so can we uphold the rights, needs, aspirations and perspectives of refugees and other people of concern and demonstrate accountability to affected people in practice. To address this, senior protection coordinators and community-based protection officers are part of our emergency standby teams. Priority is also given to information management and reporting to raise the profile of these issues.

Second, we need to adopt a ‘local to global’ approach. There is a growing concern that our priorities may have tilted too much towards a preoccupation with processes at headquarters and in capitals. While these are often critical enablers of a large-scale life-saving response, our starting point must be field presence and delivery, analyzing and understanding local realities, dynamics and capacities, and engaging with local actors and communities. This is ‘protection by presence’, and will be a central feature of our emergency standby team deployments.

This takes me to my third point, which is the critical role of preparedness. Preparedness is one of the most consistently highlighted gaps, and is key to improving our emergency response and ensuring that it is tailored to local realities. In 2013, we published our inter-agency Preparedness Package for Refugee Emergencies. In 2014, we gradually rolled it out to critical countries and we will expand further in 2015.

Preparedness action includes our global stockpiles and global supply management, but also analysis of local options. Together with national and local partners, we will map available capacities, procurement options, appropriate shelter models, assess the potential use of cash-based interventions, and identify alternatives to camps and

delivery mechanisms which recognize and reinforce the enormous contributions of host communities and authorities. This will call for innovative approaches and we are establishing an emergency lab to explore new approaches.

Fourth, our ‘stay and deliver’ security approach involves taking robust measures to enable staff to remain in complex and insecure environments in order to protect refugees and internally displaced persons. To support this, we also need to ensure that our administrative, programme and procurement systems are sufficiently clear, streamlined and flexible. Together with our partners, teams in the deep field are courageously trying to deliver in remote, high security locations in countries such as Mali, Somalia, Cameroon and Yemen. Our systems need to be in tune with the demands of today’s humanitarian crises, so that they are sufficiently realistic, practical and fast so that together we can address the enormous human needs before us.

As we move forward we shall continue our dialogue with donors, UN agencies and NGO partners to support our learning. Our emergency trainings, and we will have our first one in French in Senegal this spring, for staff and senior managers will promote open and inclusive engagement with partners, and a better understanding of what good leadership and coordination mean in practice.

The above reflection has led the High Commissioner to issue a revised UNHCR policy on emergency response activation, leadership and accountabilities in January this year. The policy, which was also shaped by our experience in implementing the Transformative Agenda, and the roll out of the Refugee Coordination Model and the Joint UNHCR/OCHA Note on Mixed Situations, highlights roles and responsibilities for emergency preparedness and response within UNHCR. It outlines specific actions in relation to our operational capacities and leadership in emergencies, while introducing a light system for taking stock of where we stand at key moments in Level 2 and Level 3 emergency operations. It is already being implemented for the Nigeria and Ukraine situations and in fact I and the Regional Refugee Coordinator have just returned from Northern Cameroon.

In conclusion, the nature of the humanitarian landscape today does not allow for a ‘written in stone’ one-off answer; rather it calls for agility, flexibility, quick thinking and a constant revisiting of our ways of working to ensure we have the best possible response at hand. This reality is further compounded by the financial situation, so we must be willing to analyse honestly, and in real-time, whether we are getting things right so that we also adapt in a timely manner and prioritize wisely. Our actions should build on the feedback from the communities we are here to serve, which is the touchstone of the appropriateness and effectiveness of our emergency operations.

In closing, I would like to extend our sincere appreciation to you, host countries, donors and member states who provide us with such strong and consistent support for our emergency operations.

Thank you.