

51st Meeting of the Standing Committee

**Remarks by Volker Türk,
Director, Division of International Protection, UNHCR
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Mr Chairperson, distinguished delegates, dear colleagues,

I am pleased to introduce conference room paper EC/62/SC/CRP.19.

The year 2010 saw more than 300 million people affected by natural disasters. In a great many of the 373 natural disasters reported by the globally-recognized International Disaster Database, or “EM-DAT”, the response was government-led and locally-based. Displacement of the majority of people affected was able to be resolved relatively quickly, and the international community was either not at all or not substantially involved. Indeed, in only six of these 373 disasters was an international response organized in the form of an Inter-Agency Flash Appeal.

Moving from the 373 tracked disasters to consider three of the most horrible “mega-disasters,” these three disasters highlight important differences in national and international responses.

- In **Haiti**, the 7.0 magnitude earthquake killed 310,000 people, displaced 1.8 million, and caused USD 8 billion in damages. The damage was so severe that the Government was incapacitated. A year and a half later, real recovery has yet to take hold, and more than 600,000 remain without substantial shelter, living in IDP camps or informal settlements.
- In **Pakistan**, massive floods endured for months, left 20% of the country under water, and affected some 20 million people. Pakistan has a strong national disaster management agency which, while requesting and accepting international assistance at the outset, immediately took the lead in the disaster response.
- Floods in **China** affected over 130 million persons. The Chinese Government managed the response on its own and did not request any organized international support.

Why do I highlight these disasters? They reflect differing impact on the population’s needs and the national capacity to respond, as well as demonstrating different

approaches and wishes of the affected government. The wishes of the Government, in turn, have determined the shape and extent of international response.

In Haiti UNHCR has played a supportive role to the cluster lead agency, OHCHR, which was already leading a protection coordination mechanism when the earthquake occurred. In Pakistan, where UNHCR has been present for more than 30 years supporting Pakistan's hosting of more than 1.7 million Afghan refugees, UNHCR was already leading a protection cluster at the national level, and it quickly established 4 provincial protection clusters to support coordination of the natural disaster response. While the support and collaboration between UNHCR and the Government was very close from day one, within six months the Government assumed the primary coordination role also in protection. In the third, China, where there was no Government request for support in the area of protection, UNHCR had no such involvement.

These variations in UNHCR's role are reflective of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee arrangement on designation of a protection cluster lead that has existed since the humanitarian reform in 2005, as well as of the "pilot" arrangement which we discussed during an informal consultative meeting in February and again in an informal paper prepared for the March Standing Committee.

Since 2005, when an affected government has requested international support and it has been decided to activate a protection cluster, the issue of which agency will lead coordination of the protection cluster in response to a natural disaster has been discussed and decided on a case-by-case basis by OHCHR, UNICEF and UNHCR. Since that time, each agency has led at least several responses. But the process for decision-making was often time-consuming. This necessarily impinged upon the speed and effectiveness of the initial response, which in a natural disaster is paramount.

The "gap" in clear leadership – and the negative effect this had on the people we are trying to serve – was raised by the UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator and discussed in the IASC on several occasions since 2009. In 2009, the High Commissioner informed the Executive Committee of these concerns by indicating that UNHCR would be ready and willing to support, in a more predictable manner, the protection response in natural disasters when called upon by an affected state.

The "pilot" arrangement negotiated by the Emergency Relief Coordinator and agreed by the Heads of Agencies in the IASC addresses the gap in *predictable* leadership and the delay it causes. It is nothing more than a change in the existing means of identifying which of the three agencies will lead at the national level in the event there is to be a protection cluster in response to a natural disaster.

The arrangement does not come into effect unless and until an affected government makes a request for international assistance that would include a protection coordination response. If a request is made, the arrangement provides as follows: First, where an existing coordination mechanism exists, that coordination

mechanism will continue and leadership will not be affected. Second, where no such mechanism exists but OHCHR is present with capacity to lead a response and UNHCR is not, OHCHR will lead the cluster. *Only* when neither condition pertains is UNHCR prepared to assume new leadership of a protection cluster.

Let me underscore three key points:

First, none of the underlying conditions for UNHCR's involvement have changed. These are the nine elements outlined in the background paper, including the issues of state responsibility and state consent – *which means that UNHCR acts only at the request of and in support of the State.*

Second, OCHA, UNICEF and OHCHR are key partners in the protection cluster at the global level as well as in the clusters at the country level. We hope and believe that the collaboration that the clusters have fostered has ultimately been to the benefit of the populations we serve. A number of exciting initiatives are under way within both the Global Protection Cluster as well as UNHCR to strengthen not only our own but also our partners' capacities to respond in natural disaster situations.

Third, the implementation of this arrangement will be subject to a review. At the time the pilot was discussed in December, it was envisaged to cover a 12-month period. However, as the arrangement has not been implicated in any disaster to date, we recognize that the 12-month period will need to be reconsidered. In any event, I assure you that we will carefully review involvement in any future disaster and we will engage in a comprehensive review at an appropriate time within the framework of the IASC.

Thank you for your attention.

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