

'No time to relax' in the fight against hunger, top UN official warns



WFP Executive Director Josette Sheeran

20 September 2010 – Calling hunger “the most severe face of poverty,” the head of the United Nations World Food Programme (**WFP**) has warned that only swift and committed action by global leaders will make the difference for the millions of people worldwide who have to subsist on one meal or even less every day.

It is time to put hunger “on top of the global agenda,” said Josette Sheeran, Executive Director of WFP, in an **interview** with the UN News Centre as world leaders gathered at UN Headquarters in New York to discuss how to make progress on the Millennium Development Goals (**MDGs**).

“We know what to do but we have to do it, and we have to do it vigorously... There’s nothing more basic than hunger.”

One of the eight MDGs includes a target of halving, by 2015, the proportion of people worldwide who were hungry in 1990.

A joint report issued last week by WFP and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization indicated that the number of chronically hungry people has fallen for the first time in 15 years, dropping from 1 billion to 925 million.

But Ms. Sheeran said this improvement, while welcome, must be treated cautiously.

“It is a projection for this year and of course we have recently seen epic-level flooding in Pakistan which was not factored into the projections,” she said. “This is no time to relax.

“We are seeing food prices climbing a little again. The projections are based on increased economic growth. If there isn’t that growth, and there’s a sudden-onset disaster or an unpredictable loss of crops, then those numbers can really swing. We’re in a volatile area where the underpinning factors are more volatile than ever in recorded history.”

The WFP chief said the recent global financial and food crises had “exposed structural weaknesses in the battle against hunger,” with many people in poorer nations priced out of the market for basic foods.

“That’s why during the crisis I labelled it a ‘silent tsunami.’ Villages in virtually every country in every continent were affected.”

Hunger fell disproportionately on women and children, Ms. Sheeran said, noting that the agency has changed its policies and strategies to focus on children under the age of two.

“They are the most vulnerable. We have learned that the first 1,000 days of a child – from conception to two years of age – is so important. If they are undernourished, then they will be damaged in their minds and bodies.

“New scientific evidence has reinforced what we had learned and has revolutionized the way we approach the issue of hunger. It’s not only important that children get calories, but that they get the right kind of calories at the right time – that they get highly nutritious food.”

WFP distributes food for about 90 million people in at least 70 different countries each year, and Ms. Sheeran stressed the importance of making sure “we tap into the world’s best thinking, the best technologies and the

best minds to defeat hunger. WFP is involved in very complex operations today – we are not talking about your grandmother’s food aid.”

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