

As delivered

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Briefing to Member States

The Humanitarian Consequences of El-Niño and the Need for Urgent Action

New York, 7 January 2016

Excellencies,

distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm very grateful to you for being here today for the briefing on the humanitarian consequences of the El Nino phenomenon. As you know, El Nino is already having a devastating effect on many parts of the world.

We are here today to resound the alarm.

And we are here to spur a collective response to the humanitarian suffering caused by changes in weather patterns linked to El Niño, and to take action now to mitigate its effects.

If we act now, we will save lives and livelihoods, and prevent an even more serious humanitarian emergency from taking hold.

In some regions, millions of people are already facing food insecurity caused by drought related to El Niño. In other parts of the world, we have a short window of opportunity now to prepare for what we know will happen within months. In both cases, we must act together and we must act quickly.

As we will soon hear from our colleague from the World Meteorological Organization, the strength of the current El Niño has put our world into uncharted territory. El Niño itself is not caused by climate change, but the fact that it is taking place in a changed climate means that its impacts are less predictable, and could be more severe.

El Niño is likely to decline in strength in January 2016, but this does not mean that the danger is passed. El Niño and a possible subsequent La Niña event will continue to affect different parts of the world at different times with a mix of above- or below-average rainfall. The impacts, especially on food insecurity, may last as long as two years.

I am particularly concerned about a number of countries spread across Central and South America, the Pacific region, and East and South Africa. The

countries that I will mention today are certainly not the only ones to be impacted by El Niño. But in these countries, the gap between projected needs and local government and humanitarian actors' capacity to respond requires our urgent attention.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Haiti are particularly vulnerable.

Below-average rainfall from March to September this year led to significant crop losses and has triggered the need for food aid for millions of people.

More than 4.2 million people in Central America, including some 3.5 million people in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, are affected by one of the most severe droughts in the region's history, which is likely to grow in intensity until March this year. In Haiti, 30 per cent of the population – that's some 3 million people – are classified as food insecure, and some 800,000 are severely food insecure and need urgent assistance.

Beyond these countries, the entire region is at risk of potentially devastating effects on the agricultural sector, including floods, landslides and droughts, potentially leading to forest fires.

In the Pacific region, Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea they are the ones at greatest risk, but as many as thirteen countries could be affected. Drought conditions are already affecting some 3.5 million people across the region, including 2.4 million in Papua New Guinea – one third of the country's total population. In some countries, El Nino is increasing the likelihood of typhoons and cyclones. In 2016, 4.7 million people in the South Pacific may be at risk from adverse weather associated with El Niño.

Serious food insecurity is also foreseen in Timor Leste by March when harvests are expected to fail, affecting about 220,000 people.

Turning to East Africa, poor rains have resulted in drought-like conditions in the northern parts of the region, mostly in Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti and Eritrea, while other parts of East Africa experienced a wetter-than-normal season.

By early 2016, projections indicate that at least 22 million people will be food insecure across the region, and between 2.7 million and 3.5 million people could be affected by floods.

Ethiopia is the country most affected so far as it faces the worst drought in more than 30 years. Humanitarian needs more than tripled in the past year; some 10.2 million people are in need of emergency food assistance today. The Government is taking impressive leadership of the crisis; including the

allocation of more than \$290 million of its own resources for response efforts. Alongside, the humanitarian community launched an appeal of \$1.4 billion in December for 2016, which I did in Geneva just before Christmas. The Productive Safety Net Programme, run by the Government in partnership with the World Bank, also ramped up and now aims to assist 8 million chronically poor people with emergency food and cash transfers. While some donors have made important contributions, the scale of this crisis demands more significant and timely support as lead times range from three to five months, that's the equivalent for donor money to translate to food into people's hands, including procurement, shipping and delivery, for food aid and other supplies to arrive in the country.

Since 1 October, donors have given some \$360 million towards this El Niño-driven drought response. An impressive commitment that demonstrates the commitment of the donor community. Thank you.

However, enormous gaps leave the operation unable to ensure this critical assistance beyond just the first few months. The World Food Programme has 10 percent of the financial resources it needs to provide emergency food assistance for the first six months of the year. Closing this gap is critical to preventing further suffering and protecting impressive development gains seen in Ethiopia over the past decade.

Southern Africa is also of particular concern over the coming months.

Abnormal rainfall patterns in the second half of 2015 have already contributed to a huge spike in food and livelihood insecurity affecting 28 million people in Angola, Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Relief might only come with the 2017 harvest, meaning the situation could only worsen throughout the coming year. As Southern Africa enters into the main part of its growing season from December to April, rainfall is forecast to be well below average.

From January to March, floods are likely to occur in Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania.

All these countries need assistance now to respond to the impacts already being felt and to prepare for what we know is to come.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

By the nature of its scale, its slow onset and the early warning afforded to us by reliable scientific analysis, El Niño poses a critical test to our global humanitarian system in two fundamental areas.

Firstly, El Niño tests our commitment to early action, which was re-affirmed after the devastating Horn of Africa drought of 2011. The warning signs are there. Are we prepared to act on them? Do we collectively make the resources available NOW on the basis of these firm clues (known on scientific evidence and experience to be lead indicators) or do we wait for the proof of these facts of a crisis, of course then rapidly a humanitarian and massive crisis, conflict in lives, and donors' money coming to the rescue in the end? Are the politicians in donors countries prepared to risk their taxpayers cash before that avoidable proof? Can we make the investments in preparedness and early response that we know to be far less costly in human and economic terms than waiting until the full scale of disaster is upon us?

Secondly, El Niño challenges our commitment to joint action between humanitarian and development actors, and between the international community and national and local governments. Are we able to forge the partnerships necessary to focus development efforts on the most vulnerable? Can we work together to build the resilience of people and communities and prevent them

from falling into humanitarian need? If we are to save lives and reduce suffering, of course we must answer 'yes' to all of these questions.

Previous crises have shown that early action is critical to reduce vulnerability and the need for humanitarian assistance later on.

And I would like to take a moment to recognize the outstanding support provided by local and international humanitarian actors in responding to this slow-onset disaster. UN, NGOs and most importantly National Governments and civil society have done their utmost to scale up response, in an environment of growing humanitarian emergencies and priorities. Over the past several months, humanitarian partners have stepped up El Niño-related preparedness and response work, scaling up operational capacity and raising the alarm. Partners have worked to pre-position stocks, strengthen local response capacity, reinforce river embankments in flood-risk areas and undertake resilience programmes in areas likely to be affected by El Niño.

The Central Emergency Response Fund, the CERF, has already allocated more than \$59 million in the past year to respond to El Niño-related impacts, and several donors have announced significant funding commitments in the past months. While these contributions provide a good start, they are not enough. Many of the response plans in affected countries are seriously underfunded.

While we will hear in a moment from the Resident Coordinators from four of these contexts, allow me to mention some further examples. Only 44% of the \$132 million dollar plan developed by the humanitarian country team for Zimbabwe has been funded, leaving a gap of \$73 million dollars. In Malawi, \$71 million dollars have been mobilized against a \$146 million dollar National Food Insecurity Response Plan.

Development actors, in partnership with national and local governments do have a critical role to play in ensuring that investments in risk reduction are brought forward and focused in the areas most vulnerable to severe weather events. Concerted efforts to reduce vulnerable areas can have an enormous return in terms of saving lives, reducing suffering and avoiding economic losses. As the response to El Niño in both Kenya and Ethiopia has shown, social safety net programmes employing a mix of cash and food assistance can play a critical role in preventing people from falling into humanitarian need. They provide a model of what could be done elsewhere. In different parts of the world, humanitarian and development actors are working together to ensure that resources are allocated to help rebuild basic social infrastructure, find durable solutions for internally displaced persons, and build the coping capacities of the most vulnerable communities. This partnership must be nurtured and deepened.

Donor governments also have a critical role to play in ensuring an early and robust response to El Niño and other slow onset disasters. In addition to building upon their already generous support to national governments and humanitarian partners to close the funding, encourage donors to bring funding forward and focus it based on early warning information. We cannot wait until the starkest evidence of human suffering is before our eyes. Donors can also help by ensuring that, wherever possible, funding arrangements in support are flexible enough to adapt to conditions on the ground and respond to the most urgent needs as they emerge.

So ladies and gentlemen, I will now hand over the floor **to Paul Egerton from the World Meteorological Organization** who will say a few words on the status and forecast of El Niño.

We will then hear from the Resident Coordinators of Fiji, Guatemala, Lesotho and Ethiopia about the situation in their countries of responsibilities, the steps that they are taking, and the support that they need from Member States and the United Nations system.

Then, before opening the floor, we will hear from Mr. Niels B. Holm-Nielsen of the World Bank about the opportunities for development processes to help reduce the risks arising from current and future climactic events.

Thank you once again for being here, and I look forward to your questions and points when we get to that stage of the proceedings.