

“I think People Are Wrong About Haiti”

Interview with **Valerie Amos**, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator of the United Nations, on the role of the UN’s humanitarian arm in Pakistan, Japan, and Haiti and on the difficulties in the coordination and funding of humanitarian assistance.

Berlin, 23 February 2011*

Question: Ms. Amos, since September 2010, you have served as Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator of the United Nations. In 2010, the world witnessed two mega disasters: the earthquake in Haiti in January, and the flood in Pakistan in July/August. In March this year Japan was hit by a threefold disaster, an earthquake, a tsunami and nuclear hazards. What does the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) do in the event of such mega disasters?

Amos: In terms of how do we prepare for these sorts of things: There are countries around the world where you would expect heavy rainfall or a hurricane. Pakistan is one of those countries. So the rains came—which were expected—but what was not expected was that they did not stop, which caused major flooding. Various flood barriers came down and the flood spread over a significant part of the country, affecting some 20 million people. This was on top of humanitarian needs in Pakistan as a result of internal conflict a couple of years ago. So you have people who are internally displaced and who are already being dealt with as part of an emergency response. And then Pakistan is also home to a significant number of refugees from Afghanistan. In short: it is a country that is dealing with a number of different issues and consequences.

Has Japan asked OCHA for help after the earthquake and tsunami of 11 March 2011?

OCHA quickly offered to send in an UNDAC team (United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination team). When it went, it supplemented the enormous efforts of the Government of Japan in helping coordinate urban search and rescue teams and prioritizing offers of international assistance.

How do you decide what to do first? How do you get all the actors together?

In Pakistan we have an office. But there were some parts of the country where we did not have people operating. One of the first things we needed to do was to make

sure that we got people out to different areas of the country. What they tried to do was to make sure that the needs of the population are identified: is it food, medicine or shelter? Do people need access to water? Do they need sanitation? Then there are partner organizations that we work with which lead in those different sectors. That is called the cluster approach, in which an agency leads a given sector and brings together all of the people who are working in that sector to identify the needs and responsibilities.

Who decides in the end?

This is decided at the country level and the Humanitarian Coordinator there leads the effort.

How is the situation in Japan?

Japan is a very different kind of emergency, in that the Government has high caliber capacity to respond to the needs and to coordinate. However, in Japan, as I noted, UNDAC worked with the Government to help coordinate search and rescue and to prioritize offers of international assistance.

The situation in Haiti today, one year after the devastating earthquake, is not as good as one would expect. In addition to that there was a cholera outbreak that took the lives of at least 4,000 people. What did the UN do in order to help the Haitians?

I think people are wrong about Haiti. They forget that in Haiti before the earthquake 40 per cent of the population did not have access to water and sanitation; 50 per cent did not have access to health care. So, before the earthquake you were dealing with a country where in the capital, Port-au-Prince, the majority of the people were living in slum conditions.

You then had an earthquake which obviously killed a huge number of people and caused significant trauma across the population. The country lost one-third of the civil servants, which really weakened institutional capacity. Despite that, within six weeks the UN and its partner international organizations had managed to begin housing people in camps, as well as providing food, water, health care, and educational assistance. Last year there were 1.5 million people housed in camps. That number has now been brought down to 800,000. We are still educating 2.2 million children; we are still feeding some of the most vulnerable people every month.

How long do you need to continue with this?

The real difficulty in Haiti is how to move from short-term emergency relief to building a society in which people have access to work, in which people live in more permanent shelter. These are huge development challenges where you need to be partnering with the government which has very clear priorities. Of course, the political situation in Haiti is still not resolved. They are still waiting for run-off elections. I think it is really important to distinguish between the impact that we have had on the emergency situation and the need to phase out of that emergency situation into one where we are supporting the longer-term development of a country. But Haiti is an extremely complex operation environment and people need to understand that.

Is it always the case that in an emergency situation the UN is the first to be asked to assist?

It entirely depends. If you have a situation where there is a major national disaster as in New Zealand right now, Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States have all sent in teams to assist the government of New Zealand. They have not asked for international support through the United Nations system because they have a quite developed system themselves.

In other situations a government may decide in the first couple of days if it thinks it can handle it alone. When it cannot, it will ask for international help. This is where we will get into action.

In the situation where a disaster is so huge and problematic as in the case of Haiti, and things are quite fragile, people just say "Help!". And because Haiti is so close to the United States and the US was able to bring in support with the military they initially took the lead in terms of logistics and, for instance, in setting up the airport.

But the UN was also there. We have a system where we immediately will dispatch teams to support the government. We dispatch teams that help to assess what the needs are on the ground. They report back to us so that we will be able to feed the information through to partner organizations. This happens immediately.

Within six weeks we were feeding millions of people, because it takes a while to set up the systems and structures that would allow you to feed so many people. And, of course, you have to bring the people in. Remember that more than one hundred UN staff in Haiti died. Thus we had to bring new people in to set up the systems.

How difficult is it to coordinate the UN agencies with their own executive boards and budgets? How do you tell them, go here and go there?

Coordination is never easy. We have the responsibility for coordination but we do not have the authority to tell people what to do. We have to demonstrate that coordination is effective and that it makes a difference. I think we all recognize that in a crisis situation everybody just running around, doing their own thing is not going to be effective. You need proper coordination in terms of bringing people together and identifying the needs. There are some operating procedures that have been developed that the humanitarian coordinator, the agencies and NGOs can use to help identify exactly what needs to be done and when.

Every year you launch a so-called Consolidated Appeal together with the Secretary-General. The appeal for 2010 was \$7.1 billion. How do you assess this?

For the initial launch of the Consolidated Appeal we look at countries where we think a concerted action of the UN, partners and NGOs is needed—countries like Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan or the Occupied Palestinian Territories. For these countries we conduct a joined needs assessment and planning process where all of those parties come together at the country level. They think through the work that needs to be done in that country for the next year. There is an entire system that is gone through, where you look at ensuring that there is no duplication, where the amount which is being asked for is rigorously questioned, where the number of people that are going to be helped is questioned and so on and so forth. This country team then presents the results of its assessment to our team in Geneva which will then go back and ask even more questions to that country team. Only then it becomes part of the consolidated appeal which is then launched by me and by the Secretary-General and others.

For how much did you ask this year?

The appeal for 2011 is \$7.4 billion. But we always know that other things happen during the year. We launched the appeal for 2011 and on top of that we had the ongoing crisis in Côte d'Ivoire where we have seen over 30,000 people displaced out of Côte d'Ivoire into Liberia and smaller numbers into neighboring countries where more than 35,000 people have been displaced within Côte d'Ivoire. Therefore we have launched a regional appeal—not just for Côte d'Ivoire but also for neighboring countries. This is how the flash appeals come up during the year. They are launched in order to respond to the immediate needs that occur at that point in time.

Do you receive the money?

It depends on the countries. Some appeals are very well-funded and some are not so well-funded. Part of my job is to continue to raise the awareness of what is going on to make sure donors understand where appeals are not being funded. It is not always easy to understand why some emergency situations are better funded than others.

It is also possible that within appeals in a country you will have some sectors that are much better funded than others. There will be times when for instance water and sanitation will be very well-funded and times when it is not.

Would you prefer less earmarked donations?

You get earmarking for specific countries and for projects within countries because people like to know how their money is spent. Part of our job is to raise awareness in the places where underfunding continues but where we think it is absolutely crucial that those projects are funded.

Does, for these cases, the Central Emergency Response Fund come into play?

The Central Emergency Response Fund is slightly different. It was set up in 2005 by member states which felt very strongly that the UN needed a fund that could give money to UN agencies in a hurry. If a disaster, like in Haiti, happens UNICEF or the World Food Programme need money straight away. They cannot wait for things to go through their executive boards. So, the Central Emergency Response Fund is really for that immediate disaster response. We manage it as OCHA on behalf of the international system. The fund is set up to try to raise 450 million Dollars per year. We have been hitting between 425 and 430 million a year, and that money is then used to fund emergencies.

Which emergencies?

Last year it was Haiti and Pakistan, but also situations that people probably are not aware of. Last year, for example, Benin had a huge flood. Half of the country was covered in water. This really did not hit the headlines but for Benin it is a major process. We funded that. There was a locust infestation in Madagascar. We dealt with that. There was lead poisoning in Nigeria where children were being killed. We funded that, as well.

Donations are volatile. Wouldn't it be better the humanitarian assistance would be fully funded through the regular budget? I think OCHA's budget consists of just ten per cent.

We have less than that. Only six per cent comes from the UN's regular budget. One of this year's key strategic objectives of the Secretary-General is to improve the UN's performance in humanitarian crisis. Responding to humanitarian crises is a huge project and yet it is not reflected in the amount of the regular budget which we receive. Of course, I would like a greater proportion of the budget. But I recognize that—bearing in mind that there will be no overall increase of the UN's budget—this means the raise would have to come out of the efficiencies in other parts of the UN system. I will continue to make the case for a greater proportion of the budget but I can see that this is not going to happen in the short-term.

You are visiting Germany today. What kind of support would you like to receive from Germany?

Germany already supports us in CERF. They also fund OCHA and they fund some of our country offices. I want that support to continue and indeed to increase. One of the areas that we want to concentrate on, as an organization, is to increase efforts in the whole area of preparedness and disaster risk reduction in countries. Next year Germany will chair what is called the 'OCHA Donor Support Group' and I hope that this is one of the themes that Germany will pick up during their chairmanship. Preparedness saves lives. It is also cheaper in monetary terms, than having to respond. The World Bank released a study last year saying that the costs of working on preparedness are one-seventh of the costs working on emergency response. I would like the continued good relationship which we have with Germany in terms of discussing prospective challenges in the humanitarian system and how might we collectively address them. I would like us to continue in the thinking that we are doing about the ways in which we can expand the base of interest in our work and expand the donor base of our work, as well. I am sure that Germany will support us on that.

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*Anja Papenfuss, Editor-in-Chief, interviewed Valerie Amos in Berlin on 23 February 2011. Up-to date information on Japan was delivered per e-mail and included on 28 March 2011.

Valerie Amos

In July 2010, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed Baroness Valerie Amos from the United Kingdom as Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. She took office on 7 September 2010, succeeding John Holmes.

Amos gathered her experiences during more than 25 years in political offices and various high-level government positions in the UK.

Before joining the UN, Amos was British High Commissioner to Australia. From 2007 to 2009, Amos was Chair of the Royal African Society and a Fulbright Commissioner. Before that, she served as Leader of the House of Lords and Secretary of State for International Development between 2003 and 2007. During this time, she participated in negotiations to tackle conflict and post-conflict situations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. From 2001 to 2003, Amos served as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. She began her political career in the House of Lords to which she was appointed to in 1997.