

WFP Country Director's Address to the Executive Board for the "Comprehensive Update on the Myanmar Country Strategic Plan"

Mr President, Excellencies, good afternoon.

At the request of the Executive Board in November last year, WFP in Myanmar prepared a Comprehensive Update on its approved 5-year Country Strategic Plan, which was launched on 1st January this year. While reporting on various operational developments, the update gives priority to the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State. With the activation of the L-3 response in Myanmar, WFP was able to engage the local authorities and re-gain access in Maungdaw District, in the northern part of Rakhine State. Since early November, WFP has been targeting between 40,000 – 50,000 people every month in Maungdaw with relief food and nutrition interventions. This is in addition to 120,000 internally displaced and other conflict affected people in central Rakhine State, that we resumed assisting monthly within two weeks of the crisis onset on 25 August.

No-one has yet a full picture of all the needs in Rakhine State. There are concerns about food insecurity and undernutrition, especially in the north, which has had high food insecurity and malnutrition indices since at least the 1990s. In central Rakhine, food access rather than food availability is as an issue. Without places to live, having lost food stocks and livelihoods and unable to move freely, many Rohingya remaining in Rakhine State struggle for their daily survival. The outflow of people from Myanmar into Bangladesh has continued at an average rate now of 1,000 people per week. While the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar have agreed on the voluntary repatriation of people to their places of origin, the process remains slow up till now.

On 9 February, my Regional Director, David Kaatrud, and I had a rare opportunity to join a 1-day diplomatic mission, organised by the Government of Myanmar, to observe the preparations for the repatriation from Bangladesh. The government arranged a helicopter to take us to a reception centre for returnees, a transit camp and a special economic zone in Maungdaw town. The view from the helicopter was striking. We saw a large number of burned and bulldozed villages. The reception center had a series of 1-storey prefab houses that would be used as processing hubs for the newly arriving returnees. The transit camp had the capacity to accommodate up to 30,000 people in long-houses, which were of a modest quality, for temporary use only. Before jumping on the helicopter on the way back, we had the opportunity to shake hands with our Maungdaw team, who has courageously withstood the hardship throughout the crisis. This was an emotional moment for me, since it was the first time, albeit only for a few minutes, that I could meet with my team since August, as my repeated requests for travel authorizations had not been successful in the past.

It was clear that significant efforts had been made in terms of physical preparation for returns. However, progress in other aspects such as protection, land tenure, freedom of movement, and citizenship is less clear. This brings me to the topic of WFP's role in the repatriation, which I will briefly touch on. When the repatriation does start, WFP, as one of the only humanitarian organizations with access in Rakhine State, may be approached with a request for assistance to the returnees. While, of course, WFP stands ready to provide assistance to any people with life-saving needs, such a request may be associated with various risks related to voluntariness of returns, registration and targeting, distribution modalities, monitoring and accountability. WFP is working on a response plan to best mitigate such concerns, in close coordination with UNHCR, and based on the "principles of engagement in Rakhine State" that were developed by the Humanitarian Country Team in Myanmar.

While many challenges remain, the Government has granted travel permits to both our national and international staff based in Maungdaw. WFP has been allowed to conduct a village vulnerability profiling in Buthidaung Township, so that we may eventually move to vulnerability-based targeting criteria. At the request of the Government, a joint FAO-WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission, tentatively scheduled for the second half of March, will also be an opportunity to observe and review critical information related to food security, nutrition, market functionality and vulnerability. Unfortunately, due to delayed approval by authorities, received only today, WFP has not been able to distribute life-saving food and nutrition assistance to the 52,000 people planned for February in Maungdaw District. We now expect to complete the February distributions next week. We also renew our call on the Government for unrestricted and sustained access for all humanitarians, including UN agencies and international NGOs.

Thank you, Mr President and Excellencies.