

## **STATEMENT BY ROBERTA COHEN ON THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE TO WORLD CRISES**

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I could start out my remarks tonight by saying that the international humanitarian response to emergencies is generous, multinational, reasonably quick, sometimes well coordinated, and overall responsible for saving many lives. Just consider the international response to the tsunami. There was immediate international humanitarian action combined with rapid military relief and rescue operations from a number of nations, the mobilization of \$13.6 billion with a good percentage received, and a notable role by the UN in coordinating one of the largest relief operations in history. Indeed, UN officials often point out that as a result of its efforts, epidemics were averted, food assistance was delivered, most children are now back in school, and tens of thousands are employed and earning money again.

Yet something is missing from this picture. What is missing is that the international humanitarian response to emergencies is more likely to be unpredictable, highly fragmented, frequently inequitable and subject to the vagaries and political interests of donor governments.

For the tsunami, \$13.6 billion was pledged, far more money than was actually needed, but for the earthquake in Pakistan, or the mudslides in Central America, or droughts in Africa, the international response has not been comparable. One disaster captures international donor and media attention whereas others meet with indifference, donor fatigue and scarce resources. One major reason is that donors generally put funds where they have compelling national security interests. Thus large amounts of funds can be found for Iraq and Afghanistan but when it comes to Africa, emergency needs are often under-funded. In fact, international organizations receive only about one-third of the funds they appeal for to feed and house people affected by humanitarian crises in Africa. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in 2005, where 1,000 people were dying every day from preventable disease and malnutrition and up to 2 million were uprooted, only 36 percent of the \$175 million appealed for by the UN was received.

To address this fractured international response, over the years it has been suggested that an international fund be created to respond to emergencies on the basis of human need and vulnerability. As part of UN reform, the UN has just announced the upgrading of The Central Emergency Response Fund to \$500 million and more flexible rules for disbursement. It will be managed by the Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs together with an advisory group of 12 experts (8 drawn from donors). Hopefully, this fund will alleviate some of the inequities in the international humanitarian response as well as the frequent delays that result when funds have to be raised anew each time when an emergency occurs. The fund has thus far attracted \$256 million in pledges. It remains to be seen whether it will receive all the funds requested, whether the funds will be replenished and how effectively it will operate. The United States has pledged \$10 million, a small amount for the world's major individual donor.

Humanitarian response to natural disasters is different from the response to situations where people are forced from their homes by civil wars, communal strife and human rights violations. International aid becomes a political commodity when internal conflicts tear apart countries on racial, religious, ethnic or ideological grounds. Indeed, opposing sides in internal conflicts fear that the aid will fortify the other side. Thus, governments may deny access to aid agencies as Turkey did in combating a Kurdish insurgency and as Burma does today; in other countries where rival factions fight one another over resources and land, as in Sierra Leone or the Democratic Republic of Congo, the different sides may steal or obstruct assistance and even target those providing the aid, making it dangerous to be in humanitarian aid delivery.

Particularly inaccessible are people in areas controlled by insurgent forces. International efforts to negotiate with insurgents are often obstructed by national governments fearful that such engagement could legitimize the rebels. During the Angolan civil war, the government objected to UN agencies' negotiating with the rebel UNITA group. As a result the United Nations had no humanitarian access to large numbers of persons in insurgent areas. Only in 2002, with the ceasefire, did the widespread starvation and disease plaguing these people come to light. One in three children leaving Angola's war zones were starving, found Doctors Without Borders.

To address this problem, the UN has sometimes come up with innovative solutions. In Sudan, for example, during the decades long north-south civil

war, the aid program, Operation Lifeline Sudan, was introduced. Although there were sometimes problems with implementation, the UN negotiated this program with both the government and the rebel groups in order to ensure that relief reached *both* sides in the conflict. In other countries, humanitarian agencies may have little contact with insurgent forces and sometimes no structured dialogue at all about humanitarian aid. As a result, little or nothing may be done to try to reach people residing in those areas.

To be effective, humanitarian aid cannot be viewed in a vacuum. The international political and sometimes military system is needed to put pressure on governments and insurgent groups so that humanitarian aid can reach the people for whom it is intended. International agencies must also develop stronger partnerships with local organizations and church groups that sometimes do have access to people in remote areas. In short, the mobilization of political will, diplomatic pressure, economic inducements and sometimes troops and police become necessary. Right now in Darfur Sudan, humanitarian aid is reaching fewer and fewer people because there are too few African Union troops, their mandate is too limited, and the political will to ensure that the aid gets through is not forthcoming.

Disparity in treatment between those uprooted by civil wars and those uprooted by natural disasters is also evident in the tsunami-affected countries. In Sri Lanka and Indonesia, for example, those uprooted by civil wars have suffered second-class status compared with those uprooted by the tsunami. Indonesia's Human Rights Commission reports that unlike those displaced by the tsunami, those displaced by conflict lack basic services and have received insufficient assistance for rehabilitation and recovery. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, NGOs report that new houses are being built for the tsunami victims while long-standing survivors of civil war continue to languish in collective centers. The UN's Tsunami Envoy Bill Clinton has called for comprehensive aid approaches that do not discriminate against one group or another on political or ethnic grounds and the World Bank has begun supporting a compensation program for communities affected by conflict in Indonesia. However, a disparity remains, in part exacerbated by many international humanitarian organizations whose funds are earmarked only for those uprooted by the tsunami.

By far the most glaring inequity in the international humanitarian response to emergencies is the difference in treatment meted out to refugees, who cross borders, and those who remain uprooted within their own countries –

the internally displaced. For refugees who flee war and persecution by crossing borders, there is an elaborate international system set up to protect and assist them. There exists a billion dollar organization, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, with more than 5,000 staff members, and an international Refugee Convention binding on many governments. The system was created after the Second World War and has worked reasonably well for more than 50 years. Today there are 9.2 million refugees. But for persons uprooted *within* their own countries by war and human rights violations, who now number 25 million, there is as yet no predictable or effective system. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) may be in the same situation as refugees but receive markedly less international protection or assistance in most emergencies and, in some cases, may receive no help at all. Indeed, the highest mortality rates in emergencies are generally those of IDPs. When Hilary Benn, the UK Secretary of State for International Development, visited Darfur last year, he was shocked by the conditions of the internally displaced and asked: “Is it really sensible that we have different systems for dealing with people fleeing their homes dependent on whether they happen to have crossed an international border?”

My work over the past 12 years has focused on addressing this glaring inequity in the international response system. I have worked closely with the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons who was appointed in 1992. In trying to place the plight of the internally displaced on the international agenda, we have had to deal with issues of sovereignty, the development of a legal framework, institutional arrangements and an expanded notion of humanitarian aid that includes protection of the human rights and physical safety of the persons concerned. Providing food, medicine and shelter to beleaguered people while ignoring violent abuse against them has led to the tragic description of the victims as the “well-fed dead.” The expression may have originated in Bosnia in the 1990s, but it also applies to Darfur where there are more than 11,000 humanitarian workers on the ground, but fewer than one hundred with protection responsibilities.

Humanitarian aid must be part of a broader human rights and protection framework. Protection could mean negotiating access to IDPs, deploying staff among threatened communities, arranging relocations and evacuations, protecting women from rape and abduction, advocating for the protection of the displaced with governments and insurgent groups and accompanying IDPs home to ensure their safety. It also means working closely with

peacekeepers that are being increasingly called upon by the UN to defend IDPs and facilitate the delivery of relief because in some situations, humanitarian aid deliveries and protection are only possible through military and police action. Absent an international protection system, local wars can be expected to go on for decades, undermining the stability of countries, while donors spend large sums of money on humanitarian relief. The aid may even help prolong the wars. In my view, humanitarian aid must be part of a broader package of political negotiations, diplomatic pressure, economic inducements as well as sanctions and in extreme cases police or military action. When aid is used as a substitute for political or military solutions, it cannot and does not work well.

Finally, humanitarian relief needs to be provided in such a way as to help people make the transition from emergency aid to rehabilitation and development. In many post-disaster situations, there is a large gap between emergency aid and the programs to help people get back on their feet and become self-sustaining. Getting humanitarian and development agencies to work closely and effectively together to bridge this gap remains a challenge for the international community.

In conclusion, humanitarian aid may sound like a quick, easy fix, but it's often a complicated intervention, with significant impact on the political, development and military-strategic environment in which people in need languish.