

2020 first regular session of the Executive Board

Virtual session

Opening remarks by the Executive Director

D. Beasley, Executive Director: Thank you very much, it is great to have you in the saddle as President of the World Food Programme's Executive Board. Thank you for all your work in the past few years and I know we are going to see remarkable leadership from you.

But I have to say that it is going to be hard to fill the shoes of Ambassador Badr. As you well know, he ran a very efficient and very timely operation. Ambassador Badr, thank you for all your remarkable hard work. It was fantastic to work with you. Mr President, it is great to be here and I can assure you that it is great to be feeling good.

All of you know that I got the virus. I had left Italy about six weeks ago, travelling into the Middle East and it was before the virus had come all the way down to Rome. I was travelling in the Middle East, meeting with UAE leaders, Saudi leaders and, in fact, for safety purposes, and because I was coming from Italy, I took two virus tests, just to give some comfort to those I was meeting with that I did not have the virus, and those tests were negative.

I was in Lebanon and Syria and Jordan, and then I travelled to the United States and to Canada and somewhere along the way I picked up the virus. I had got to my home in South Carolina for the first time in many months and this time of year in the south of the United States we have a lot of pollen, so I thought at first it was an allergy, but to be safe, and knowing that I meet with a lot of people, I went to get checked and, unfortunately, it was positive.

And it lingered for about three weeks. It would hit me, but never hard, for a couple of days and then I would have no symptoms at all for a day, and it would cycle like this for about two and a half weeks, but the good news is that it is behind me and I am so grateful.

Now, having spoken about myself, let me say that at the World Food Programme we are doing everything that we possibly can to ensure the safety of all the people working for WFP all over the world. So far, there are 17 WFP personnel that have the virus. Out of that 17, seven have fully recovered, and out of the ten that have not fully recovered, nine are doing really well and one is in the hospital but they expect that person to be released in the next couple of days. And so overall, out of our 18,000 to 20,000 employees or associates, contractors, etc., the WFP folks are very healthy and we are doing everything to maintain that health. In fact, we are providing Medevac assistance and support for all employees at WFP for COVID-related illness, irrespective of their contractual status, because they are part of our family and we owe it to them.

While many organizations' staff are having to leave countries, 97 percent of our people in the field are still on the ground, because we are there to save lives. We are there for emergencies and if we leave, people will die.

To give you some context, just in the past three and a half months with COVID-19, about 140,000 people, give or take, have died from the virus. At the same time, almost three million people have died from starvation around the world. That is about 25,000 people dying per day from hunger-related diseases. We are now supporting almost 100 million people – out of that, 30 million people are depending on us for life-saving assistance. If we were to lose our money, or our core operations or supply chains break down - if we were to lose funding for that 30 million, over just 90 days, up to 300,000 additional people could die per day.

I say that because you cannot look at COVID-19 from just one perspective, you have to look at the whole spectrum. As I have been saying to leaders over the past week from countries all over the world – and I have been talking with many of you ambassadors - I have been talking with many presidents, prime ministers as well as ministers of governments, explaining that you must not move funding from our core operations because people will die if they do not get food.

We have to balance this out – and this is a difficult decision for leaders around the world. You cannot shut down economies completely. You cannot shut down the supply chain around the world. If farmers are restricted from being in the fields, if the truck drivers in the ports are shut down, people will die. If



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export bans create issues that will cause spikes in the pricing of commodities, people may die. Particularly as the virus now begins to move into Africa, where you already have fragile economies, fragile environmental systems, fragile healthcare systems, it is really going to be, in my opinion, a disastrous combination.

Many of you may remember late last year and early this year, before COVID-19 hit, I said that 2020 would be the worst humanitarian year we have seen since the United Nations was established. I had said that because of what we were seeing in terms of war and conflict, as well as extremist groups and climate change, climate shocks - whether it was in Syria or Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sahel region, Ethiopia, DRC, etc. - that we were looking to 2020 to be a very bad year.

Because of that and because of the respect and the reputation of the World Food Programme over the past several years, our funding has been going up, up, up and it has been remarkable to watch leaders in countries recognize the vital role that the World Food Programme plays in not just keeping people alive but also in stabilizing communities and economies.

And so our funding, as Ambassador Badr said, has gone from USD 5.9 billion when I arrived three years ago to USD 8.3 billion in terms of revenues last year and, as I mentioned at the last Board meeting, I was hopeful that the United States funding might reach USD 3 billion. In fact, we ended up with USD 3.4 billion from the United States.

But countries like Germany and the United Kingdom and the EU and the Nordic countries and other European states, and many of you from around the world, have continued to support us, understanding the critical role that we play. Because of time I will not be able to get into the details of what we are doing in Syria, Yemen, the Sahel, etc., today, because we will focus primarily on COVID-19 in terms of the presentations to you - but let me just touch on a couple of issues.

We are the logistics arm of the United Nations and already we have been delivering personal protective equipment, masks, testing kits for the COVID-19 virus, along with many other medical devices and supplies all over the world. Whether it is with WHO, UNICEF, whomever it may be, we have already delivered millions of these products in over 78 countries.

So we do not just deliver life-saving food, we deliver for the emergency operations of the humanitarian sector for the world. And so it is critical that we keep our supply chain moving. And here is what will be very complicated in, for example, Africa, as passenger airlines are shutting down. As you know, passenger airlines do not carry just passengers, they also carry cargo, which means the World Food Programme is going to have to step up in many areas around the world, and especially in continental Africa, to supply passenger services as well as cargo services.

This is why we have made a special request for an additional USD 350 million, so that we can provide these services. Because doctors, nurses, healthcare responders - humanitarians that are critical at this stage - will be needed in countries in Africa and elsewhere. They will be needing these types of services they are going to need us to move people around as well as cargo.

On the supply chain side, we have been working with leaders in many countries, because if a port is shut down or trucking systems or restrictions are put in place, we are not just talking about the chance that somebody might get sick from COVID-19, we are also talking about people dying from starvation. COVID-19 is bad in itself and leaders have got to make the right decisions about isolation, restricted movement and so on, but at the same time we have got to keep the economy moving to the degree that at least supply chains are operating so we can get food not just to our beneficiaries via humanitarian assistance, but also so it's available commercially, because otherwise many, many people will die as a result.

We are talking with leaders in the private sector as well as in the government sector about many of these issues. And I do also believe much of the media is beginning to understand the consequences if we do not keep those supply chains moving. If people cannot get food, they will die. And so the World Food Programme is providing leadership. Our teams are working day and night and - I say this very proudly because even though we are not in the headquarters building, we are tied in together



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hour upon hour on the cell phone or on Zoom or Teams or Skype or whatever – the work is still getting done and we are working extraordinarily well.

While we are setting up our systems and hubs around the world, and passenger services on the humanitarian side, we will continue to look to you for financial support because what we do not want to do is take USD 350 million out of our core operations for COVID-19.

As I talk to leaders in countries, what I have been hearing has been extremely positive. Every leader I have talked to has said to me: We do not plan to reduce funding. We are committed. We understand the role that World Food Programme plays. Even if we have to shuffle funds around, we definitely understand the priority of food security. However, while everybody has the best intentions, I am very concerned that later in the year, when the budget analysts and economists walk into the president's office or the prime minister's office and say, we are going to have a revenue shortfall of 25 percent or whatever it may be, then anything is up for grabs.

So we will continue to make the case, and as soon as possible I will continue to do what I have always done, which is go to the donor capitals and visit the leaders, explain the reality: Please do not take funds from people that will starve to death. We can do both and I have no doubt that we will come out at the end with a stronger WFP but it is going to be a challenging year, not just because of COVID-19 but because we are continuing to deal with issues like the conflict in Yemen, the war in Syria, the complexity in South Sudan.

As oil prices have now dropped over half, that is going to have a dramatic negative impact on the revenues and economies of countries like Nigeria, South Sudan, Senegal, etc. We are working with the leaders in these countries. We are concerned about destabilization as young people lose their jobs, and cannot have access to food. You will have very unstable environments in many different places, but I am not going to get into all those countries right now because of time.

Mr President, it is great to see you and I look forward to working with you. We have got a lot of work to do. We are making a lot of headway, as you say, on the People Strategy and on a number of different issues. We are moving in the right direction and we are not going to let COVID-19 stop us from doing what we need to do, because I do believe the world looks at the World Food Programme, the United Nations looks to the World Food Programme, not just to be a model leader in terms of food distribution and food security and logistics, but also in how we model respect for our people inside the World Food Programme as well as people that we work with out in the field, helping improve their lives as well as keeping them alive.

Mr President, I think I have spoken enough for right now. I am going to turn it back to you and I hope to see you and be back in Rome just in the next couple of weeks. We are working through that now so that I can continue to provide leadership, working with the leadership group and our leaders around the world, who are all doing an amazing job. Thank you, Mr President, I will turn it back to you.

