

2020 annual session of the Executive Board

Virtual session

M. Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, United Nations

M. Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, United Nations (as delivered): Thank you very much, indeed. Unfortunately, as everybody has said, we meet at the time of the biggest international crisis the world has seen for 50 years and our job is to stand up, as David (Beasley) has said, at this point of crisis because what we are seeing is a dramatic increase for the first time in 30 years in the proportion of people on the planet living in the most extreme poverty. We are seeing a dramatic increase in starvation. David (Beasley) has written about that in Foreign Affairs and elsewhere. We are seeing a dramatic increase in child mortality. We are seeing a dramatic increase in gender-based violence. We are seeing the collapse of immunization services. We are seeing the collapse of malaria prevention and control. We are seeing the collapse of access to education and who is paying the price of all these things? Well, it is the poorest and the most marginalized and the most excluded and the most vulnerable.

This is a moment of acute responsibility for everybody in the development and humanitarian system. Our successors, decades from now, are going to look back and ask the question, did we stand up when we were needed? I want particularly to emphasize the crucial importance of the work of the World Food Programme and its importance because, as David (Beasley) again has said, we face the risk of someone like me, whose first job was working on the famine in Ethiopia in the 1980s, never thought I would see again, of up to 10 countries facing famine and acute starvation by the end of the year or early next year. The question is, whether the world is going as it can to prevent that or simply watch while it happens?

An effective response does not just require the work of the World Food Programme because, as we know, children and women, and it is mostly children and women, who lose their lives in famines, do so mostly through the measles or a respiratory infection or other infections that a healthy person fights off. To avoid people getting to that stage, the provision of food and food assistance is the single most important thing we can do. I urge the supporters of WFP, all of you meeting today, really to step up in this moment of acute need, to avoid us having to watch millions of children starve to death by the end of the year or early next year.

I particularly want to urge the importance right now of action in Yemen because that is the country where the worst is closest. WFP faces a desperate shortage of resources. Unfortunately, the number of people who we have been able to reach with food assistance is falling by the million, month on month because we do not have the money to reach them. If we want to do something about that and do not want to see the scar of a tragedy on a global scale in Yemen, on our collective consciences, now is the moment to act and, unfortunately, what we have got at the moment is a dramatic reduction in resources available to save lives in Yemen compared to last year and what we need is to turn that round straight away.

I also want to reinforce what David (Beasley) has said about the logistics operation. The disappearance of commercial airlines has meant that WFP has had to step in to get aid workers in and out of crises, to get cargo in and out and to support the medical evacuation system, without which it would not be morally feasible to keep our frontline workers where they do their work at the frontline.



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That system needs substantial more funding if we are to keep it going. It is not a system which primarily serves WFP or the United Nations. The main passengers who use that system are the international NGOs. Nobody in the humanitarian system will be able to keep going unless we keep those services going and the funds are running out fast and whatever issue you are most concerned about, whether it is the position of women or hunger or immunization services, none of those things can go on with support from the international community unless we keep going with the logistics services. I really urge people, in a position to do so, to provide more assistance today, to keep those services going, otherwise they are going to start to close down.

I want to make one last point, which is about the broader funding environment. The rich countries, the OECD, have invested USD 9 trillion to protect the global economy. That was a very smart thing to do. It is also necessary though to protect the 10 percent of the world's most vulnerable people and for just 1 percent of that USD 9 trillion, the 700 million of the world's poorest people can be protected. Most of that money can come off the balance sheets of the international financial institutions, about two-thirds of it, but some of it, about USD 30 billion or so, which is one-third of 1 percent of the global stimulus, will need to come in the form of grants for humanitarian agencies. The choice is stark. We can either provide a little bit of money, or we can watch the biggest global loss of life and tragedy anybody in our lifetime has seen accumulate in front of us.

