

2025 first regular session of the Executive Board

Hybrid session

Opening remarks by the Executive Director

Ms C. McCain, Executive Director: Thank you, Madam President. I am very happy to be here. Excellencies, good morning and welcome to the first regular session of the Executive Board.

Allow me to also welcome back WFP's Inspector General, Fabienne Lambert, after a leave of absence. I also want to thank Helge Østtveiten for his outstanding work. Helge, I hope you know how grateful we are for what you have done for us and the amount of work that you have put in in your time here. Thank you and good luck.

Excellencies, last week WFP lost one of our team members in Yemen. We are heartbroken. Ahmed, an IT officer, died while being detained by the Houthi de facto authorities, one of seven WFP national employees arbitrarily arrested last month. He was a true humanitarian dedicated to serving others. Let us take a moment to honour Ahmed and all those that we have lost. Those of you who choose, will you join me in standing for a moment of silence.

No humanitarian worker should ever be targeted. Humanitarian aid workers are not targets, period. Yet this is our reality on the ground, aid agencies face daunting challenges as we try to get food aid to desperate communities, many of them innocent victims of conflict.

It is no surprise that needs are surging in many parts of the world. In 2024, there were 120 active armed conflicts, the highest number since World War II. WFP has to deal with the consequences of this destruction every day. We are being forced to navigate growing risks to aid workers, restrictions on access to people in need and a general erosion of the principles enshrined in international humanitarian law.

In 2024, 325 humanitarians were killed. It is the deadliest year on record. This is exactly why I have made duty of care to our global team and the people we serve a very top priority of mine. This will continue in 2025. We are reinforcing our policies designed to protect the safety and well-being of all WFP's dedicated women and men, regardless of what contract they hold.

I will also continue leading the IASC's work on protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, a topic on the agenda at the IASC meeting I am attending in Geneva tomorrow. An effective duty of care framework is not optional, it is essential, as we have seen recently when fierce fighting erupted in eastern DRC.

WFP acted immediately to relocate all non-essential employees and their dependants away from Goma and Bukavu. Many of those relocated were national employees. We are still maintaining critical operations in Goma, and our outstanding team on the ground are providing food assistance to displaced people wherever they can.

This is the spirit of WFP in action. Despite the risks, our people are still on the front lines, staying and delivering in DRC and around the world.

Like in Gaza where, since the ceasefire, WFP's team has been working night and day. We have sent over 4,500 trucks and it is having a huge impact. Bakeries have reopened and kitchens are once again feeding people. We have reached over 850,000 people so far.

Or like in Haiti, where WFP is one of the few agencies with the capacity and access to deliver at scale. Last year we reached 2 million of the most vulnerable people. Or in Syria, where I spent time with the team last month. Needs were already high before the change of government, with 3 million acutely hungry people. Millions more are now extremely vulnerable, including many returnees.



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Or in Lebanon, which I visited on the same mission. At the time of the ceasefire, 1.5 million people were facing acute food insecurity. That is almost one in three people. Latest analysis suggests this number is likely to rise, but we are not giving up. WFP aims to reach 1.35 million with regular assistance.

I am incredibly proud of each and every member of our global team. It has never been harder to be a humanitarian, so senior leadership will stay focused on what more we need to do to protect the safety and well-being of our people. They deserve all the support we can give them, and we are determined to live up to our duty of care.

Excellencies, we must also acknowledge the changing and more challenging funding landscape that the humanitarian sector will need to navigate in 2025 and beyond. As you know, for many years, the US has been WFP's largest donor. The uncertainty over US funding moving forward is therefore a concern.

I went to Washington just following the announcement of the funding pause, where I met with a wide range of leaders on Capitol Hill. It is encouraging that the positive impact of WFP's work is recognized and appreciated by the US lawmakers I am talking to. We will continue to engage extensively with our US partners in the months ahead.

At the same time, other major donors are also telling WFP that contributions for 2025 will be lower than last year. As we adapt to this new environment, it is essential we plan prudently and effectively to ensure that our operational priorities are aligned with our funding outlook.

WFP has responded by adopting a revised funding forecast, reducing it from USD 7.7 billion to USD 6.4 billion for 2025. However, I want to be clear with Board members, I am still absolutely committed to rallying the support of global leaders and the private sector to secure as much funding as possible to combat hunger and food insecurity.

This remains a key priority. I firmly believe that global food security is not just a humanitarian goal, it is also a strategic objective. When a crisis explodes, its shockwaves are often felt thousands of miles away, so combating hunger is an investment in wider stability and security.

This is the message I highlighted at last week's Munich Security Conference, where I met with many of WFP's key donors and partners. I will be discussing these issues in Saudi Arabia next week and in donor and partner capitals throughout the year. Everywhere I go, I am asking for support for WFP's work. But we understand that governments cannot do it all. We need everyone to step up and do their part.

Work has begun on a new private sector strategy to replace the current one ending this year. These vital partnerships will feature prominently in WFP's future resource mobilization strategy, building on the successes already achieved. Today, the private sector is WFP's fifth largest donor, and this is not just about financial resources. We are also harnessing the expertise and efficiencies and innovations of leading businesses to transform our own operational impact.

Partner governments have an equally critical role in supporting WFP's work. They are increasingly using their own resources to finance programmes and activities which reduce needs and spur long-term growth and prosperity. Last year, 49 countries provided support to WFP's operations from domestic budgets, as well as funding from the international financial institutions.

Governments investing in their own development can reduce the demand for traditional donor funding, which is then freed up to meet the most urgent needs. It is an approach that could unlock substantial resources, so our country teams are going to explore every potential opportunity for national financing.



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Excellencies, in this current climate, WFP's commitment to being an even more efficient, effective and streamlined organization is fundamental. I know from my own conversations with donors how loudly this message resonates, so we will stay laser-focused on this key corporate priority in 2025.

Last year, we reduced our PSA budget by USD 85 million. That is 15 percent. We reduced the number of departments from four to three, and the number of divisions from 31 to 23. In doing so, we reduced the number of ASGs and headquarters directors. We did this while prioritizing resources for country offices. Now we need to go further.

The leadership team has therefore agreed to implement a 10 percent reduction to the 2025 PSA budget, setting it at USD 432 million. This reduction will be applied across global headquarters to all headquarters divisions, the global offices and the regional bureaux. We will continue to prioritize resources for frontline operations.

In addition, we have implemented a series of corporate efficiency measures. The recruitment freeze that has been in place for global headquarters since October of 2023 will continue and has been extended to WFP operations worldwide. Exemptions will be strictly limited to mission-critical activities and corporate emergencies. International duty travel has been restricted to essential missions only, and workshops and trainings will be run virtually. We have also suspended all non-essential procurement of goods and services.

Another critical pillar of our efficiency agenda will be implementing WFP's One Integrated Global Headquarters model in the months ahead. It has specifically been designed to remove duplication, fragmentation and unnecessary bureaucracy and increase collaboration, efficiency and accountability. As we focus on stretching every donor dollar as far as possible, this work has taken on a new urgency.

We will also continue rolling out the Global Assurance Project to ensure stringent oversight and control measures are in place across WFP's country operations. Donors and partners and those we serve must have confidence that WFP's assistance is reaching its intended recipients.

Excellencies, I know I am painting a sombre picture in what lies ahead, but I am not downhearted. Far from it, actually. I am resolute about positioning WFP to seize the many opportunities before us. I have spoken before about unleashing the huge potential of technology, innovation and the private sector by scaling up ambitious new partnerships for impact.

This is exactly what we are doing. We will shortly publish WFP's first ever strategy on artificial intelligence and machine learning, drawn up by our Technology Division. These technologies will revolutionize the humanitarian sphere, enhancing decision making, boosting efficiency and better targeting resources.

WFP has always been a leader in innovation. It is in our DNA. Now, I want us to be a leader in harnessing AI's power to transform humanitarian operations while ensuring appropriate safeguards.

We all know that the world is changing fast. The challenges facing the humanitarian sector are not going away, so we have to be agile and creative as we adapt and change in response.

WFP's greatest advantage is that our mission is clear. We exist to help as many hungry people as possible and support them to build a better future. With the support and the friendship and the partnership of our Executive Board, we will face the future with confidence and continue to deliver for the vulnerable people we all serve.

Thank you.

