

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE
IASC WEEKLY MEETING

Summary Note

25 July 2007
Geneva

I Zimbabwe - OCHA Support to the Contingency Planning Process

Mr. Dusan Zupka (OCHA), Humanitarian Affairs Officer (Overall Supervision and Coordination), Emergency Preparedness Section, Office of the Director

Mr. Zupka briefed participants on his latest mission to Zimbabwe, where he assisted the joint OCHA-WVI workshop on contingency planning on 11 July 2007.

The humanitarian context in Zimbabwe is, according to Mr. Zupka, a combination of (i) acute humanitarian needs deriving from food insecurity, displacements and evictions from agricultural land and mining sites, and (ii) more protracted, chronic vulnerabilities, such as lack of access to basic social services, insufficient agricultural outputs and an HIV/AIDS prevalence rate of 20% of the population. Adding to this is the increasing economic decline, growing unemployment rates, hyper-inflation and migrations, not to mention the intensified political tensions and instability.

From a humanitarian perspective food is the key concern – and this is in a country that was able to produce sufficient food to cover the needs of its own population in 2006 – and, according to WFP, minimum USD 1.4 million will be needed for food aid distributions in 2007. Other concerns include water and sanitation (less than 60% have access to safe water supplies and sanitation facilities are very basic, when available), lack of appropriate shelter, natural disasters (floods and draught) and health related (insufficient staff in the health sector and drug shortages).

Restriction on access to many areas is increasingly becoming a problem and it prevents the humanitarian community from obtaining an adequate picture of the humanitarian situation. Moreover, the deterioration of the political environment has in the last couple of weeks resulted in international NGOs experiencing difficulties in terms of renewing their work permits and one staff member has even been arrested as his work permit had expired.

With regards to the contingency planning workshop, it was well attended by 70 participants, including 28 NGOs, 10 UN agencies, donors and the Red Cross, and Mr. Zupka expressed satisfaction with the outcomes, as well as with the broad participation. The participation was, however, with the exception of the Government, as it currently is not deemed possible to engage with the national authorities in this regard. However, the UN Country Team envisions reaching out to the Government at a later stage.

At the work shop worse case scenarios and early warning considerations were identified for the period of July 2007 to July 2008. These include food insecurity, further displacements of farmers and mine workers, floods, drought (4-5 million), cholera/malaria (6-20% of the population), HIV/AIDS (700.000 vulnerable), limited access and potential increase in the political unrest in relation to the elections scheduled for April/May 2008.

While the workshop was a success, Mr. Zupka underlined that it never was the intention to finalise the contingency plan at the work shop. Instead an action plan was agreed upon and a contingency planning technical group was established with the purpose of ensuring a higher level of local ownership and commitment. The technical group, which consists of five UN agencies, five national/international NGOs, IFRC and two donor countries, is expected to finalise the contingency plan by end September 2007.

Participants expressed recognition of the increasing operational constraints, as well as restrictions in terms of communication, including computer communication being monitored and telephones being tapped.

With regard to the health situation a participant stressed that while the health sector in several ways is well functioning, it suffers significantly from understaffing. Vacancy rates, for instance, amount to 75% (senior management), 47% (nurses), 57% (doctors) and 58 % (pharmacists). Other participants expressed concerns as to the situation of the IDPs and returnees from South Africa. The issue of HIV/AIDS was equally central to the discussion, and the cross boarder movements to South Africa were also raised as a concern in this regard, as approximately 40% of the returnees are estimated to be HIV infected.

II OPT - An Update on the Humanitarian Situation

Mr. Matthias Burchard (UNRWA), Head, UNRWA Representative Office, Geneva

Mr. Burchard briefed participants on recent developments in the OPT with focus on the economic, food and security situation.

With regard to the economic situation, increasing unemployment and poverty remain key concerns. World Bank figures estimate an unemployment rate of 44% in Gaza, which means that 66,000 people have been laid-off work since June 2007. At this point only Gazans employed by NGOs and the UN agencies are expected to receive salaries. In the West Bank, the unemployment rate was at 24.3% in the first quarter of 2007.

The consequences of the declining economy are far reaching: The private sector risks bankruptcy, market relationships are diminishing and sustainable development opportunities are erasing. The number of those living below the official poverty line has risen further and it is estimated that 2/3 (or 1 million) of the Palestinian population in Gaza currently are living below the poverty line. In terms of the health situation, lack of financial means forces the Palestinians to resort to traditional healers. In addition, the long lasting strike of PA health workers has resulted in up to 200 patients per doctor a day in UNRWA and World Bank clinics.

Approximately 36,000 households have directly benefited from allowances granted under Window III of the Temporary International Mechanism (TIM), whose mandate was recently renewed up to 30 September 2007. In addition, Window I provides supplies and coverage of health care running costs, and Window II pays for electricity and fuel.

Concerning the food situation, Mr. Burchard explained that food assistance is being provided to around 610,000 Palestinian refugees in the West Bank by UNRWA, while the WFP is taking care of the non-refugees. In Gaza, 1.1 million out of the 1.4 million big population depends on food assistance from UNRWA and WFP. There is no starvation, but the vast majority of the population is barely subsisting on the UN food rations.

On security related issues, Mr. Burchard stressed that the security situation in Gaza has improved significantly, partly due to the termination of the widespread tensions between Fatah

and Hamas security forces and partly due to the firm action by Hamas preventing private use of firearms. The situation in the West Bank has not affected UNRWA operations so far, but Mr. Burchard noted that endemic violence, searches, arrests and demolition of houses and infrastructure remain key concerns, just as he expressed concern with regard to UNRWA staff on the ground, who increasingly experience threats and violent reactions in the accomplishment of their daily tasks.

Access to those in need has been further troubled by the Israeli Government's attempts to halt the transshipment of goods (apart from essential goods such as food and medicine supplies) to the Gaza Strip. Only few and far too small crossings remain open, and militant factions in Gaza, including Hamas, have not helped matters by permitting sporadic attacks on these crossing points. At the West Bank the number of checkpoints (539 as of 24 July 2007) and flying checkpoints (150 as of 24 July 2007) remain high, while the barrier construction is continuing with 408 km completed out of the total 722 km.

Regarding the potential role out of the cluster approach, Mr. Burchard stressed, as earlier emphasised by Mr. Kevin Kennedy (UN Coordinator for Humanitarian and Development Activities in the OPT) at the IASC Weekly meeting in May 2007, that there already exist well established coordination mechanisms in the OPT. Consequently, there are concerns that the implementation of the cluster approach may damage already well functioning structures. Another participant noted that as the cluster approach to a very high degree is about filling gaps in the humanitarian response, protection in many ways remains unaddressed. This was recognised by Mr. Burchard, who explained that efforts are currently being undertaken by OHCHR in order to set up a Protection Group covering the OPT and Lebanon. The purpose of the Protection Group is to assess how protection issues better can be addressed through monitoring and through bringing together already available, but fragmented, information on non-compliance with international law in the OPT and Lebanon.

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