



STATEMENT BY MR. A. GOPINATHAN, ACTING PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE, ON AGENDA ITEM 5: STRENGTHENING OF THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE OF THE UNITED NATIONS: PRESENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES AT HUMANATARIAN AFFAIRS SEGMENT OF THE ECOSOC SUBSTANTIVE SESSION 2004 ON JULY 12, 2004

Mr. President,

We thank the Secretary General for the report presented under this item and the useful introduction provided by the Under-Secretary-General for OCHA.

Mr. President,

The problems associated with the way humanitarian assistance and humanitarian actors are perceived have emerged as an area of concern in recent years. Continuing attacks on humanitarian workers in some situations of conflict have led these questions to be of growing concern to the UN and the international community. The report attempts to address these issues with considerable insight.

The report of the Secretary-General recognises that the problem of perception arises due to humanitarian assistance being often seen as inspired by a political agenda. Suspicions about the neutrality of those who provide humanitarian assistance have led to attacks on humanitarian workers or refusal of access by parties to a conflict in many cases. The first attempt then should be to ensure that humanitarian assistance strictly abides by the basic principles as set out in resolution 46/182, viz., neutrality, humanity and impartiality. Humanitarian action should be apolitical and offered at the request of the recipient government.

Another important measure could be to provide a local face to humanitarian action. This could be done by ensuring that the humanitarian assistance personnel are predominantly hired keeping the principle of geographical proximity in mind, and paying attention to the importance of familiarity of the personnel with the location and nature of crisis. Personnel who belong to the area or have a prior experience of similar emergencies would be better placed to handle humanitarian assistance in any given area or situation. The report also makes the sensible recommendation in this context, namely, the need for humanitarian personnel to be sensitive to local customs and traditions.

Similarly, procuring of resources locally or from the neighboring regions, would not only save precious resources, but would also help in building capacity locally and would be seen as a welcome step by those receiving humanitarian assistance. This would also reduce time-delays. Hiring of local transport companies would also be another step in this direction. Regional approaches to humanitarian assistance may also be useful, as suggested in the report. However, this may not be the case for all regions or for every situation.

The allocation and availability of resources for humanitarian assistance remain matters of vital concern. The report indicates that the pattern of funding humanitarian activities remains uneven, leaving some countries substantially under-financed. The report cites the case of the Central African Republic which received only five percent of their requirements in 2003. This underscores the importance of allocating resources fairly to all countries in need. It is important that the UN is seen to be above 'humanitarian favouritism', and for this, the UN must avoid regional imbalance or uneven funding of humanitarian needs. Only then the universal trust in the UN system would be preserved.

In this context, we note the reference to the engagement of IFIs, especially the World Bank, in assessing post-conflict needs. We appreciate fact that the report highlights the need for involving national governments in the joint planning efforts. We do wish, however, to point to the need for ensuring that the financial assistance provided by the IFIs in this context does not bring with it additional conditionalities or add to the debt burden of the recipient countries. We strongly support the recommendation contained in the report on inviting donor countries to make available increased amounts of un-earmarked, predictable funding for relief assistance and exploring means to fund all critical needs across all sectors.

Mr. President,

The report makes a reference to involvement of a multiplicity of actors in disaster management. In order to make humanitarian assistance effective, it would be useful to avoid multiplicity of actors, lest the coordination function overwhelm humanitarian action on the ground and become the most important function of the humanitarian effort. In this regard, we would underscore the role of the national government and the need to fully respect the principle of national sovereignty. The developing countries, especially the disaster-prone ones among them, would benefit from assistance in the area of capacity-building in early warning systems. Sharing of technologies such as remote sensing, geographical information systems (GIS), Global Positioning, computer modelling and expert systems and electronic information management would go a long way in assisting the developing countries to be better-prepared for dealing with natural disasters and reducing their adverse impacts. We, therefore, agree with the recommendation in the report of the Secretary-General for channeling of increased resources for capacity-building activities in disaster-prone areas. We note with concern that comparatively low level of funding is being provided by donors for capacity-building in disaster reduction and recovery, an amount that is particularly meagre when compared with funding for conflict and post conflict activities.

Concern has been expressed in the report on the problem of sexual exploitation and abuse by those providing humanitarian assistance. Building awareness towards this problem within the UN system is indeed welcome. We note the Secretary-General's bulletin on Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse as an effort in this direction. Minimum standards of behaviour must be observed by all UN staff, particularly those engaged in providing relief to those in distress. However, we would like to express our serious misgivings on the exhortation in the report for incorporation of the standards set out in the Bulletin into domestic legislations and codes of conduct for national armed forces and police and other security forces. These are matters within the jurisdiction of national governments. UN must avoid intrusive tendencies, even if the objective seems desirable, so as to maintain the universal trust of member States.

Thank you, Mr. President.

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