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## Wars, refugees and a 'systemic crisis': international emergency assistance

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# The Current Column

*of 23 May 2016*

## Wars, refugees and a 'systemic crisis': international emergency assistance requires reform

Bonn, 23 May 2016. The present demand for emergency assistance is almost unprecedented. Some 125 million people worldwide are currently dependent on emergency aid as a consequence of war, instability, inequality, natural disaster and resulting refugee crises. But the international humanitarian system itself is also in crisis, proving ineffective, inefficient and inequitable in the way it allocates aid and shares the burden of aid provision. It neglects many serious flashpoints and fails to do enough to build local and regional capacity.

United Nations organisations with a key role in the international humanitarian system are too often in competition with one another and with other actors, which is detrimental to effective coordination. Even UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is calling for radical changes in the way that the United Nations fulfils its humanitarian responsibilities. The World Humanitarian Summit, which begins in Istanbul on 23 May, must pave the way for these changes.

There are at least four key areas in which reform is needed.

First, it is necessary to link immediate humanitarian assistance with structural support, that is, with development cooperation. Most actors agree on the need to couple humanitarian aid and development cooperation more effectively in order to provide people in crisis with a sustainable perspective. However, when it comes to proposals for specific solutions, there has been little beyond non-binding and unspecific declarations of intent to date. Taking measures to strengthen Resident Coordinators, the UN's highest representatives in each country, would be a significant step forward. Specifically, these individuals should be given greater authority to enable them to coordinate planning of emergency aid, medium-term transitional aid and long-term oriented development cooperation.

Second, armed conflict must be addressed, as it is the chief cause of humanitarian crises. Consequently, the Secretary-General's report on the global summit, published some time ago, calls first and foremost for greater efforts to prevent war and promote peace. There has been little substantive response to this point in the international debate. This is because the United Nations organisations are actors who define their mandate as non-politically as possible. In practice, they thus often support the government position in critical situations, despite the fact that this may exacerbate conflict in the worst cases. Consequently, it is necessary to critically examine political neutrality in (post-)conflict situations. Conducting regular do-no-harm analyses in crisis and conflict countries (with the aim of

determining how assistance can be provided in a conflict-sensitive manner) would be a good starting point in this regard.

Third, the organisational and decision-making structures of the UN humanitarian system need to be reformed in two ways which at first glance appear contradictory: centralisation and decentralisation. Coordination work should be centralised in the event of a humanitarian crisis, with the competencies of the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) expanded accordingly (along similar lines to the Resident Coordinators). It would be particularly effective in this context for the ERC to also have financial decision-making power.

At the same time, decentralisation measures should be taken to strengthen the ability of local and national humanitarian organisations to take action in crisis situations. The primary role of international organisations would then be to assist national and local organisations as necessary with fulfilling the tasks required of them. International organisations would only play a direct role where this is not possible.

Fourth, it is necessary to address the issues with the humanitarian system's current financing mechanism, which is not based on any fixed or binding contribution rates. Consequently, financing gaps emerge time and again, with dramatic consequences in some cases, such as when cuts had to be made to food rations for those in need. This situation also results in UN organisations competing with one another for scarce resources. Set up by Ban Ki-moon in May 2015 and comprising international representatives from business, policy-making and civil society, the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing recommends a system of financing contributions that is fixed to a greater extent over several years. Funding should be less ear-marked to enable the system to deal with humanitarian crises which have largely fallen out of the public eye. Humanitarian organisations should also increase their financial transparency and move to providing more cash-based assistance, as this is often more effective than other forms of assistance.

The window of opportunity for structural reform is narrow. The General Assembly will conduct its regular quadrennial review of the UN Development System in September. It will be difficult to obtain approval in the foreseeable future for any structural changes that are not discussed during this review. Global demand for humanitarian assistance is hardly likely to decrease in coming years. Consequently, it is essential that the World Humanitarian Summit deliver specific steps for reform.