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UN sets humanitarian agenda for 2011: save more lives, more quickly



Valerie Amos

21 January 2011 – With climate change presaging natural mega-disasters, aid workers facing mounting attacks in conflict areas and the economic crisis crimping resources, the United Nations office coordinating the global humanitarian response announced its agenda for 2011 today: more lives saved, more rapidly, with fewer gaps and less duplication.

“In a changing world there can be no organizational status quo,” Valerie Amos, who heads the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)), told Member States at a meeting at UN Headquarters in New York.

“In 2011, OCHA’s structure, in the field and at headquarters, will be more adaptable to the evolving nature of crises,” she said, noting that 2010 had been an unprecedented year with more than 250 natural disasters.

“By the end of 2011, OCHA will be a more focused organization. It will be better at managing its human resources and there will be greater clarity between the field and headquarters in terms of who does what,” in line with the Office’s theme for 2011 – Responding in a Changing World.

Established by the General Assembly in 1991 as the Department of Humanitarian Affairs to ensure a more effective and coherent response to emergencies by coordinating the actions of UN

agencies and national and international organizations, OCHA has seen its caseload balloon over the past 20 years, culminating in the 2010 record.

From the devastating earthquake in Haiti, which killed 220,000 people and made 1.5 million others homeless, to unprecedented flooding in Pakistan barreling down from the northern mountains to the flatter and agricultural south to affect over 20 million people, from Cook Islands in the Pacific, battered by tropical storms, to post-flood coordination in Albania, OCHA was on hand and on the ground.

Ms. Amos, who serves as Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, stressed the need to learn the lessons of Haiti and Pakistan where delays, logistics and other issues prevented the initial operations from moving as effectively as desired, and she warned of the mounting complexities confronting humanitarian operations in the future, noting that climate change is playing its part.

“Unpredictable and unprecedented weather patterns across Africa, Central America, and South and East Asia displaced tens of millions of people,” she said. “As the frequency and intensity of natural disasters increase, mega-crises such as the flooding across Pakistan may well become the new normal, making us think again about the speed, scale and effectiveness of our response.

“Humanitarian work has also become more dangerous. The level of threats and the number of deliberate attacks on aid organizations – our people, equipment and facilities – have risen dramatically. Reaching populations in need to deliver essential services has become more difficult,” she added, noting that 63 humanitarian workers were killed in 2010.

“And if negotiating these challenges was not enough, the humanitarian community is also dealing with increasing financial pressure. We are being urged to do more with less not only because of the global economic downturn, but also because countries that give us support must account to their populations for the way they have spent their money.”

Ms. Amos listed an ambitious list of tasks for the coming year: to coordinate responses, mobilize resources through international appeals, manage quick-response funds, act as a voice for victims, negotiate access to those in need, and provide critical information and analysis as crises unfold.

And she listed, too, the global challenges where OCHA will continue to improve its understanding: climate change, food and energy price increases, population growth and urbanization.

OCHA, with over 350 aid agencies participating in joint planning exercises, is funded by 39 Member States and Ms. Amos asked for \$208 million in voluntary contributions for 2011.

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