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Digital Aid: Game-Changing Humanitarian Transformation

Your Excellency Abdullah Al Shaibani [Secretary General of the Executive Council and Board Member of the International Humanitarian City],
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,

It is a pleasure to welcome you here today to the 36th WGET – ICT Humanitarian Innovation Forum.

I would like to begin by thanking our partners in this event – the International Humanitarian City and the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster, led by the World Food Programme - and our sponsors, Thuraya and Yahsat. We are honoured that the United Arab Emirates is hosting this Forum, and are appreciative of the important support they provide for humanitarian response.

And thanks to all of you for joining us here today—this is the largest WGET Forum yet, with more than 200 people in attendance representing over 120 organizations

The WGET – the Working Group on Emergency Telecommunications – is a unique forum that provides the opportunity for those involved in disaster response and telecommunications to discuss recent experiences, consider new technologies, and build partnerships.

The global humanitarian system as a whole is at a crossroads. More than ever we need to work together to meet the daunting challenges we face.

The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has almost doubled over the past ten years, and is expected to keep rising. Last year, the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people worldwide **exceeded 51 million people** for the first time since the Second World War.

Every day on average, over **32,000 people flee their homes** because of conflict and seek protection elsewhere, either within the borders of their countries or in other countries. On average, each of them will be displaced for 17 years.

And the situation is getting worse.

By 2050, we estimate that up to **one billion people** could be displaced by climate change.

Economic losses from natural disasters have now reached **\$300 billion annually**, and are projected to increase dramatically.

Even if today's conflicts ended tomorrow, humanitarian needs would persist and recovery could take decades.

Our challenge is clear: we must act now to strengthen our efforts. It is time to take stock and reshape our thinking around humanitarian response.

We need to put people, particularly women, young people and children, at the centre of our work and listen to what they tell us about what they need. Providing information and two-way communication are now an integral part of humanitarian response.

Technology is helping us here. In 105 countries, there are now more mobile phones than people. That means that in many cases, people can tell us where they are, what they are short of and what they need; and we can tell them how to access it.

The mandate of my organization, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, (OCHA) is to ensure that humanitarian response is as coordinated and effective as possible. In the most basic terms, this means finding a consensus about what the problem is, what the priorities are, and what needs to be done to ensure we best deliver aid to the people who are affected.

Two years ago I attended my first WGET Forum in Sweden at Ericsson Headquarters, when I launched OCHA's report *Humanitarianism in the Network Age*. The report recognized that communication is a basic need in humanitarian response. It outlined how Governments and aid agencies, particularly well-resourced international actors, have an operational obligation to help communities and local authorities to generate, access and use information.

In these past two short years we have increasingly seen just how much the network age is reshaping humanitarian response. The communications revolution continues to have a profound impact on the way people survive and respond to emergencies.

For example, Zaatari camp, which now hosts over 80,000 Syrian refugees in the desert of Jordan, has become an informal city and a complex ecosystem. A recent survey showed that 86 per cent of youth own a mobile handset and more than 50 percent use the internet at least once a day. Hotlines have been established by humanitarian agencies to provide refugees information about available services and to help family members reunite with loved ones.

Mobilizing communities has been the key to end the current Ebola epidemic. Text-messaging-based tools connect young people in Liberia to vital information and services about the virus, while two million text messages are sent out every month with information about Ebola by the International Federation of the Red Cross.

In Darfur, we have set up a hotline in partnership with mobile network operators so that displaced people living in camps can let us know when a water pipe is broken or when there is a shortage of medicine.

But we can do more to harness technology to help us to deliver. During recent consultations we held with Syrian refugees in Egypt, one of the issues raised was the need to use new technologies in providing information and aid. In their opinion, technology could strengthen their protection and improve access to aid.

Indeed, we can give people choice and also help them to keep a sense of dignity with mobile money programmes and voucher schemes, which help to restore people's livelihoods and kick-start local economic activity. We also need to have a more coordinated and coherent approach, focusing our resources on the most vulnerable, working together rather than in competition.

Next year, OCHA and partners will hold the first ever World Humanitarian Summit. This is the first global summit on humanitarian action, and the goal is to bring all stakeholders together to commit to improved ways of working together to resolve humanitarian crises. We began consultations over a year ago and we will continue throughout the rest of 2015 -through events like this WGET Forum and the Regional

Business Consultations taking place here in Dubai next week - to take stock and gather your feedback to shape the future humanitarian landscape.

This year's WGET is therefore focusing on how we can enable digital aid and continue to improve the way we engage with affected communities. The WGET community is helping us define new response paradigms by being at the forefront of the transformation of humanitarian response.

The Emergency Telecommunications Cluster is leading the way in these changes—through a new strategy, the ETC is committing to broker full service communications solutions between private industry, governments, humanitarians and affected communities to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid. By 2020, the ETC's activities will focus on delivering essential life-saving communication services to affected communities and on working with governments to build resilience, by restoring essential communications channels after a disaster.

Another important initiative this year has been the launch of the Humanitarian Connectivity Charter for the mobile industry, by GSMA, the global mobile association. The charter outlines shared principles of commitment and a series of aspirational, collaborative actions to support communities and other stakeholders in disaster situations. It encourages mobile network operators to make their services more accessible to those affected by humanitarian crises, including by providing free or subsidized services in emergencies, and by increasing preparedness to support community resilience.

The transformation of the humanitarian system will be driven by data, and the connectivity required to provide digital aid. Digitally driven services will presents many opportunities as well as create a variety of new challenges which need to be better understood and addressed in order for us to effectively leverage opportunities such as digital aid in a responsible and principled manner.

And we need to make sure that digital aid works in the field –that it works where the conditions are harshest and where people are in greatest need. The potential offered by innovations and advances in technology must translate into more lives saved and a more effective humanitarian response.

The Humanitarian Connectivity Charter has demonstrated that we can partner, innovate and effect change together. We are aware of some of the changes we need to make: broadening the base of our partnerships; listening to what people affected by disasters tell us; harnessing technology to help deliver more quickly and effectively.

You have the skills, resources, tools and technology. We need your support for game-changing approaches and transformational actions to enable more effective aid during crisis and building national resilience prior to crisis.

I hope many of you will leave with the sense that you have a significant role to play in humanitarian response efforts; that we can overcome barriers to cooperation and collaboration and develop a system that is truly global, inclusive and accountable.

I look forward to our discussions over the coming two days.