

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

"Crisis, Conflict and Disability: Ensuring Equality"

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(As delivered)

Your Highness, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

The Shafallah Center for Children with Special Needs is a true centre of excellence, and the theme of this fifth Shafallah Forum—the challenges faced by people with disabilities during conflict and natural disasters—is a crucial issue, which is starting to gain the recognition it deserves. And the One Billion Strong campaign is an important element of this.

I thank Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser for making this debate possible, and for her work for the less fortunate.

I am very pleased to be back here in Doha, only a few weeks since my last visit. Qatar is becoming a global leader in humanitarian affairs – offering its generosity and fresh thinking in the way that we seek to resolve crises around the world. Part of that thinking is on the need to create a more inclusive and equitable humanitarian system, building on the range of skills, talent and expertise at our disposal.

Qatari non-governmental organizations have played a crucial role in responding to many emergencies – and my organization, OCHA, is committed to working more closely with them. This is not just about creating a truly global humanitarian system, it is also about recognizing that our response needs to be context specific and, wherever possible, person specific.

As the UN's Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, and Emergency Relief Coordinator, my job is to make sure that when crisis hits, everyone gets what they need, when they need it.

During emergencies, organizations from around the world want to help. But without proper mechanisms to assess, monitor and coordinate, there is a risk of duplication.

This is especially true for people with disabilities, who may find it physically or mentally difficult to get the access they need to highlight their particular concerns.

The challenges facing people with disabilities in conflict and natural disaster rarely make the headlines.

As the invitation to this forum testifies, people with disabilities are often the last to get the help they need during conflict and disasters. And the films we saw this morning were a poignant reminder that behind every statistic there is a person—a potential human tragedy.

We have a clear moral obligation to address this situation.

Which goes way beyond our legal obligation.

As we saw and heard so clearly this morning, poverty, lack of development, conflict and disaster all have an impact. Humanitarian needs are set to grow, which means that the needs of people with disabilities will also grow.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Article 11, which recently came into force, explicitly states that:

“States’ Parties shall take... all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters.”

The challenge we face today is to move beyond these words, and put them into practice.

Two recent emergencies illustrate the importance of our evolving approach.

In July last year, when the food crisis in the Horn of Africa came to global attention, a group of organizations—including CBM, Handicap International and the Kenya Red Cross Society—issued a fact sheet to put the issue of people with disabilities higher on the agenda.

It warned that people with disabilities, and their families, often found it more difficult to access emergency response services “due to difficulties in mobility, hearing, seeing and understanding.”

It also said that children and women with disabilities were particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, and could be neglected as families made difficult decisions on the use of scarce food resources; that the 90 per cent of children with disabilities who were not in school ran a serious risk of missing out on school nutrition programmes, or were at greater risk.

To address this, these aid agencies called for specialized interventions—such as mobility and counselling services—as well as measures to ensure people with disabilities have equal access to mainstream services.

Whereas organizations might once have resisted special treatment for specific groups, today they recognize the need for more tailored solutions and are seeking advice on how to provide them.

[“We can feel the openness of aid actors to this issue,” one humanitarian worker told us.]

In December last year, parts of Mindanao, in the Philippines, were struck by a devastating flash flood. Some people described it as an inland tsunami.

Hundreds of thousands of people were displaced, and a massive relief effort was launched.

Aid agencies working with people with disabilities quickly did an assessment of the situation. They found that only 120 of at least 1,256 people with disabilities in one hard-hit area had found shelter in evacuation centres. Ten per cent. If that was the case of any other community, there would be outrage.

What's more, they found that those who did reach the evacuation centres were often excluded, pushed aside by the crowd and unable to queue for relief—whether due to lack of access, or because they were too nervous or too weak.

Today, there are widespread concerns over a lack of hygiene and sanitation in many refugee and other situations, but especially so for people with disabilities. Minor health concerns can quickly become life threatening.

Aid workers say it took two to three weeks for these concerns to attract wider attention. In the Philippines, aid agencies are now creating an information hub for disability needs. And there are calls for organizations to put these concerns at the centre of their response.

As humanitarian workers, we must find ways to meet everyone's needs, and to ensure all communities take part in the design and monitoring of our work. We have to be accountable.

This has not happened fast enough. But the fact that it happened in the Philippines, within a month of the crisis, marks some progress. In previous disasters, it might not have happened at all.

That is why I believe that this is a moment to seize the initiative. To build on those examples.

Across the world, the case is being made as more and more emergency responders recognize the particular needs of people with disabilities, and accept that the needs of people with disabilities needs to be integrated into our thinking. It is not an add-on.

Our challenge is to build on this recognition, and translate it into reality.

I look forward to us taking the ideas from this conference and implementing them.

Thank you.