Open Session of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union on its annual meeting on humanitarian action in Africa

Remarks by Dr. Hameed Nuru, Director of the World Food Programme African Union Global Office and Representative to the African Union and Economic Commission for Africa

17 May 2023

Your Excellency, Ambassador Rebecca Amuge Otengo, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Uganda to Ethiopia, Djibouti and the African Union and Chairperson of the Peace and Security Council for the month of May,

Your Excellency, Ambassador Bankole Adeoye, African Union Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security,

Excellencies, members of the Peace and Security Council,

Distinguished guests, ladies, and gentlemen

I would like to start by thanking the AU Peace and Security Council Chair for the month of May, the Republic of Uganda, for the invitation. WFP greatly welcomes the PSC’s decision to have a focused discussion on humanitarian action in Africa.

This is a critical and timely subject. Considering WFP’s goal of combating hunger and improving food security in the poorest countries, my address will focus on the growing concern over food insecurity, and the resultant humanitarian crisis in the continent.

Your Excellencies,

As vulnerable and food insecure communities on the continent are struggling with conflicts, climate change impacts, food price inflation and record numbers of displacement, development gains are being reversed at a faster rate than we have ever seen or recorded.

The 2023 UN Global Humanitarian Overview estimates that a record 351 million people worldwide will need humanitarian assistance and protection – a significant increase from 274 million people at the beginning of 2022. Of the 351 million food insecure people, almost half are in Africa. And more than 80 percent of the record 155 million Africans facing acute food insecurity, are in conflict-affected countries underscoring that conflict continues to be the primary driver of Africa’s food crisis. And 8 of the top 10 African countries experiencing acute food insecurity are facing conflict.

For instance, food insecurity is on track to reach a 10-year high in West and Central Africa. A new study by the United Nations shows a worrisome rise in hunger in coastal countries, while acute hunger is set to reach catastrophic levels in conflict-affected parts of Burkina Faso and Mali where access to humanitarian assistance is
limited. Between 2019 and 2023, security incidents have increased by 79 percent in the region leading to massive population displacement and disrupting access to farming land, fodder, and essential social services. WFP is increasingly concerned about a spillover of the humanitarian crisis into coastal countries – particularly Togo and other countries in the Gulf of Guinea.

Meanwhile, over 15 million people in Sudan were facing severe food insecurity before the conflict erupted. Now, food and fuel prices have skyrocketed as cash and basic supplies are running out in the country. Early reports indicate that food prices have already doubled since the start of the conflict. Sudanese people and refugees from South Sudan who were based in the country prior to this crisis are on the move with some 30,000 people reported to have crossed into Chad, more than 40,000 into Egypt, and more than 30,000 people have crossed the border into South Sudan. WFP is concerned about the food security situation in neighbouring countries, many of which are already dealing with multiple crises of their own.

Your Excellencies, ladies, and gentlemen,

The crisis in Africa requires a response that is at the same time Humanitarian, Pro-development and unconditional Peace-oriented.

Humanitarian actors play a critical role in providing assistance. As the world’s largest humanitarian organization, the World Food Programme (WFP) is among the first on the scene in an emergency, providing food and other assistance to people affected thereby saving lives. At the same time, we keep a sharp focus on sustainable development, providing governments with the support and skills to manage food security in the long term thereby changing lives. WFP reached over 78.6 million lives in Africa in 2022 alone. We have about 12,400 dedicated staff in 46 AU member states, where we spend over US$ 6.7 billion annually.

Our focus is also on emergency preparedness, working with partners to provide early warning and helping communities lessen the impact of looming disasters. On any given time, WFP has up to 5,600 trucks, 30 ships and 100 planes on the move, providing humanitarian action.

Your Excellencies,

WFP and its partners remain committed and prepared to scale up operations and provide life-saving assistance to people in need throughout the continent, despite the challenging and dangerous operational environment on the ground.

We must act now to stop AND reverse this unprecedented level of need to save lives and invest in solutions that secure stability and peace for all, as we continue to see people all over the continent facing rising hunger, food insecurity and poverty.

Given the central role of conflict in Africa’s food insecurity crisis, we recognize that we cannot do it alone. We look to the Peace and Security Council to help us resolve the causes that start conflicts, fuel conflicts and resolve conflicts all of which erode/destroy in the continent’s development process.
This would allow humanitarian actors to scale up urgent life- and livelihood-saving operations and to deliver better-integrated humanitarian and development responses that address the multiple drivers of acute food insecurity.

Your Excellencies,

We invite all PSC members to show the leadership that the continent urgently needs right now.

I thank the members of the Peace and Security Council for making this responsibility your own -- and I thank you once again for inviting me to speak today.

Thank you.