

2024 annual session of the Executive Board

Hybrid session

Special address by Mr Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator

H.E. Youssef Balla, President of the Executive Board (original language Arabic): It is now an honour for me to welcome Mr Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. He is joining us online.

Over decades, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and WFP have worked hand-in-hand in providing support to vulnerable populations in complex crises and environments throughout the world. Unfortunately, the number of these crises and the number of affected, vulnerable people keeps climbing and the partnership between the two organizations remains vital for many women and men, girls and boys around the globe.

Mr Griffiths, as you come to the end of your tenure as Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, the Board is eager to hear your reflections on how the international community can best address the current rise in humanitarian needs around the globe and your perspective on WFP's role in addressing multiple complex emergencies.

Mr Griffiths, I have the honour of giving you the floor.

Mr Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator: I just want to thank you very much Mr President, but also of course my friend Cindy, Executive Director of WFP, thank you to the Board, and I thank you on behalf of the Secretary-General but also on my own behalf, because this will be one of my last assignments, as Mr President, you kindly referred to, before I am off to join the free world and do less damage to the official world. So thank you for the invitation.

I would like to start by just summarizing how important WFP is for all of us in the humanitarian community. You provided food, cash, commodities for about 150 million people last year I think Cindy, in more than 120 countries. Thirty percent of the whole humanitarian response plan was carried forward by the World Food Programme. Nobody else is near that kind of level of achievement.

You run the global logistics cluster, which is crucial, you run the United Nations Humanitarian Response Depots which are vital, you run the humanitarian air service, without which we would not be able to do our jobs, you run the emergency telecommunications cluster, and this is over and above your normal day job, which is to make sure that people do not suffer from the absence of food security.

And the fact that you do so many things reminds me of the days as we approached the beginning of the Ukraine war, and as you will probably remember, WFP for good enough reason, was not present to any great state in Ukraine before that war started. We all knew in those days, as the war became closer, we needed WFP in Ukraine.

Without WFP in Ukraine, there would be no humanitarian response in Ukraine. And indeed, you joined, you were there very quickly, and now you have even given us, in Denise Brown, one of the great leaders of the United Nations community in Ukraine. So WFP, you are everywhere.

Secondly, the current humanitarian challenges, just to rehearse a little bit, from a WFP perspective, take one awful statistic. At the end of last year, 45 million children under 5 at threat from wasting. And you just choose one statistic from the level of statistics that we keep quoting to each other and to the world every day, that tells you what kind of a world we are living in.



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We recently heard this week about the prospects of food insecurity in Gaza. Just under half a million people in IPC phase 5, risk of famine. Interestingly, rather less than previously. It shows that aid works. When aid gets through, it makes a difference. Our problem in Gaza is getting it through.

Famine looming in Sudan, of course, huge numbers there. And I think there have been announcements about that today. And we all know about the reasons and causes for these terrible statistics and appalling situations. I have been very vocal on it about the absence of firm leadership globally to choose dialogue and negotiation instead of violence to resolve differences.

An erosion in respect for international humanitarian law. Impunity has never been so widespread. We have all, you have included, suffered, you do daily, your own warehouse is being attacked as we have heard this week in Gaza, for example, aid workers, more aid workers killed in this last six months than in the previous 12 years.

You have, in the first weeks of Cindy's arrival, as I remember vividly, as you will, of course, remember vividly, Cindy, lost your own staff on the job in Sudan.

But what WFP does, it is not just deliver aid, it is not just a behemoth of humanitarian aid, but it is also a leader on the protection of civilians. It is also driven by the issue of the rights of peoples. And that has become our front line, so much today more than it has been in the past.

As we know, major problems of underfunding. It is partly that funding has reduced, but it is also mainly because needs have increased. As I understand it, about 40 percent of the required funding came through in 2023; 40 percent. And in WFP, you faced last year a shortfall of about 64 percent, a massive number, even though your budget was probably your biggest ever, and you raised a huge amount of money.

And as I was telling the media yesterday, we are now, this year, about 16 percent of funding needed for humanitarian response plans around the world; 16 percent, halfway through the year. It has never been so low. And it is not actually a sustainable way of doing business. We need to look at different ways to levy funds. We need to look at different levels of generosity. And we need, of course, to address the disparity between money spent on war and money spent on the needs of ordinary people.

Finally, if I may, a few thoughts as I leave, of the focuses that have obsessed us all. I would like to start with that. I have never seen in all my many, many years of humanitarian assistance, such an amity, such a consensus, such a clear partnership between humanitarian agencies, as we see today. And I bear huge tribute to Cindy and the staff of WFP for that kind of partnership.

I also think that we have shared that kind of partnership right from the beginning. It is quite an extraordinary asset. Not many communities have this kind of unity, as expressed through Board meetings like this, through inter-agency standing committees, through public statements, very early public statement on the need for a ceasefire in Gaza, not an easy one to make right at the beginning, but we made it together. So there is that consensus.

Number two, humanitarian diplomacy and humanitarian mediation have become more common, and we have all been involved in it. I had, of course, direct involvement in the Black Sea Grain Initiative, by the way, full involvement of WFP, including seconding staff to the team that did that negotiation, for obvious reasons we could not have done it without that, and in the team that followed through in the implementation. And we still have hopes, maybe a bit residual at the moment, but still have hopes of safe trade in the Black Sea sometime in the near future.

But that was an interesting example of humanitarian diplomacy in a world gone mad.

Number three, we all negotiated with the Government of Syria to keep United Nations aid moving back last summer, when the Security Council was not able to agree on the cross-border



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operation. And it was a noteworthy, not a very public negotiation, but it was noteworthy with its clarity, and it has indeed worked, despite many people fearing it would not.

Number four, the very difficult discussions and negotiations that we have all had with the de facto authorities, the Taliban in Afghanistan, about women's access to work, women's access to education, women's access to parks, for God's sake, women's rights in Afghanistan. But what is interesting, is the way in which the negotiations, particularly led by our local humanitarian partners, women-led humanitarian partners, have sustained, despite all those edicts, a continued flow of aid to women, by women, for women. Not easily done, and very difficult in many cases politically, but quite an achievement, I think.

Next, Sudan. God knows, very little good news to come out of Sudan these many, many months. And facing a horrific prospect in Darfur and El-Fasher, and still in the rest of the country. But it was interesting, and it is still yet to be fully adhered to, of course, is those Jeda negotiations that the United States and Saudi Arabia led.

We were involved, we were all involved in this, as in support roles, but they led them, and they produced from each of those two warring parties, an absolutely classic declaration of commitments to humanitarian principles and law. Not yet realized in practice, but it is always a remarkable piece of diplomacy, and it shows that a fundamental point, which I feel very strongly about, which is that the spirit of humanity, let me put it this way, can drive us to places where even enmity resides, can drive us, despite enmity, to places of global good.

And humanity, which is essentially the generosity of people towards their neighbours, the ordinary people who help those displaced, who come to reside near those host communities – those people, that humanity, that is as deep today as it ever has been, despite all the problems that we have just been describing.

Finally, a couple of words, if I may, on climate and on localization. We are all pursuing the flagship project, I think it has been also addressed at the Board, which is essentially a very simple proposition, which is listen to people tell you what they need. They know better than you do what they need. That does not mean to say they do not need advice, does not mean to say they do not need guidance, but essentially the leadership is theirs. This is not only a matter of respect and proper values, but it is also a matter of efficiency of the use of funds.

That is what we are involved in. It is going to require huge changes in the way we do business. It is a generational change in the humanitarian enterprise, but it is astonishing to me how widely it has been welcomed by donors, by Member States, and of course, by agencies like WFP and others.

And then finally, climate. Climate chasing conflict as the driver of humanitarian needs. Climate, there is some small, good news, since the last COP. We are beginning to see, I think, climate adaptation money come through to those front-line communities that we have access to.

Somalia has begun to receive, finally, substantial amounts of money, not enough, and I am sure it never will be enough, substantial amounts of money coming out of climate adaptation being helped through to deliver to front-line communities by our community.

I think that is remarkable. I know, from speaking to my own colleagues how in Southern Africa the alliance of the Member States and of local government and the big agencies like WFP, FAO and others, on response to El Niño and next year to La Niña, has been remarkable. Climate actually is a unifying potential issue, as well as a crucial creator of need.

So yes, there are huge difficulties ahead for the community, but actually those are difficulties faced by the world in which we are not the prime mover and the challenge for the world – and here I



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will stop Mr President – is to make sure that we place the needs of ordinary people, and we are all ordinary people, that we place those needs above the needs of war, of violence, of gender-based violence, of food insecurity, and of wanton disrespect for rights and the humanitarian law.

We want to be part of the solution and I am absolutely sure, especially once I am gone Cindy, that you and others will be leading the solution.

Thank you very much.

President (original language Arabic): Thank you for this very interesting presentation. Board members, I would now like to open the floor for statements. As agreed with the Bureau, each list will have the opportunity to deliver a statement of three minutes.

I will give the floor to Senegal on behalf of List A.

The representative of Senegal (original language Arabic): On behalf of List A, Senegal would like to express our thanks to Mr Martin Griffiths for his brilliant presentation which has emphasized the crucial importance of WFP's efforts in responding to the urgent humanitarian needs that continue to shake the world in a critical context.

Mr Griffiths, in view of your esteemed career and your dedication to humanitarian causes, we can truly say that your leadership has contributed to strengthening the coordination of emergency relief and to approving the management of operations aimed at relieving suffering and saving lives. We salute your commitment to humanitarian principles, in line with the priorities of our own organization's mission.

As we meet today we are fully aware of the growing needs and the complexity of the emergency situations we face. In regions of Africa and in the world, in the Sahel, in the Lake Chad basin, in Sudan, in the Horn of Africa, Haiti, and Gaza. The humanitarian situation and millions of people struggling with the devastating effects of extreme weather conditions, with economic disruption, with man-made disasters and conflict, all highlight the urgency of our mission to address the challenges of food insecurity and malnutrition.

More than ever, this urgent mission requires a coordinated and global response, given the dwindling resources of our organizations in the face of growing humanitarian needs. List A believes that WFP, guided by its mandate to fight world hunger, must be more committed to leveraging its resources, its expertise, and partnerships, to provide vital assistance to those in need.

And thanking you once again, Mr Griffiths, for joining us today, I would like to emphasize that we are inspired and motivated to work together in a spirit of cooperation to achieve our common humanitarian goals.

President (original language Arabic). Kuwait you have the floor.

The representative of Kuwait (original language Arabic): In turn, we would like to express our appreciation to Mr Griffiths for his efforts, and I here take the floor on behalf of List B. So full appreciation, Mr Griffiths, for your efforts and continued commitment as a United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator in order to alleviate the suffering of the population, as well as their protection in conflict areas around the world.

The dimensions of the complex humanitarian disaster in the Gaza Strip require a multifaceted approach, and your efforts towards mobilizing resources and communicating with stakeholders are vital efforts. Your calls for a ceasefire as well as your proposal for a peaceful solution,



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highlight the importance of diplomacy and dialogue in achieving lasting peace and stability in the region.

Here we would like to point out some facts and figures contained in the latest report IPC on the levels of food security and hunger in the Gaza Strip, specifically as 876,000 people were classified within Phase 4, meaning emergency, and 677,000 people were classified within Phase 5, meaning catastrophe, all of them facing famine and suffering from food insecurity.

Moreover, the latest report issued by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has referred to the indiscriminate attacks during the war in the entire Gaza Strip, which resulted in dramatic civilian casualties and widespread destruction of livelihoods and infrastructure, in addition to the continuing threats by the Israeli occupation forces to turn Lebanon into another Gaza.

These actions constitute serious violations of international humanitarian law and call for an urgent need for accountability and justice. Your efforts in highlighting these violations and defending civilian lives are crucial in upholding human rights and the international law.

In addition to this, we would like to point out that the current conflict in Sudan requires an urgent attention and intervention. As the conflicts have significantly deteriorated humanitarian conditions, increasing the suffering of the civilian populations, not to mention other damages, your efforts in coordination and provision of humanitarian support in these areas are also highly appreciated.

Enhancing stability and security in Sudan is an integral part of our joint efforts to achieve peace and sustainable development in the entire region. We reaffirm our full support for your efforts, as well as our commitment to work side by side with you and our international partners to provide humanitarian aid and backup efforts in order to achieve just and sustainable peace everywhere in the world.

Thank you again for your tireless efforts and wise leadership in these difficult times.

President (original language Arabic) The floor now goes to Canada on behalf of List D.

The representative of Canada (original language English/French): I have the pleasure to deliver this statement on behalf of List D and I would like to begin by thanking you for sharing your reflections with us today and for your commitment, your leadership and your dedication as Emergency Relief Coordinator. We have known you for a long time, and we know how you work; you are tireless in your humanitarian advocacy, putting people and their protection at the centre of your mandate, your actions and reforms.

Under your leadership, OCHA has expanded its role in humanitarian diplomacy and negotiation, helping to secure critical access for the delivery of vital assistance in complex crisis contexts and to demand respect for international humanitarian law.

We also appreciate your commitment to innovation, including a focus on anticipatory action and the better use of data. You have advocated for an increased focus on accountability to affected population, and localization of humanitarian responses. And significantly, you initiated a set of reforms to transform the humanitarian system to better reflect an increasingly complex humanitarian landscape.

In this respect, I think we would welcome hearing a little bit more from you this afternoon about the changes that you think have been made as a result of the flagship initiative in the four pilot countries. List D believes that current efforts to focus and simplify humanitarian planning and programming should result in improvements in our collective ability to reach those most in need and vulnerable.



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For example, the introduction of the revised joint intersectional analysis framework bolsters the use of rigorous comparable analysis to inform prioritization efforts and to deliver principled needs-based and timely assistance. Given growing needs and financing pressures faced by the whole humanitarian sector, this boundary setting initiative is necessary to enable the humanitarian system to prioritize life-saving assistance.

As members of the WFP Board we are very mindful of the importance of WFP engaging constructively and contributing to the smooth functioning of the United Nations humanitarian system. This includes OCHA's initiative to reform field coordination structures.

As the largest humanitarian sector and logistics provider, the Board has strongly encouraged WFP to support the Emergency Relief Coordinator's efforts to foster coherence for the effective delivery on OCHA's core mandate, and I have to say I am heartened to hear in your remarks earlier, that you think that this is working and that you have never seen the kinds of cooperation that we are seeing today among the humanitarian community.

I hope you do not mind, but I have a couple of questions on behalf of the List, so I hope that you will indulge me. We talked about the flagship initiative. I think we would very much like to hear more specifically what changes you think are necessary to respond to the current humanitarian landscape. You said you thought it was going to take a step change, but what to you specifically does that look like, now that you are going to be a regular citizen? What role can or should WFP take as a double mandated organization to support an improved humanitarian system that builds on the capacities and priorities of affected people?

What role do you foresee for national responders? What are your views on successful local leadership in humanitarian response? And what role could United Nations partners take in supporting such a model? And how do we bring partners to share the same understanding and definition of resilience so that they can deliver coordinated interventions across the humanitarian–development and peace nexus?

And above all, again, thank you very much, Martin, for all of your efforts in this role as Emergency Relief Coordinator. We know that it can take a toll, but you have done extraordinary work.

President (original language Arabic): And now I will give the floor to the United Kingdom.

The representative of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: I just wanted to briefly come in to say that the UK aligns itself very closely, fully with our List D statement.

But I just wanted to add a personal note from the UK to emphasize our sincere thanks to you, Martin, for your service and your work as ERC. We absolutely know the central role that coordination plays for the success of the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, especially, as you say, with the drivers of conflict and climate behind so many of today's humanitarian needs.

I just really wanted to reiterate that your brief today and your commitment to partnership with WFP really sends a strong message to us all and I am sure Board members will look forward to working really closely with the next ERC as we commit to deploy together all of our levers, both humanitarian and diplomatic. And I wish you all the very best for the future.

President (original language Arabic): And now over to Martin Griffith to respond to the members questions.

Mr Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator: I will be brief. But first of all, I am very moved by the statements made.



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And personally, I do not deserve those accolades, but what I think is so important, and it reflects something I did say in my earlier remarks, is that there is a sense of common purpose among humanitarian agencies. And I have been through periods of working with United Nations agencies and international NGOs inside and outside of the United Nations where that common purpose just was not present. That common purpose is a vital capital asset now and it is reflected, I think, in the remarks made today.

But in specific terms of some of the questions, the flagship initiative so far is having two interesting dynamics.

Number one, we are getting close to the period in those four countries where we will be able to say with some confidence what various communities say are their primary needs and priority needs. We are beginning to have the corroboration, the evidence that we need to drive effective programming prioritization. And that is where we are going to find the difficulties beginning, because we are not able to produce everything that people want.

We do have supply chains. We do have budgets. It is going to be very important to be able to respond to needs, but to do so in a way within our own ability to plan a budget successfully. The challenge is about to begin. But I know from work that I did many, many years ago when I was working for UNICEF, worked on development activities, these are challenges which we will work through together. And we will not do it perfectly first time, but we will get it better and better as we go through that.

Because, and this is the second interesting aspect of flagship, the idea of the flagship project is as old as time itself. The idea of listening to people telling you what they need and actually responding to that is not a new idea. It is an old one.

But in the case of the humanitarian community, which has not been necessarily the best exponent of listening to communities, other communities slightly better, but the humanitarian community is taking it up – a whole series of other countries are already beginning to adopt some of the practices that are being looked at and discussed in the flagship project.

Central African Republic, a great example of a country which is doing remarkable work in terms of vocalization, prioritization, listening. Learning to listen is the key to this. For OCHA, by the way, what this has meant for our organization, a small minnow in comparison to yours, we only have about 2,500 staff, but what it means for us is to move our staff out of the capital city, out to the places closer to the frontline communities, away from their computers and into sitting down and listening to people.

It is a step change, a cultural change for us as well. But we are going to need to grapple with this and still keep what has been an extraordinary achievement of the humanitarian community this last decade, the professionalization of aid. We should not lose that. We should simply build from that to make it also an aid which is respectful to people.

Second point, I think the World Food Programme, as I said at the outset, you do so much, you cannot move for WFP. You turn around, there they are, leading, speaking, delivering and cooperating.

The double mandate, though, is a really interesting point. When I joined OCHA three years ago, I was told that I was a co-chair of a panel on the nexus. Well, I am very, very pleased to tell you that that panel has not met in this last three years. It was a panel to be based in New York.

But essentially, the nexus, in other words, the relationship between resilience and development and humanitarian and lifesaving is going to be something that we actually address – WFP will be so well prepared for this – in front of the communities, not in panels in New York, but in the



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villages where the nexus means something, where people do not say, "Sorry, are you a humanitarian? Oh, well, in that case, you can do this." "No, development, you do that."

The reality of people's lives will shift us to make that double mandate really, really valuable. National responders, what I have found so remarkable in this terrible, terrible world that we have the privilege of engaging with, is the extraordinary courage and commitment of national responders. One of the most important experiences of my time was in Burkina Faso, and I have spoken about it publicly in the village of Jibo, where a relatively small population, 70,000 people, fed, housed and homed and looked after a displaced population of 300,000 who were moved into that area.

Food was cut off to Jibo because of the fighting between the Government and Al-Qaeda insurgent groups. And the mothers of Jibo, the mothers of Jibo crossed conflict lines night by night, conflict lines with Al-Qaeda, for God's sake, to get leaves and salt, which they shared with their new neighbours. That courage, that power of national responders, is an example to us, but it is an asset to us as well.

Look at the example of the emergency rooms in Sudan. They have never closed. They have never closed. They represent a huge asset for the future of Sudan.

And finally, on the issue of resilience and lifesaving. Huge issue. It has become more important because of funding issues, but I think both are obviously extremely important. You have lived it, you have lived through it, particularly in the Horn, as well as elsewhere. We cannot ignore resilience because people will tell us how important it is. Every time you go to a displaced people's camp, they tell you, "We want to work. We do not want you to just give us aid. We want to work. And by the way, we would like to go home."

Resilience is not second class in relation to lifesaving. But we should do what we do well. And that is lifesaving in the humanitarian community. And let us make sure the people who do resilience better, and WFP does both, they do that better.

The idea of the relationship between resilience and lifesaving, again, like my point about the nexus, I think will become real because the people in these communities will tell us about real lives as opposed to the panels in New York.

President (original language Arabic): It is now a pleasure to pass the floor to the Executive Director. Please go ahead.

Ms C. McCain, Executive Director: Martin, thank you so much for joining us today and for your insightful special address. As usual, you got straight to the heart of the matter and set out the immense challenges we face as humanitarians, with passion and with candour.

Thank you for everything you have done and achieved as Emergency Relief Coordinator. You have been a loyal defender and ally of vulnerable people around the world. Your kindness and your humanity shine through and you have inspired everyone in the humanitarian community to work even harder for the people we serve.

Martin, you have also inspired me personally, and made me more determined than ever to ensure that WFP fulfils our vital mission to save lives and change lives. I am going to miss your insights, your ability to unite people around a noble cause, and above all, your warmth and unfailing good humour. It has been a privilege to work with you and learn from you and I am also so proud to call you my friend. You are a true humanitarian and we will miss you more than I can say.

Motivated by your example, we will continue bringing help and hope to those who need it most. Martin, thank you so much for everything and on behalf of everyone at WFP, very best wishes for this new chapter in your life. And please do not be a stranger. We still need you.



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I would like to take a personal note if I can and thank you for mentioning the coordination between the agencies. That is something that we worked on very hard and I am grateful that it has taken root within this system. Personally, I will miss your candour. I will miss your straight talk and your incredible diplomatic skills, your calm demeanour, and most of all, your friendship. Thank you for caring. I will miss you.

President (original language Arabic): Mr Griffiths, it has been a pleasure to welcome you at our Board and I want to thank you for the incredible collaboration that you have fostered between our two organizations and for your invaluable insights on the humanitarian challenges that we are all facing. Thank you again for your presence with us today.

