

# **7<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference for Effective Partnership and Information Sharing for Better Humanitarian Action**

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## **Opening Remarks**

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honour to be among you here today,

you who have dedicated your time and your efforts to humanitarian work,

I am also honoured to be representing relief and humanitarian concerns of the League of Arab States at this 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference for Effective Partnership and Information Sharing for Better Humanitarian Action.

For decades, the League of Arab States, through its leadership, its Member States and its representatives and staff, have been dealing with humanitarian crises across our region.

Whether famines, droughts, poverty, natural disasters, civil strife or cross boarder conflicts, we have been present with humanitarian, medical, financial and food aid.

However, one has to admit that the current crisis the world is facing today has proven to be the most challenging and complex that the League and many other organizations have had to deal with on many levels.

The political complexities notwithstanding—there are also logistical complexities that have to be addressed in terms of the safe passage of aid and relief personnel and materials; challenges in raising funds and consolidating resources to make the greatest impact and benefit the largest numbers.

Additionally, our greatest challenge has been the sheer numbers of people affected by these current crises which cut across the geography of the Arab world.

From Somalia, to Yemen, to Libya, to Sudan, from Syria to Iraq,

we have had to divide and distribute our humanitarian and relief efforts to those internally displaced within their own borders.

Add to that:

- Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey;
- Yemeni refugees in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan;
- Sudanese refugees in Egypt and other neighbouring countries
- Somali refugees in Ethiopia and Kenya;
- Libyans in Egypt, Tunisia and Chad;
- Iraqis who have sought refuge in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan;

and the complexities multiply again at all levels. Between providing for the needs of the refugees themselves and supporting the host countries to which they have fled, we have been spread very thin indeed.

Up until the end of last year, 2015, the number of people forced to flee their homes, their towns, villages, and ultimately their countries had reached 20 million—This is almost one year ago and in the intervening months there has been no improvement in the general situation.

Most of those 20 million constitute families and a great many include elderly members or persons with disabilities, and nearly half are children.

The needs are enormous and varied—from serious and urgent medical needs to chronic medical care; from basic needs of food and shelter to education and psychosocial rehabilitation.

It is this growing challenge and the enormity of the task of dealing with it that prompted the League of Arab States to establish a department to respond to crises and disaster. One of the outcomes of the 2014 Arab Summit was developing and establishing the mechanisms to coordinate humanitarian aid.

The aim was to secure regional and international partnerships and to work in collaboration and cooperation with organizations in the field. This has proved to a valuable experience both at the planning and the implementation levels.

One would ask, so why not get on with the work you are doing?

Why attend another conference?

And why have a 7<sup>th</sup> conference?

Didn't we learn enough about what needs to be done from the first six conferences?

In fact, we did learn a great deal.

And we are still learning. And through this learning and this exchange, we are able to improve our responses and refine our methods.

Sadly the crisis is escalating in size and scope. Our efforts, whether they are immediate relief, short term aid, or long term development are constantly trying to catch up with the latest and most urgent needs.

We attend these conferences because they represent one of the ways in which we exercise our humanity by alleviating the suffering and ameliorating the conditions under which victims of inhumanity are living.

We recognize that it is not in our power to stop wars, to end slaughter, or to negotiate peaceful resolutions. But our strength lies in coming together, joining our efforts to be more effective in aiding survivors and creating safe havens for refugees and to provide them with basic needs and help them to preserve their dignity.

One of the valuable lessons we have learned over the past few years, is that with:

- added coordination;
- additional collaboration;
- effective cooperation;
- shared knowledge and information;
- strategic action and communication;
- expertise-based division of responsibilities;
- creation of new partnerships

we are able to provide more effective and efficient services needed, making a greater impact and covering as many needs as possible.

These annual meetings provide us with opportunity to regroup, review, share and evaluate what we have achieved and the effectiveness of our actions; and to seek relevant partnerships and meet new goals.

Today's conference has the additional impetus of the World Humanitarian Summit that took place in Turkey earlier this year, as an initiative of UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon.

The Summit aimed at creating the momentum for a necessary shift from single-focus humanitarian response to multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary action.

This includes collaboration of faith-based and religious humanitarian organizations. These organizations have worked successfully, although independently of the global effort, to deliver humanitarian aid and basic needs to refugees across the region.

At this stage, there is a need to expand the role of these organizations and deepen the collaboration in order to widen the scope of services delivered.

One of the challenges identified by LAS in relation to humanitarian work has been difficulties associated with social customs and traditional cultural norms. Joining efforts with faith-based humanitarian organizations could prove invaluable as they are often part of the communities they work in and are trusted and accessible to them.

Many of the Arab League's responses to the humanitarian crisis in the past have centered on emergency medical aid or the provision of medical equipments and medical services. This has been the case in Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen.

However in the last few years, there has been a concerted effort to combine medical emergency aid with long term development programs and projects.

One example is the educational project for children and young adults in crisis situation implemented in collaboration with Save the Children in Al Zaatari Syrian refugee camp in Jordan. A secure play area and safe learning environment for children was established to provide them with education, entertainment and psychosocial rehabilitation.

This is a project we are learning from in order to repeat and improve in other refugee camps as well.

Another project being discussed with various partners is a sports initiative to provide safe and appropriate play areas, training, coaching, and necessary equipment for children and

young adults to play football. One of the challenges this projects faces is the inclusions of girls who are just as keen and interested in playing but are often hindered by social and traditional customs.

In the short term, the project aims at providing children and youth with a healthy physical outlet for their energy and frustrations build their confidence and give them a sense of purpose.

The long-term goal is to expand to other sports activities and ultimately identify potentially gifted athletes and help them to develop their talents and skills.

This meeting provides us with the time and space to interact with partners and explore potential partnerships, and opportunity to informally assess the impact of the work we are doing on the lives of the people we are helping.

But this does not constitute a formal monitoring and evaluation of the mechanisms, activities or effectiveness of our responses.

One of the side events I participated in at the World Humanitarian Summit was to discuss establishing an Arab Humanity Council. The organizers of the event presented basic ideas for the core principles of the Council.

These included:

- protection of civilians in times of conflict;
- ensuring adherence to international humanitarian and human rights law in conflict situations;
- accountability for violations of these laws;
- ensuring humanitarian access to populations in need of assistance

As well as basic characteristics of the Council, including:

- ensuring the independence of the Council
- moral leadership
- active civil society representatives working at the grass-roots level
- business, media, academia, religious institutions, civil society, sports and cultural icons

I am not sure whether it is my failure to follow up on what happened or whether the idea remains in the planning stages.

However, I believe a Council such as this, with cooperation of international relief and humanitarian aid organizations , could be mandated to assess, monitor, evaluate our humanitarian actions in the region.

By ensuring a qualified and diversified membership and developing the appropriate mechanism and necessary criteria, such a Council could function to ensure that we as humanitarian aid organization are meeting are expected goals; are using our funding effectively; are providing the suitable type of aid where it is needed.

I believe this may be an idea worth exploring.

I am confident that there will be many other ideas worth exploring and experiences worth sharing over these days, and I look forward to the positive impact we will make on the ground.

Finally, allow me, within the context of this partnership, to invite you all—government representatives; humanitarian and charitable organization at the international, regional or local level, to intensify collaborations with the League to provide additional aid and creative initiatives to alleviate humanitarian suffering.

In closing, a final to all of us: let us think together and try to develop the appropriate mechanisms that could influence the political decision making—rather than work only to mitigate their results.