

## **Sir John Holmes, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator and Aleem Siddique, UNAMA Spokesman**

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**UNAMA:** Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, my name is Aleem Siddique from UNAMA Spokesperson's Office. Welcome to our press conference this afternoon. We are very pleased to be joined today by the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Sir John Holmes.

Sir John arrived in Afghanistan last Thursday to review the humanitarian situation and help improve our response to the needs of Afghanistan's most vulnerable communities.

Before I hand over to Sir John to make some brief remarks I would like to advise you that we will not be holding our regular briefing tomorrow but will be holding a press conference this coming Thursday morning with the United Nations Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, who arrived in Afghanistan yesterday.

### **SIR JOHN HOLMES**

Thank you very much. Let me say first I am very pleased to be here. This is my first visit to Afghanistan and I have spent already some three days here. It is a very short time, but it has been enough to enable me to meet with representatives of the Government -- particularly in the provinces, representatives of the humanitarian community, -- both United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations, and also representatives of ISAF [International Security Assistance Force], both here in Kabul and in the provinces as well. I was able to visit Jalalabad, Nangarhar province, and Kunar in the past two days, where I was able to meet with members of local communities affected by the conflict and to discuss the difficulties that they are meeting. I will be going from here to have discussions Vice President Khalili of the central Government about all these humanitarian issues as well.

The fact that I am visiting Afghanistan as the coordinator of the international humanitarian system is testimony to the fact that that the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan in various respects is serious and is getting worse, not least because of the deteriorating security situation in various parts of the country.

So I wanted to come and see that situation for myself, to meet all the parties involved and to see whether we are responding in the right way. And, I think, nearly at the end of my visit, I can say that we do regard the situation as serious and I believe that we need to step up our humanitarian efforts, both the coordination of those efforts and our capacity to address the various problems in the future.

The most serious immediate problem, as you will all be aware, is food insecurity as a result of the global food price rises, which have had an effect here in Afghanistan, and drought in Afghanistan, which is having an effect and will be having an effect on the harvest particularly later this year. This is a global food crisis, affecting many countries around the world, but it is also affecting Afghanistan in a critical way. I think the Government of Afghanistan together with the United Nations and the humanitarian community were quick to recognize that, which is why we issued an appeal for 81 million dollars in January this year. That appeal was well-funded and is enabling us to help around 2.5 million particularly vulnerable people here in Afghanistan, but we also recognize that it was not enough, so we are working together with the Government of Afghanistan on a further, larger appeal to meet some of these needs and also to tackle some of the problems facing agriculture in this country.

I said the problem of food security is the most immediate and acute problem facing the people of Afghanistan but there are other humanitarian concerns as well, for example the plight of those returning refugees from Pakistan and Iran, returning in large numbers and facing great difficulties in terms of where to

settle and a temporary need for help.

The international humanitarian community, the UN agencies, particularly UNHCR, and the NGOs are working to help these returnees, but we recognize the need to do more. I was able to see something for myself of those needs when I visited temporary returnee settlements near Jalalabad two days ago.

There are also continuing problems with internally displaced people, some long-term displaced because of conflict or other reasons, and some temporarily displaced by fighting, for example in the south of the country and we want to increase our help to those people too.

Another aspect of our concerns is the natural disasters to which Afghanistan is unfortunately prone, including floods and droughts. This is also an earthquake-prone region and we want to make sure the preparedness to deal with those disasters when they happen is as good as it can be – again, working very closely with the Government of Afghanistan.

I said the humanitarian situation is clearly affected and made worse by the ongoing conflict in different parts of the country. This has different effects; one of them of course is the difficulty of access by the humanitarian organizations, whether they be UN agencies or NGOs, to those who are in need in some parts of the country.

Another is the effect of the fighting on civilians, in particular, for example the number of civilian casualties caused by the fighting, caused by military actions from both sides, and this is a source of great concern.

According to our UNAMA figures, the number of those casualties has continued to rise this year compared to last year. Most of those casualties are caused by the insurgents who seem to have no regard for civilian life, but there are also still significant numbers caused by the international military forces, not just ISAF but other military forces as well.

I heard about these concerns from some of those I met in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces, and I was able to discuss their concerns with the military forces, both in the eastern provinces and here in Kabul. It is clear that the international military forces are making every effort to minimize civilian casualties and recognize the damage this does and want to deal with that. Nevertheless these problems are still there and we need to deal with them and make sure that the safety of civilians comes first and international humanitarian law is respected by everybody.

In this context, it is important that where, for example, there are vaccination campaigns which need to be conducted, particularly against polio but also against other diseases, that we are able to negotiate days of peace or days of tranquillity, or humanitarian corridors, so that those operations can proceed peacefully and without incident.

One other aspect of this is the continuing attacks on food convoys and other humanitarian operations. The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), between January and June this year have already had 11 armed attacks against commercial vehicles and have lost a total of 340 tons of food. Such attacks are completely unacceptable and should stop; they are contrary to every tenet of humanitarian law. I am sorry to say there has been another attack on a WFP food convoy today, a convoy moving towards Helmand and Nimroz provinces, of I think some 47 trucks altogether which has been attacked. We don't know all the details yet, but it has come under fire and it is clear that at least some of the trucks have been burned and the food has been lost. And again, I condemn this absolutely. It simply cannot be of any assistance to any forces and is simply depriving people of the food that they desperately need.

So for all these reasons we will be, as I said, trying to step up our capacity and working very closely with the Government of Afghanistan to step up our capacity to respond to these humanitarian problems and put together a new humanitarian action plan in the next few months.

I am now happy to answer your questions.

#### **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**Aina TV [translated from Dari]:** You mentioned some of the reasons for worsening security in Afghanistan are civilian casualties and attacks on United Nations food convoys. Don't you think one of the reasons is that the Pakistani Government has made deals with the Taliban on the other side of the border and this is causing insecurity in Afghanistan?

**USG for Humanitarian Affairs:** You are asking me a very political question and my responsibilities are humanitarian. Clearly there are some issues that need to be discussed and resolved between the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The UN is prepared to help, if we can, in that in the search for

agreement about those issues, but essentially I think those are issues that will have to be resolved between the two Governments with the help of other members of the international community.

**AFP:** Can you give us a figure for civilian casualties this year?

**USG for Humanitarian Affairs:** According to our UNAMA figures, this year we have recorded some 698 civilian casualties so far, that is from January to June, compared with 430 for the same period last year. 422 of those were killed by anti-government elements and 255 were killed by the Government or international military forces, and there were 21 where the origin of the deaths is unclear. It is clear from that that the proportion of deaths attributed to Government and international forces has gone down. It was more or less balanced last year, I think; this year it is certainly much more like 60 per cent /40 per cent, and clearly the proportion of civilian deaths compared to the number of incidents may have also gone down; I think that reflects the efforts made by the international military forces to reduce civilian deaths. Nevertheless, according to our figures as I said, the absolute total of civilian deaths has increased this year.

**UNAMA:** Can I just refer colleagues to a factsheet which is on the side table that does actually have many of the statistics that you will hear Sir John using today.

**Freelance Journalist:** You mentioned access for humanitarian aid agencies and increasing insecurity. A significant portion of the aid and development community thinks that the blurring of lines between the military and aid delivery through Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and other programmes has increased the dangers for the aid community and is hindering their access, and the military resources are better spent bringing this much needed security rather than engaging in areas in which they don't have much expertise such as education, agriculture and other programmes. Is this a time to look at this afresh?

**USG for Humanitarian Affairs:** I think the basic reason why access is more difficult is because of insecurity -- the number of security incidents and the amount of fighting that is going on. That is the basic reason. But I agree that there has been and there is to some extent a blurring of lines between military operations and, for example, humanitarian assistance by the PRTs. I think it is very important that PRTs do not involve themselves in humanitarian assistance unless there is absolutely no other alternative for security reasons. I also think it is very important that the PRTs do not describe what they are generally doing as humanitarian. I think those points are well understood by the military people I have been talking to in the last few days, and there are clear guidelines about this. But what is extremely important from our point of view -- that of the international humanitarian community -- is that humanitarian aid is given strictly according to the needs of the people who require help and not in accordance with to any political or security agenda, regardless of whose agenda that may be. Those are basic principles of humanitarian assistance which I defend strongly everywhere in the world and they need to be defended very strongly also here in Afghanistan.

**Pajhwok [translated from Dari]:** You mentioned that the aid should be distributed in accordance with the needs. Do you mean that the assistance so far has been given based on the political agenda? How do you assess this distribution of food, was it successful or not?

**USG for Humanitarian Affairs:** I think there is a risk here that aid could be distributed for reasons other than basic humanitarian principle and need, and that is why I am drawing attention to the need to defend those basic humanitarian principles. I can't point to particular examples where it's not happened, but I think there is a risk because of the complicated situation that exists here. When we are talking about the food assistance, this is being delivered by the World Food Programme, by other UN agencies and by NGOs who understand very, very clearly these basic humanitarian principles and will do everything they possibly can to make sure that aid is distributed according to need and not for any other reasons, which is why I condemn so strongly those who are attacking these food convoys and other genuinely devoted humanitarian workers.

**Noorin TV [translated from Dari]:** Given the concerns you expressed over food insecurity, security and the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, don't you think that the assistance given so far to Afghanistan has failed?

**USG for Humanitarian Affairs:** I am not sure it's failed, I think we definitely need to do more. We need to be more strategic in our approach, we need to have more capacity on the ground to deal with these humanitarian needs and we need to mobilize more resources from the international community. Those are all things I will be taking away with me and trying to improve. I think there has been a very understandable focus on the political agenda, the security agenda and the development and reconstruction agenda, and all those remain absolutely vital. There are also some humanitarian needs which perhaps have been neglected more than they should have been, and now I want to correct that.

Thank you very much.