

PRESS STATEMENT FOR UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL
VALERIE AMOS
REPUBLIC OF KOREA, 24 OCTOBER 2011

Good afternoon everyone, and thank you for coming.

I have been traveling for almost two weeks in the region, in China, DPRK, and now in South Korea. I am very pleased to be here and want to take this opportunity to thank the Government for its warm reception.

At the start of my trip, I had the chance to meet emergency responders from throughout Asia at the fourth regional humanitarian partnership meeting in Shanghai, including colleagues from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs here who deal with humanitarian issues. I have very much enjoyed building on those discussions here in Seoul.

The message has been clear. The people and governments of Asia are world leaders in responding to emergencies, and are taking their place at the forefront of dealing with disasters - not only at home, but around the world.

The Republic of Korea is playing a particularly constructive role in this movement, and we in the United Nations are grateful for your support. Support not just from the Government but also through increasingly active non-governmental partners - the further development of which I warmly encourage.

This month, as you have probably heard, the seven billionth person will be born. The planet she or he will come to know is in many ways richer, more vibrant, and more interconnected than any other time in history.

But it also faces extreme challenges. Climate change, rising prices, urbanization and environmental degradation are leading to bigger disasters, affecting more people, than ever before.

If we are to meet these challenges, we must create a genuinely global humanitarian community. We need to pool our funds in a common system, agree priorities, and coordinate all of our work, to save lives and reduce suffering.

Across Asia we are seeing increasing participation in international humanitarian affairs. The Republic of Korea – a country which has risen so far in so little time – is already playing an essential role in this evolving system and we look forward to intensified engagement, increasing influence in shaping the humanitarian system of the future, and renewed commitment to provide political, moral and financial support to that system.

Over recent years South Korea has steadily increased its overseas aid budget, and has pledged to double its current level of assistance by 2015. This September, for example, Korea pledged US\$ 50 million to help people overcome a devastating drought and famine in the Horn of Africa – including US\$ 10 million for badly needed humanitarian assistance. This generosity is deeply appreciated in the United Nations, and by people around the world.

Korea has also provided important funding to strengthen humanitarian coordination, which is so essential to making sure that people get what they need, when they need it. This is money well spent, and is saving many lives.

Korea's extraordinary economic progress over recent decades also makes it particularly well-placed to contribute to our policy debate - to help us understand not only the problems of chronic poverty, but also how to overcome them.

As we strengthen our humanitarian system, I very much look forward to sharing ideas and learning from Korea, its Government and people; to understand how better to turn crisis into opportunity, and build a more prosperous world.

Before I take questions, let me say a few words about the DPRK.

I recently completed a five-day mission, where I met with Government officials, UN agencies, NGOs, and donors in Pyongyang, as well as visiting the field in South Hamgyong and Kangwon provinces to see some of the challenges on the ground. I went to two hospitals, an orphanage, a communal farm, and a local market, where I spoke to health workers, mothers, local officials, and aid workers.

I went because I was extremely concerned that 6 million people in DPRK urgently need food aid – and the outside world is not giving enough.

Rations provided via the Public Distribution System (PDS) have fallen from 400 to 200 grammes per person per day, and people are surviving on maize, rice if they are lucky, and cabbage. This has led to terrible levels of malnutrition, particularly among children.

In the north, almost one in two children are chronically malnourished. One nurse I met at the pediatric hospital in Hamhung told me that the number of malnourished children coming to her hospital had increased 50 per cent since last year.

The reasons, as you well know, are complicated. A lot more needs to be done to address the underlying causes. But I also saw that where aid is getting through, it is making a real difference. I am committed to finding ways to send more.

We need to remember that the most vulnerable people in DPRK are victims of a situation over which they have no control. They are suffering through no fault of their own.

We cannot turn our backs on them, especially at this moment of extreme need.

Thank you again for coming, and I look forward to hearing your questions.