
FIFTH COMMITTEE

Statement by
Mr. Patrick Carey

6 March 2017
Madame Chair,

I have the honour to introduce the report of the Secretary-General, A/70/737 and Corr.1, on the lessons learned exercise on the coordination activities of the United Nations Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER).

In August 2014, the Presidents of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone wrote to the Secretary-General requesting that the UN lead the coordination of the global effort to stop the Ebola crisis. In response to the Secretary-General’s proposal, the General Assembly, through its resolution 69/1, approved the establishment of the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response, or UNMEER, the first-ever emergency health mission.

UNMEER was deployed in the context of the grave threat that Ebola posed to the region and beyond. The Mission aimed to coordinate and scale up the response in support of nationally-led efforts. Amidst the unprecedented nature and scale of the outbreak decisive action was required to scale up the UN system’s response to the crisis.

Given its unique nature, it was important that lessons learned be captured from the operations of UNMEER. The General Assembly, in its resolution 274B, requested that the Secretary-General provide detailed information on his lessoned learned exercise and the report before you is submitted in that context.

Madame Chair,

The Executive Office of the Secretary-General forged a partnership with the International Peace Institute to carry out this exercise. The lessons learned exercise concluded that the UNMEER deployment was met with mixed results. On the political front, UNMEER’s establishment was viewed to have played a catalytic role in mobilizing the necessary financial and human resources to scale up the response. On the operational front, however, the UNMEER deployment was initially perceived as too static and too focused on the establishment of the Mission apparatus.

The lessons learned exercise found Member States guidance was instrumental in directing the Mission during its lifespan. Important changes were implemented in the ten-month lifespan of the Mission to respond to changing situations on the ground and, from its onset, Member States provided the Secretariat with flexibility. The strategic guidance of Member States, through the monthly reporting to the General Assembly, and the budgetary review processes, provided the necessary iterative feedback to adjust and improve upon the emergency response. In the midst of an unprecedented and rapidly unfolding crisis, this structure proved to be responsive.

The key findings from the lessons learned exercise are broadly organized in the report into three overarching thematic areas: leadership; organization; and operational impact and delivery.
First, allow me to touch upon the elements of the Ebola response that worked best.

The critical role of high-level leadership was emphasized. The direct and sustained high-level engagement across the board – from the General Assembly to the Presidents of the affected countries, to Heads of State, the Secretary-General and the heads of UN entities – was viewed as critical in ensuring that the crisis was appropriately addressed. Leadership was also viewed as one of the greatest contributions that UNMEER made to the Ebola response. In this regard, the Secretary-General’s Special Envoy on Ebola played a critical role in ensuring strategic coherence in the response, facilitating information exchange among responders, mobilizing resources and in providing continuity in the response with the transition from UNMEER after its closure.

Within the UN system, in an evolving crisis demanding a high degree of inter-agency and cross-departmental collaboration, effective executive management was essential. It provided ongoing guidance and direction, providing direct access to Mission leadership and the Special Envoy to the Secretary-General’s office to escalate issues as necessary for immediate decision-making, intervention and advocacy.

The importance of high-level leadership was also reinforced in the widespread validation of the roles played by the Ebola Crisis Managers at country level. The importance of tailoring leadership profiles to the operational requirements of a crisis was also underscored through the lessons learned. This was recognized in the changes of the leadership of UNMEER, which corresponded with distinct phases of the outbreak requiring different approaches.

UNMEER was expected to provide the operational framework to harness and support the integration of critical functions being performed across the UN system on the basis of comparative advantage and mandated responsibility. It was found that UNMEER was considerably more effective when it played a facilitating role, rather than sought to play an implementing role or engage in the technical response. UNMEER’s regional dimension was also found to support its ability to fill critical gaps in the region.

Madame Chair,

The feedback on how UNMEER was structured and its effectiveness in coordinating response partners was less positive. The command and control approach that UNMEER adopted in the first stage of its deployment was faulted. The lessons learned found that the requirement for centralized decision-making and command in an acute outbreak does not negate the benefits of coordination, consultation and collaboration. Once UNMEER reoriented itself to play a greater coordination role, it was better positioned to leverage existing mechanisms, capacities and economies of scale and elicit the buy-in from partners that it required in order to provide operational direction effectively. The feedback received reflected the recognition that command and coordination are not mutually exclusive.
Coordination was found to be most effective when, where possible, existing coordination mechanisms and familiar terminology are utilized or built upon. Creating new mechanisms in the midst of a crisis was not ideal. Where UNMEER ensured inclusion of existing structures and mechanisms, it was best able to provide for integration with other actors already on the ground and facilitate continuity in the response.

There was significant feedback that the UNMEER Accra Headquarters – while necessary at first for practical reasons given the flight bans on the affected countries – contributed to a perceived detachment from operational decision-making in the affected areas.

In the second stage of its deployment, as UNMEER shifted the emphasis on allocation of its resources and capacities away from its Accra Mission headquarters to the affected countries, it became more adept at tailoring its presence to actual operational gaps and needs.

Madame Chair,

There were also some areas that were more nuanced in terms of the feedback, where the reviews were mixed.

As indicated at the outset in the identical letters from the Secretary-General to the General Assembly and Security Council it was intended that UNMEER would be a temporary measure. However, it was found that the rationale and importance of incorporating and communicating a systemic exit strategy from the onset of an operation was not well understood. This understanding must be further inculcated in the UN system to ensure that Mission exit strategies are planned responsibly and do not leave gaps in their transition and handover to UN country teams.

The establishment of UNMEER and implementation of its mandate also presented significant challenges from a mission support perspective, in terms of both the urgency of the operation and safety threats presented by the situation. The lessons learned exercise highlights a number of important areas in which improved outcomes might be possible in future.

UNMEER struggled initially to identify and deploy sufficient personnel with the specialist skill-sets required. In spite of the special measures put in place to facilitate expedited recruitment and deployment, the lessons learned exercise indicated that the Secretariat did not have ready access to enough of the specialized skills needed by the mission. This highlighted the importance of an effective staffing strategy to target recruitment efforts to specific capacity gaps based on a comparative advantage assessment.

Given the impact of the outbreak on national systems, insufficient capacities to support in-mission medical treatment or medical evacuation, whether related to the Ebola crisis or other health requirements, was also a critical concern that impacted the deployment of personnel. Movement of staff and other capacities within the affected area to ensure they were available where most needed
was also a concern. In this context, air operations were critical enabler, not only for UNMEER, but also for other actors within the United Nations system.

The General Assembly will also be aware that the Board of Auditors is currently completing an audit of UNMEER's resources at the request of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions. The Secretariat is cooperating fully with the ongoing inquiries, and I am confident that the audit will provide the assurances sought by the Assembly with regard to the Mission's use of resources and the final wind-down of its operations.

Madame Chair,

UNMEER was a unique solution to an unprecedented crisis, created to galvanize and align all response partners with unity of purpose, as well as provide the logistics backbone and crisis management capacity needed to scale up the UN system’s response in support of the affected governments.

While the findings of the lessons learned exercise concluded that the structure of the Mission and the implementation of its mandate could have been improved upon, the exercise determined that there was support for the concept of the Mission and the strategic benefits that it brought to the response in terms of leadership, facilitation, logistics support and the availability of assessed funding. The lessons learned exercise found that there would be support, in the future, for a lighter and more streamlined model that leverages, to a greater degree, existing capacities and coordination mechanisms, while deploying the benefits that a “Mission” model yields in support of emergency response.

The key findings of the exercise represent a critical analysis that should not be taken to detract from the individual and collective efforts of all involved in the response. Undertaking a reflective and constructive review of our system-wide intervention does not detract from the heroic contributions and shared commitment of UN entities and personnel who heeded the call to action, but supports us in collectively gaining the understanding required to more effectively address possible future crisis.

Thank you, Madame Chair.