

Remarks by
Sir John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and
Emergency Relief Coordinator

Ministerial Meeting on Haiti
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Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by offering my profound condolences to the people of Haiti for the devastation they have suffered since the earthquake struck almost two weeks ago. Let me also express my appreciation to our hosts today, and to the NGOs for their presentations today and for their vital role on the ground.

Comparisons between major natural disasters are tempting and much loved by the media, but of limited value in real life. Each one poses different, often huge problems of access, logistics and coordination. But those engaged in this operation agree the challenges from this massive and devastating earthquake are as great as any encountered in recent years, for a number of reasons: because of the poverty of the population and problems in the country before the disaster, despite progress in recent years; the scale of the devastation of the capital and government nerve centre; the initial breakdown of virtually all normal and essential services in Port-au-Prince and other nearby cities; the losses and damage from the earthquake to existing UN and NGO presences on the ground; continuing damage and disruption from aftershocks; and the daunting logistical challenges of getting the necessary massive amounts of aid into the country and distributed in a potentially volatile environment. The full death toll is still unknown but clearly huge, and the number of injured correspondingly high. What I am going to say about the relief effort cannot begin to do justice to the real physical and psychological suffering from this catastrophe.

Mobilisation

To help the estimated three million people badly affected and literally reeling from this new disaster to strike Haiti, there has been an unprecedented, at least since the Asian tsunami, and massive mobilisation of the humanitarian community, and of the international community more widely. The relief effort is beginning to get there, reaching around 500,000 people so far, but we still have a huge distance to go, first to reach everyone in desperate need now; and then to ensure we have in place the kind of pipeline and systems we will need to provide sustainable, equitable assistance to all three million people, although not everyone will need everything. This operation will need to continue long after the TV crews have gone home and the troops have returned to their normal duties. We are now planning on at least 12 months, but the reality is we may be engaged on a very large scale for much longer than that, in parallel with the enormous reconstruction and redevelopment effort.

Search and Rescue

The search and rescue phase is now effectively over, and was very successful compared to previous experiences, with more than 130 people rescued by over 50 international teams. They reacted in a highly effective, coordinated way. Of course most people were rescued by the population themselves in the first days, but the international effort provided vital expertise and equipment as soon as was feasible.

Health

We still face an urgent health crisis, to help all those needing operations, intensive care and life-saving drugs because of their injuries. Many field hospitals have arrived, not least the US hospital ship, and others are on the way, together with mobile clinics and medical teams from humanitarian organisations and countries. At least 150 health actor organisations are now on the ground. At the same time, early warning systems are being put in place for detecting and controlling outbreaks of communicable diseases. Nothing worrying has been signaled so far. But again we still have a long way to go to stabilise the situation. We then face a daunting task in providing medical facilities to all those displaced from their homes over a long period, not least for reproductive health in a country where maternal and child mortality were already unacceptably high and for the many HIV-AIDS sufferers – all this while helping to rebuild the badly damaged local health infrastructure. Local doctors and hospitals have also performed heroically in the last two weeks, despite shortages of virtually everything

Water and Food

The other two most urgent priorities are water and food. On the water side, we are making useful progress, both in supplying bottled water, and tankers resupplying from the still functioning main Port-au-Prince water treatment plant. Approximately 200,000 people are receiving water everyday. Needless to say, again we still have a great distance to travel to restore predictable supplies to the currently estimated 500,000 in most urgent need of water. We are already moving from supplying bottled water to purification of bulk supplies, with advantages from cost, delivery and environmental points of view.

Food is a particular logistical challenge because of its bulk and the massive need - estimated at around two million people at this stage. Some 500,000 people have received food so far. The World Food Programme have already distributed well over 5 million meals, plus what NGOs and the Red Cross have been able to provide, and of course the invaluable US distributions using their helicopter lift capacity. Some food is increasingly available in the reviving markets, but the prices are out of the reach of many - which is why cash for work programmes, injecting cash into the community, and getting the banking system back on its feet, also beginning to happen, with 44 branches now open, are also so crucial.

The issue now is to fill the food pipeline with ready to eat meals for the next two or three weeks, while cooking remains a problem for so many. I appeal urgently now for all countries with military or other stocks of MREs to contact the World Food Programme and offer whatever you can. We still need tens of millions of such meals. The US military have promised their help

to get these supplies into Haiti. Then a more regular system of rations and where necessary communal kitchens can be set up to enable people to have food they are more used to. This is all doable, and has been done before, but the particular challenges faced in Haiti mean the immediate needs are harder to meet, and the timescales for a properly regulated operation longer than anyone can be satisfied with.

Let us remember that some 1.8 million people were food insecure prior to the earthquake. In a country where close to 60 per cent of the population lives in rural areas, and with people leaving the capital in large numbers, it is essential to boost food production at national level, rehabilitating damaged infrastructures and making available to small holders agriculture inputs (seed, fertilizer and tools) - particularly for the spring planting season starting in March, which accounts for 60 per cent of national food production.

Shelter

The next top priority, and a fundamental one, is shelter. There is a massive need for tents - we have over 40,000 on the spot or on the way but many, many more are going to be needed if the estimates of 1 million people homeless are anything like right. We also need to have the sites needed for camps, with facilities like water and sanitation available, and to establish these camps as soon as possible, in order to give people a roof over their heads, at least a canvas one, and the ability to access basic services in a more predictable way. Intensive discussions are under way with the Haitian authorities about this, with one camp for 30,000 people actively under preparation and ten other sites on the way. We need to find the right balance between large camps, which are easier in some ways to service, and smaller ones, which are easier to manage, while respecting local cultural and other sensitivities. There are around 500 sites in Port-au-Prince listed as spontaneous settlements. I will come back to longer term challenges in this area in a moment. Again this is all doable, and has been done, but needs to be moved on very rapidly now. Along with this shelter challenge goes the distribution of non-food essential items such as jerry cans, hygiene kits, kitchen equipment and so on. This is scaling up rapidly.

Outside the capital

If the immediate focus after the earthquake was on the relief efforts in the capital, we quickly realised that there was massive need in other surrounding cities too - Jacmel, Leogane and elsewhere. SAR teams were diverted there as soon as practicable and relief efforts there are also scaling up rapidly now. We are working closely there not only with the local authorities but also the Canadians, who have an important presence there. We are now setting up offices in these cities as well as visiting. We also recognize the need to help those who are currently leaving the capital and those already poor communities who are receiving them.

Security

As you have heard, the security situation is generally calm, despite sporadic incidents, but there are obviously particular risks with distributions of essential items, particularly in this first phase when people are in such urgent need. Security for convoys and distributions is therefore needed, not for the safety of those doing the distribution, though we need to have that in mind

too, but to ensure fairness and calm for all, particularly the weak and vulnerable whose needs are greatest. We are working closely with MINUSTAH and the other military forces present to ensure these security escort requirements are not a constraint on the speed and scale of humanitarian relief.

Logistics

Let me turn briefly to the logistical and coordination challenges. On the logistics side, there is still a large backlog of incoming flights, but the airport is functioning increasingly well, and prioritisation of humanitarian flights by UN experts working with the US air traffic control is well in hand. The route from San Domingo by road is also hugely important and working smoothly, thanks not least to excellent cooperation from the Dominican Republic authorities. The Port-au-Prince main port is now in operation to a limited extent (40 per cent) and should be able to contribute increasingly. Other smaller airports and ports in both Haiti and the Dominican Republic are also increasingly being used. We need all these entry points to keep the pipelines of goods full. But the sea route will in the longer term be the key one for bulk goods. Meanwhile shortages of trucks and fuel are being tackled. Fuel is currently less of a problem but the right trucks remain in very short supply. Again I appeal for urgent help in this area. One increasing issue is traffic on the streets of Port-au-Prince and neighboring cities which, while an encouraging sign of life returning to the streets, is at the same time becoming a major headache in terms of moving goods and people around quickly.

Coordination

On coordination, the overall responsibility naturally rests with the Government of Haiti, with whom we are working very closely indeed. On the international side, I warmly welcome the proposals for overall mechanisms for the global aid effort, which you will be discussing today, and the vital civilian-military task force arrangements now working at different levels. Cooperation has been very good with all concerned, despite the odd inevitable glitches. But we now need the more systematic arrangements, particularly at country level, and between civilian and military efforts.

On the humanitarian side, the UN has been playing its normal central coordinating role, accepted by all. We are working closely not only with the UN agencies, the NGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, but also the many bilateral actors. The lessons from the tsunami of 2004/5 have been learned and applied through a process of reform. This is now paying off, not least through the operation of the cluster system, whereby all those working in a particular area are clustered around a lead agency to ensure predictable delivery of services and good sectoral coordination. This is always a challenge - there are now more than 500 organisations of one kind or another working on the Haiti earthquake and that number is rising all the time. And not least in the chaotic early days of a huge disaster like this. But the key players globally and locally know how the system works and it swings into action from the first hours. Twelve clusters are now in full operation under the overall leadership of Kim Bolduc, the Humanitarian Coordinator, with equivalents in the main areas on the Dominican side of the border too.

My office, OCHA, as the central coordination point of this system, has scaled up from 4 international staff in Haiti before the earthquake to more than 50 now, and still rising. Other humanitarian organisations are doing the same. We have also just established offices outside Port-au-Prince, in Jacmel and Leogane, to coordinate the assistance provided there. While of course not comparable to what the population is going through, the working conditions in all places for all concerned, both office and accommodation, are as appalling as any one can remember for a crisis of this kind. Heroic efforts are being made, not least by many local staff who have lost homes and families themselves but are continuing to work.

Role of the Military

In this crisis we fully accept the vital role of foreign military assets, in particular MINUSTAH, but also those of the US and Canada, and others who may arrive. They are providing services and capabilities we simply do not have, in areas like airlift and engineering equipment and skills. We are therefore putting a particular emphasis on civil-military coordination, with staff embedded in various key military locations to ensure the best possible coordination, while upholding the Oslo guidelines. These assets are of course present at the invitation of the Government of Haiti.

Financing

No aid effort can function without resources. Here the picture has been hugely encouraging in general, but there is no room for complacency. The international response has been astonishing in its breadth and depth. Individuals and private companies from many countries around the world have contributed generously, using new electronic methods to the full. Governments have also responded with great speed and generosity, including those around this table today. We have counted well over a billion dollars in all pledges put together, a figure which continues to rise rapidly as fundraising initiatives abound, including telethons in many countries.

The Flash Appeal we launched three days after the event for \$575 million has been well supported. But it is still only 47 per cent funded in terms of contributions, according to our Financial Tracking Service, though there are some pledges beyond that, yet to be turned into contributions. So there is some way to go. The main organisations desperately need funding to sustain their operations beyond the first weeks. And some critical areas remain very badly funded, including early recovery and its vital cash for work component as well as agriculture. So I appeal to all of you, and those not here too, to continue to dig deep for these crucial organisations and activities. The point is that funds from individuals are hugely welcome but may not always find their way to all the right places at the right time. The Appeal will be revised in a few weeks time, to reflect the more systematic needs assessment now under way, and the fact that it is clear we need to appeal for funds on at least a twelve month basis now. Let me also repeat once again that it is cash above all which humanitarian organisations need, not goods in kind unless they are in those particularly short supply globally, such as MREs.

Rainy/Hurricane Seasons

Let me conclude by emphasising some key future and cross-cutting challenges. First, we need to be thinking now about how the people worst affected by this crisis are going to be able to face the forthcoming rainy and hurricane seasons, starting in April and June respectively. Tents, while the only shelter solution available quickly enough now, will not be much good for these purposes. Most people will not be able to return to their destroyed or hopelessly damaged homes for many months or even years, even with very effective repair and rebuilding programmes. We therefore badly need an intermediate, transitional shelter solution, ie rapidly built temporary housing on a large scale, which can be much more resilient to rain and hurricanes than tents. We need imagination in this area, good practice from previous disasters, and contributions from the private sector in terms of technology and rapid construction capacity.

Protection

A major and increasing concern is also protection of the vulnerable, particularly of children and women, as always particularly in danger after such tragedies. Even before the earthquake, Haiti had too many street children and too much gender-based violence. The increased risks now are clear. In particular, we must provide care and protection to orphaned, unaccompanied and separated children. They need to be reunited with their families wherever possible. We must do all we can to prevent the inappropriate or illegal removal of children from Haiti, no matter how well meaning adoption offers may seem. Opportunities for trafficking of children or women must be closed off. The protection cluster is up and running and of vital importance to bring together the capacities of the key UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent. As a broader point, gender concerns must be fully mainstreamed into our relief and indeed reconstruction efforts. And we must get temporary schools into operation as quickly as we possibly can, to give children a focus and the beginnings of some normality in their lives.

Transition

We must also make sure that all we are doing on the relief front is laying the right basis for the wider reconstruction and redevelopment effort, and is dovetailed as seamlessly as possible with the Post Disaster Needs Assessment process and what will follow. Transition is not the right word, in reality. Humanitarian relief and reconstruction will of course be parallel tracks for a long time to come, rather than one following from the other. I have already mentioned the importance of cash for work and rebuilding livelihoods as soon as possible in this context. This is part of a wider concern, and again a lesson learned from previous experiences, including the tsunami: do the maximum in every way to encourage community participation, not least from the youth, to consult and empower the Haitian people. We must build and utilise to the full local capacity of all kinds. People need their lives back, and to stand on their own feet, not exist on hand-outs. Reconstructing and enhancing Haiti's government capacity and authority, and rebuilding and strengthening its civil society, are as important as rebuilding schools and hospitals.

Disaster Risk Reduction

Finally, but certainly not last in importance, everything we do must be part of building back better. Haiti will remain disaster prone after, as before, this catastrophe. A very strong disaster risk reduction focus is therefore essential, including establishment of governmental capacity in disaster prevention and management. If there is a country in the world which needs to enhance its climate resilience through measures such as reforestation and watershed management, Haiti is it. Alternative cooking methods to charcoal have to be found as a matter of extreme urgency in order to help rebuild the forests. This disaster is in reality a very specific opportunity in this context which we cannot afford to miss, even if there is a high short term financial cost.

The Long Term

I have set out several important challenges and priorities. Let me repeat that we still have a major short term problem on our hands, and I reiterate my strong and urgent appeal for help with MREs and other ready to eat food solutions for the next two to three weeks, for tents and for trucks. But I have no doubt of the ability of the humanitarian community, given sustained resources, to manage the relief effort successfully and sustainably once past this immediate hump and the bottlenecks which go with it. The biggest challenge will be to keep the wider international community focused on the rebuilding for the long term, and the creation of a stronger, more independent and more resilient Haitian society for the future. The long suffering people of Haiti deserve no less.