



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi, Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations in Geneva, at the Humanitarian Affairs Segment of the U.N. Economic and Social Council
Geneva, 20 July 2009

Madame President,

1. Natural and man-made disasters affect millions of persons each year and no region of the world is exempted. In particular, chronic armed conflicts have devastated societies in various corners of the globe, with innumerable civilian victims. The Holy See, therefore, welcomes the present humanitarian dialogue as an opportunity to yet again highlight the continued challenges and the need for an effective and coherent globalized response, guided by sound policy directives such as solidarity and the promotion of the inherent dignity of all. In this way, the right of persons, their families and communities to humanitarian assistance, and of care providers to unhindered access to these people in need of basic social, physical and spiritual attention, acquires a solid foundation and a motivation for action. While, for example, the year 2008 saw a decline in the number of refugees, still over 10 million men, women and children continue to live in refugee camps and 26 million remain internally displaced due to past and recent conflicts, insecurity and persecution. Asylum-seekers, irregular migrants, uprooted people looking for survival, and victims of natural disasters and climate change, are confined in hundreds of detention centers and makeshift camps. Although far from the media spotlight, these untenable situations wreak an immeasurable physical, mental, emotional and spiritual pain and lead to the breaking of the social fabric, destruction of families and communities, jeopardizing reconciliation, and threaten the lives of thousands of innocent civilians.

2. The primary responsibility of protecting the lives of civilians lies first and foremost with the national authorities and parties engaged in an armed conflict. While the international community strives to prevent the eruption of conflicts, it is imperative that all parties recognize their responsibility for

protecting the lives of civilians in areas under their jurisdiction or control and comply with and fully respect the rules and principles of international humanitarian law, among them, those related to the protection of humanitarian personnel and the unimpeded access to people in need. Further, in areas of natural disasters, States must work to promote, and allow access to, life-saving measures without using them for political control or to condition a political guarantee of impunity for violation of human rights. The common good should be the guiding principle and the international humanitarian law should be implemented in all circumstances and without any condition.

3. At the same time, the international community remains a vital and indispensable actor in assisting the national authorities to respond to crises and, where these are unable to do so, it is called to provide access to emergency and life-saving regional and international actors. Naturally, in coordinating this internationalized response, the United Nations position places it in a unique role, with unique responsibilities to promote coordination and coherence for effective action and responsible management of available resources while preserving the basic humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and humanity. Besides, by respecting subsidiarity and the ability of local groups and individuals, this coordination can better identify and implement a humanitarian strategy that would reach the people most in need. It is these local organizations, often faith-based, present on the ground before disaster strikes, that will be the ones present long after the international community has directed its focus of attention onto other crises. The Holy See Delegation, therefore, stresses the essential role of the civil society in situations of emergency and the need for policies to be adopted in a way which recognizes their long-term contribution and enables their capacity to respond to the needs of all.

4. New and old challenges have undermined the capacity and effectiveness of humanitarian actors to respond and provide assistance to millions of victims. The food crisis has led to a decrease in food distribution in famine areas, in camps and detention centers; the energy crises have added drastically to the cost of providing aid over long distances; and now the global economic crisis risks reducing funding to public and civil society, humanitarian agencies and organizations. The Holy See notes with appreciation that many States continue with generosity to shoulder the responsibility to assist, economic crisis notwithstanding. Failure to remain in

solidarity with and provide for people in humanitarian crises during this difficult time will lead only to social and political instability which undermines society and its ability to come together and resolve the economic crisis.

Madam President,

5. My Delegation further calls on national authorities and groups in armed conflict to respect the rules of international humanitarian law, in particular the applicable Geneva Conventions and its optional protocols. The continued sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls within and around refugee camps violates all standards of international law and leads to the emotional, physical and mental devastation of these women which cannot be justified under any circumstances. Further, greater efforts must be made to provide for and ensure access to prisoners of war and others placed in various forms of detention. Deprivation of freedom, of the right to work, to family reunion, to education and personal development, among other human rights, cannot be simply discarded in emergencies. Camps and detention centers are meant to be temporary provisions and places where access is open and the dignity of persons remains a priority. With the cooperation of all actors, the international humanitarian community will retain the freedom to act in accordance with its mandates and principles, which should not be compromised by government interference.

6. The Holy See remains committed to addressing the needs of all individuals affected by humanitarian and man-made crises regardless of ethnicity and religious creed. Through its many institutions, it remains deeply involved in non partisan humanitarian assistance and looks forward to sharing its best practices and ideas with other stakeholders. Guiding principles of assistance both in natural and human-made disasters need to be implemented but before all, we must put at the center of all our interventions the person and her material, psychological and spiritual needs.