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UNICEF seeks \$1.2 billion to aid women and children caught in world's worst crises

4 February - The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) today launched an appeal for \$1.2 billion to help provide life-saving emergency support to women and children impacted by the most severe humanitarian crises around the world, including the Haitian earthquake.

The appeal is part of UNICEF's Humanitarian Action Report 2010, released in Geneva today, which spotlights the desperate situation of children and women in 28 countries and territories facing deep humanitarian crises.

UNICEF said Haiti was one of the countries it classified as 'in crisis' prior to the 7.0-magnitude quake struck on 12 January, killing up to 200,000 people, leaving around 2 million in need of aid and reducing much of the Caribbean country's infrastructure to rubble.

"Faced with multiple hurricanes, in addition to civil unrest, the country was [already] in need of humanitarian assistance," said UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Hilde F. Johnson.

"The earthquake is a horrific example of another double disaster, destroying the lives and livelihoods of the Haitian people and crippling the very infrastructure and systems needed for humanitarian actions to be effective," said Ms. Johnson.

"But we are achieving results," she noted. "This week, UNICEF and partners will begin a campaign aimed at immunizing 500,000 children under the age of seven against measles, diphtheria and tetanus."

Ms. Johnson added that as the agency scales up the delivery of aid and protection for every child in Haiti, UNICEF is still involved in providing humanitarian assistance all over the world.

"Children are suffering in many different places, and for a range of reasons," she said. "They all need our help."



A Haitian boy receives treatment at an ad hoc medical clinic at MINUSTAH

Every year, UNICEF responds to 200 emergencies all over the world, with 2009 witnessing repeated large-scale natural and man-made disasters in South-East Asia while emergencies in the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) intensified, she said.

“Children are always among the most severely affected, and disasters put them at increased risk of abuse and grave violations of their rights, including sexual violence, killing and maiming, and forced recruitment into armed groups.”

The report placed the 28 countries on its list on the basis of the scale and chronic or protracted nature of the crisis, the severity of its impact on children and women, and the potential to bring about life-saving results.

In these cases, urgent action is imperative to save lives, ensure access to safe water, adequate sanitation and hygiene, health, nutrition and to protect children against the worst forms of violence and abuse, and to provide children with an education even under the worst of circumstances, UNICEF stressed.

The report noted that the greatest needs are still in sub-Saharan Africa, where in 2009 some 24 million people in the Horn of Africa alone were affected by drought, chronic food insecurity and armed conflict.

“Together with its partners, UNICEF continues to search for innovative ways to meet the desperate needs of children and women caught up in emergencies,” said Ms. Johnson. “Only by working together can we effectively deliver on our mission to promote and protect children’s rights, help meet their basic needs and enable them to reach their full potential.”

UN expert urges immediate cancellation of Haiti’s external debt

4 February - An independent United Nations human rights expert today called for the immediate cancellation of Haiti’s external debt to allow it to recover from the devastating earthquake that struck the nation last month and move towards reconstruction.

Haiti’s current external debt amounts to about \$890 million, around 70 per cent of which is owed to multilateral creditors, mainly the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank.



Haitian farmers clear land for planting

The country is struggling in the aftermath of the deadly 12 January quake, which is estimated to have affected one third of the nine million citizens of Haiti, already the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.

“Haiti’s remaining multilateral debt must be unconditionally cancelled as a matter of extreme urgency in order to afford the country the necessary fiscal space as it recovers from the recent devastating earthquake and moves towards reconstruction,” Cephas Lumina, the UN Independent Expert on foreign debt and human rights, said in a news release.

Mr. Lumina also called for the provision of aid in the form of unconditional grants, “not new loans whatever the degree of concessionality,” as well as a moratorium on debt service.

While welcoming the recent announcement by the Paris Club – an informal group of 19 creditor countries – that its members would cancel the \$214 million debt owed to them by Haiti, the expert warned that more action was needed.

“The decision is insufficient to assure the country’s sustainable recovery effort, given that the bulk of its external debt is owed to multilateral creditors.”

Mr. Lumina also warned that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was ignoring its own advice by the recent approval of a ‘highly concessional’ and ‘interest-free’ loan of \$114 million to Haiti, repayment of which is due after a five-and-a-half year ‘grace period.’

“A new build-up of unsustainable debt must be avoided,” he said, noting that independent assessments indicate that it will take at least ten years for the country to recover from the quake.

“It is unrealistic to expect that the people of Haiti can muster the resources to start servicing this debt in five years’ time. It is also inappropriate to make Haiti pay back its emergency assistance,” said the expert.

Mr. Lumina has been mandated by the UN Human Rights Council to monitor the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on the full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights. He reports to the Geneva-based Council in an independent and unpaid capacity.

Meanwhile, the UN International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) signed a grant agreement of nearly \$5.7 million to support agricultural production in some of the poorest regions in the north of Haiti.

The grant will supplement IFAD’s ongoing project to increase agricultural production by modernizing irrigation infrastructure. Strengthening irrigation systems, including those reportedly damaged by the earthquake, will provide improved access to water resources for smallholder farmers.

“Beginning in 2008, Haiti was hit by rising food prices and a disastrous hurricane season, and now the earthquake,” said Josefina Stubbs, IFAD’s Director for Latin America and the Caribbean.

“IFAD has provided \$10.2 million over the last three planting seasons to boost agricultural production and support over 240,000 smallholders by providing agricultural input such as seeds and tools,” she continued, “and IFAD will continue to support Haitians during this difficult time.”

Central African Republic receives new UN peacebuilding funds



Clashes still occur in the Central African Republic (CAR), despite peace accords [File Photo]

4 February - The United Nations today announced a further allocation of \$20 million from its Peacebuilding Fund to the Central African Republic (CAR) to support security sector reform, economic revitalization and the rule of law in consolidating peace in the impoverished African country.

CAR has already received \$10.8 million from the Fund, which was created in 2006 as part of reforms setting up the UN Peacebuilding Commission, an intergovernmental advisory body of UN entities and Member States, international financial institutions and others on how best to coordinate the world community’s aid in post-conflict countries.

During a visit this week to CAR, which has been beset by sporadic conflict between Government forces and rebels and a spill-over of violence from its neighbours that have left hundreds of thousands of people displaced, Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support Judy Cheng-Hopkins said the new funding will deliver peace dividends to all.

In the area of security sector reform, it will provide start-up funding for the construction of two of the four barracks needed to support 10 police contingents and is expected to leverage further funding from other donors.

In supporting economic revitalization, it will fund a joint project between the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR/UNDP), UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to create quick peace dividends to help internally displaced persons (IDPs) return home. Again, it is hoped that this project will be scaled-up with future funding from bilateral or multilateral donors.

In the area of governance and rule of law, the funding will assist a new human rights commission and the development of a human rights action plan. Additionally it will fund the construction of two new prisons providing those found guilty of crimes with safe and secure detention facilities.

Ms Cheng-Hopkins is travelling with Bisrat Aklilu, Executive Coordinator of the Multi Donor Trust Fund Office, which is run by UNDP and administers the Peacebuilding Fund, which is currently supporting more than 100 projects in 15 countries.

Countries on the agenda of the Peacebuilding Commission receive funding, and those that are not may also receive funds

following a declaration of eligibility by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

In December, Mr. Ban's Special Representative in CAR, Sahle-Work Zewde, warned the Security Council that international assistance was vital to prevent CAR from sliding back into political crisis and potential new fighting as it prepares for elections this year.

New UNESCO panel seeks to identify how to bolster tolerance worldwide



2010, International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures

4 February - The head of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has set up an expert group to find ways to increase tolerance around the world, as part of her commitment to promoting a "new humanism" to pursue a rapprochement of cultures.

The world, said Director-General Irina Bokova, is marked by a growing interdependence, but mistrust has also arisen in recent years.

"I am convinced that UNESCO has all the strengths needed to provide a humanist response to globalization and crisis," she said. "In response to the sense of vulnerability which permeates all levels, there is indeed a need to invent new forms of action to safeguard social cohesion and preserve peace."

The new panel will meet for the first time on 18 February in Paris. The gathering will also mark the launch of the International Year for the Rapprochement of Cultures, which will kick off with a round-table discussion on the theme, "The Dialogue of Cultures: New Avenues for Peace."

"The objective of this International Year is to help dissipate any confusion stemming from ignorance, prejudice and exclusion that create tension, insecurity, violence and conflict," Ms. Bokova emphasized.

The task, she said, will be to promote mutual knowledge and to generate respect for other cultures.

"Exchange and dialogue between cultures are the best tools for building peace," the UNESCO chief said.

Whales, dolphins and porpoises suffer high death rate as by-catch in fishing nets – UN



4 February - Large-scale fishing operations are seriously threatening the lives of the majority of toothed whale populations, which include dolphins and porpoises, warned a new United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report released today.

The report, launched on the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (UNEP/CMS) website, noted that some 86 per cent of all toothed whale species are at risk from entanglement and death in gillnets, traps, weirs, longlines and trawls.

Lack of food and forced changes in diet as a result of overfishing pose additional threats to 13 of the 72 toothed whale species.

"During the International Year of Biodiversity, the Convention on Migratory Species continues to address major threats such as by-catch, ship strikes, ocean noise impacts and climate change to safeguard these charismatic marine mammals," said UNEP/CMS Executive Secretary Elizabeth Mrema.

"Governments need to enhance their efforts towards implementing targeted action plans under the Convention," added Ms. Mrema.

UNEP said that toothed whales make their home in a wide range of marine and freshwater habitats, from the Arctic to the tropics, with some species living in large river systems such as the Amazon, Ganges, Indus and Yangtze.

According to UNEP, the Baiji River Dolphin, which used to live in the Yangtze River, is probably extinct, and the Vaquita porpoise from the northern Gulf of California is facing the same fate with only 150 individuals remaining in the wild, with entanglement in fishing gear claiming an unsustainably high number of both species.

Many populations of toothed whales were at one point hunted almost to extinction and 50 species continue to be hunted, often at unsustainable levels. More recently, the ingestion of plastic debris or the effects of pollution by an ever-increasing cocktail of chemicals have been reported in 48 toothed whale species.

In addition, habitat degradation from dams and withdrawal of water from rivers and lakes threatens 18 species while ship strikes have a serious impact on 14 species, and noise caused by seismic explorations, marine construction projects and military sonar pose increasingly greater threats to these marine mammals, noted UNEP.

Timor-Leste hospital receives life-saving obstetrics equipment from UN

4 February - To help combat high maternal mortality rates in Timor-Leste, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has supplied equipment to assist in child delivery to a hospital in the capital of the fledgling nation.

The equipment was handed over to the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology of the Guido Valadares National Hospital on 28 January.

Pornchai Suchitta, UNFPA Representative, voiced hope that the equipment will help to save lives.



A child in Dili, capital of Timor-Leste.

UNFPA has been working with the hospital since 2000 to build the capacity of the obstetrics and gynecology staff to tackle the high maternal mortality rate and other issues related to women's health in the country.

According to a joint study by UNFPA, the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank, nearly 200 women died in Timor-Leste in 2005 while or shortly after giving birth.

UN seeking support from donors to scale up cash-for-work initiative in Haiti



The "cash-for work" programme is kick-starting economic activity in Haiti

4 February - The United Nations is seeking to scale up its cash-for-work programme that is enabling Haitians to earn an income as they help their country recover from last month's devastating earthquake, and the world body is calling on donors to help fund the vital initiative.

"The goal of the next few days is to ramp up the coverage, depending on the generosity of donors," Jordan Ryan, Assistant Administrator of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), told a news conference.

UNDP coordinates the cash-for-work programme, which was identified as one of the priority activities in the early recovery agenda following the 12 January quake, which is estimated to have affected one third of the 9 million citizens of Haiti, already the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere.

Mr. Ryan said the programme draws on the experience of the Government of Haiti and UNDP coming out of the 2008 hurricane season when over 100,000 jobs were created following those disasters.

So far just over 30,000 people in Haiti are working through the cash-for-work programme, receiving the equivalent of just under \$5 a day.

“Clearly, we want to grow that up as rapidly as possible,” said Mr. Ryan, adding that this involves working closely with the Government as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which play a large part in dispersing the programme throughout Port-au-Prince and other affected areas.

As part of the wider \$575 million flash appeal launched by the UN for humanitarian relief efforts, UNDP is seeking \$35.6 million for immediate recovery priorities, including debris clearance, rehabilitation of basic infrastructure, and cash-for-work reconstruction activities.

So far UNDP has received \$10 million to date for the cash-for-work programme, with another \$7 million pledged by a number of countries, including China, Spain and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

“There still is a funding gap for the early recovery of at least \$18 million,” Mr. Ryan pointed out. “There are still a number of donors that have yet to come on board. We hope they will because this will allow us to scale up this early recovery activity.”

He stressed the value added associated with the cash-for-work programme. “It gives people a feeling that they’ve got a stake in the recovery. It gives them a bit of money in their pocket.

“We do believe it’s one of those types of activities in an early recovery programme that can reduce social tensions,” he said, adding that it can also enable people to acquire new skills which they can use later.

Second Global Model UN of young people to be held in Malaysia in July

4 February - Some 1,000 of the best university-level students worldwide are expected to take part in a Global Model United Nations Conference in Malaysia in July as the world body seeks to harness the energy and intellect of Earth’s younger citizens in achieving peace and development.

“It is crucial to engage young people,” Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information Kiyoo Akasaka told a news briefing in New York today, announcing the upcoming meeting, which builds on the success of the inaugural Global Model UN Conference in Geneva last August.



Global Model UN conference opening ceremony in Geneva in 2009

“Student leaders are already coming up with solutions to global issues. We want to tap into this synergy... I have no doubt the United Nations will have much to learn from this year’s model United Nations,” he added saying the goal was to have 1,000 participants this year, compared with 350 in Geneva.

Organized by the UN Department of Public Information (DPI) together with the Malaysian Government, the UN Alliance of Civilizations and the Commonwealth Secretariat, the forum will be held in Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian capital, from 28 to 30 July under the theme *Towards an Alliance of Civilizations – Bridging Cultures to Achieve Peace and Development*.

“In response to the continuous and growing number of incidents and conflicts reflecting the clash of cultures around the world, the Global Model UN Summit aims to deliver a road map developed by youth that will move the world closer to a peaceful Alliance of Civilizations, DPI said in a news release.

“The annual global Conference aims to serve as an exemplar of best practices for other Model UN meetings, to raise awareness of the Organization’s role in world affairs and to inspire involvement in global issues by the next generation of leaders.”

Participants will be chosen in transparent, inclusive and gender-balanced process that provides an equal chance for students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, and a quota system has been established for each region (Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Western Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and North America) to ensure wide geographic representation.

They will take on the roles of diplomats, debating international crises, negotiating difficult global issues and drafting and adopting resolutions.

“It will not only be an opportunity for the young people, for the students taking part to reflect through simulation exercises to these challenging issues but also to get an input from them,” UN Alliance of Civilizations Director Marc Scheuer told the briefing.

Model UN student conferences are well established around the world, with an estimated half million or more students from primary school to university in more than 70 countries participating in national versions every year, simulating UN forums such as the General Assembly, Security Council and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), as well as UN agencies, funds and programmes and regional economic commissions.

“Over the years, many ambassadors to the United Nations and UN officials have told me that they too took part in Model UNs in their cities and towns,” Mr. Akasaka said.

“It is our hope that participation in the Global Model UN Conference will inspire young people to become ambassadors, to work for the United Nations or become the experts and leaders that we in the United Nations look to as our partners in the global effort to support peace, development and human rights in countries around the world.”