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United Nations Secretary-General

New York

19 March 2020

Secretary-General virtual press encounter on COVID-19 CRISIS

We are facing a global health crisis unlike any in the 75-year history of the United Nations – one that is spreading human suffering, infecting the global economy and upending people's lives.

A global recession – perhaps of record dimensions – is a near certainty.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has just reported that workers around the world could lose as much as 3.4 trillion U.S. dollars in income by the end of this year.

This is, above all, a human crisis that calls for solidarity.

Our human family is stressed and the social fabric is being torn. People are suffering, sick and scared.

Current responses at the country level will not address the global scale and complexity of the crisis.

This is a moment that demands coordinated, decisive, and innovative policy action from the world's leading economies. We must recognize that the poorest and most vulnerable – especially women – will be the hardest hit.

I welcome the decision by G20 leaders to convene an emergency summit next week to respond to the epic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic – and I look forward to taking part.

My central message is clear: We are in an unprecedented situation and the normal rules no longer apply. We cannot resort to the usual tools in such unusual times.

The creativity of the response must match the unique nature of the crisis – and the magnitude of the response must match its scale.

Our world faces a common enemy. We are at war with a virus.

COVID-19 is killing people, as well as attacking the real economy at its core – trade, supply chains, businesses, jobs. Entire countries and cities are in lockdown. Borders are closing. Companies are struggling to stay in business and families are simply struggling to stay afloat.

But in managing this crisis, we also have a unique opportunity.

Done right, we can steer the recovery toward a more sustainable and inclusive path. But poorly coordinated policies risk locking in – or even worsening – already unsustainable inequalities, reversing hard-won development gains and poverty reduction.

I call on world leaders to come together and offer an urgent and coordinated response to this global crisis.

I see three critical areas for action:

 **FIRST, TACKLING THE HEALTH EMERGENCY.**

Many countries have exceeded the capacity to care for even mild cases in dedicated health facilities, with many unable to respond to the enormous needs of the elderly.

Even in the wealthiest countries, we see health systems buckling under pressure.

Health spending must be scaled up right away to meet urgent needs and the surge in demand -- expanding testing, bolstering facilities, supporting health care workers, and ensuring adequate supplies -- with full respect for human rights and without stigma.

It has been proven that the virus can be contained. It must be contained.

If we let the virus spread like wildfire -- especially in the most vulnerable regions of the world -- it would kill millions of people.

And we need to immediately move away from a situation where each country is undertaking its own health strategies to one that ensures, in full transparency, a coordinated global response, including helping countries that are less prepared to tackle the crisis.

Governments must give the strongest support to the multilateral effort to fight the virus, led by the World Health Organization (WHO), whose appeals must be fully met.

The health catastrophe makes clear that we are only as strong as the weakest health system.

Global solidarity is not only a moral imperative, it is in everyone's interests.

 **SECOND, WE MUST FOCUS ON THE SOCIAL IMPACT AND THE ECONOMIC RESPONSE AND RECOVERY.**

Unlike the 2008 financial crisis, injecting capital in the financial sector alone is not the answer. This is not a banking crisis -- and indeed, banks must be part of the solution.

And it is not an ordinary shock in supply and demand; it is a shock to society as a whole.

The liquidity of the financial system must be guaranteed, and banks must use their resilience to support their customers.

But let's not forget this is essentially a human crisis.

Most fundamentally, we need to focus on people -- low-wage workers, small and medium enterprises and the most vulnerable.

And that means wage support, insurance, social protection, preventing bankruptcies and job loss.

And that also means designing fiscal and monetary responses to ensure that the burden does not fall on those who can least afford it.

The recovery must not come on the backs of the poorest -- and we cannot create a legion of new poor.

We need to get resources directly in the hands of people. A number of countries are taking up social protection initiatives such as cash transfers and universal income.

We need to take it to the next level to ensure support reaches those entirely dependent on the informal economy and countries less able to respond.

Remittances are a lifeline in the developing world -- especially now. Countries have already committed to reduce remittance fees to 3 percent, much below the current average levels. The crisis requires us to go further, getting as close to zero as possible.

In addition, G20 leaders have taken steps to protect their own citizens and economies by waiving interest payments. We must apply that same logic to the most vulnerable countries in our global village and alleviate their debt burden.

Across the board, we need a commitment to ensure adequate financial facilities to support countries in difficulties. The IMF, the World Bank and other International Financial Institutions play a key role. The private sector is essential to seeking and creating investment opportunities and protecting jobs.

And we must refrain from the temptation of resorting to protectionism. This is the time to dismantle trade barriers and re-establish supply chains.

Looking at the broader picture, disruptions to society are having a profound impact.

We must address the effects of this crisis on women. The world's women are disproportionately carrying the burden at home and in the wider economy.

Children are also paying a heavy price. More than 800 million children are out of school right now – many of whom rely on school to provide their only meal. We must ensure that all children have access to food and equal access to learning – bridging the digital divide and reducing the costs of connectivity.

As people's lives are disrupted, isolated and upturned, we must prevent this pandemic from turning into a crisis of mental health. Young people will be most at risk.

The world needs to keep going with core support to programmes for the most vulnerable, including through UN-coordinated humanitarian and refugee response plans. Humanitarian needs must not be sacrificed.

△ THIRD, AND FINALLY, WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO "RECOVER BETTER".

The 2008 financial crisis demonstrated clearly that countries with robust social protection systems suffered the least and recovered most quickly from its impact.

We must ensure that lessons are learned and that this crisis provides a watershed moment for health emergency preparedness and for investment in critical 21st century public services and the effective delivery of global public goods.

We have a framework for action – the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. We must keep our promises for people and planet.

The United Nations – and our global network of country offices -- will support all governments to ensure that the global economy and the people we serve emerge stronger from this crisis.

That is the logic of the Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

More than ever before, we need solidarity, hope and the political will to see this crisis through together.

Thank you.

Under-Secretary-General Fleming: SecretaryGeneral, we're now going to take questions from the press. This is a virtual press conference, the first of its kind for you and in our age.

Our first question is from Edith Lederer from the Associated Press. She asks: Mr. SecretaryGeneral, you're calling especially on the G20 countries to take the lead, but many of them are struggling to deal with the COVID19 pandemic in their own countries. Where is the money going to come from to fulfil the ambitious programme you just outlined?

Secretary-General: Well, we see that whenever there is a problem in the banking system, trillions appear to solve the problems of the banks. And these trillions must appear now. Governments, Central Banks must work to guarantee that there is liquidity in the economy but also that funds are mobilised to those that are most in need. And those that

are most in need are people on one hand and the poorest countries on the other. And it is absolutely essential to show solidarity in the way we respond to the crisis.

A wealthy country must not be convinced that it has only to deal with its own citizens. It's in the interest of a wealthy country to contribute to a global response because the crisis can come from wherever at any moment, and it is in the interest of everybody to fight it effectively, especially in the most vulnerable areas of the world.

Ms. Fleming: The next question is from many journalists collectively. Are you concerned that the restrictions on travel will boost nationalist sentiments? You say that international cooperation is the answer. How do you achieve that?

Secretary-General: I think that the restrictions on travel can be understood because of the need to contain the spread of the disease, but it's very important at the same time people feel the need of solidarity. It's very important to fight fake news, to fight those campaigns in social media that try to spread fear, that try to spread antagonism, that try to create divisions.

This is a moment of solidarity, and this is a moment where political leaders, religious leaders, community leaders must convey a very strong message, asking for people to feel that we need to do this together. And even if we are physically separated I am physically separated from my family at the present moment, but we are together fighting this crisis. And I think that the same must happen with countries. The same must happen with peoples. We can be physically separated, but we need to do it together.

Ms. Fleming: The next question is from Valeria Robecco from the Italian news agency ANSA. Africa is now experiencing a limited number of cases, but some experts fear that there will be a wave of cases in the near future. Are you working on some plans to help the most vulnerable areas?

Secretary-General: Yes. Our teams in Africa are working very hard with the governments to support them, but my very strong appeal to the G20 is to have a particular concern with African countries and other countries in the developing world. We must absolutely be strong in supporting them because the virus will come... is coming to them, and their systems are extremely weak. So, they need very strong support from the developed world, and if that support is denied, we could have catastrophic consequences.

If the virus is not contained because countries have not the capacity to contain it, it can spread like wildfire, as I mentioned, and we could have... even with low rates of mortality, we could have millions of people dying, and this is absolutely unacceptable.

Ms. Fleming: We're going to take two more questions. This next question is from a number of journalists. As you know, the journalists gathered here are working in this building. And they want to know: Is it worth the risk to keep the UN Secretariat building open? And can the UN Security Council and the General Assembly meet virtually?

Secretary-General: First of all, we were ahead of the curve in the UN, in the UN Headquarters. We took precautions earlier than they were prescribed even by the authorities here and in different other parts of the world. We have been extremely careful in order to contain the spread of the disease.

I'm working in headquarters. Most of our staff is working at home, and I believe that when people absolutely need to come, they can come, because I think we have created the conditions to do it in perfect safety.

On the other hand, it is very important to create the conditions for Member States to be able to meet. The Security Council will meet next week, more than once, and we have provided conditions for virtual meetings to take place at any moment.

In some circumstances, physical presence is needed. In others, it is not. But we have all the conditions to allow for virtual meetings to take place with any number of people.

I was just, today, in a virtual meeting with our 140 resident coordinators around the world. I've been in contact every day with eight to ten of our offices around the world and of our missions around the world. And I can tell you I'm very proud, because even in these very difficult circumstances, the UN everywhere is open for businesses, and we are working to make sure that we deliver in relation to the Member States that need our support and in relation to the people we care for, the most vulnerable everywhere.

Ms. Fleming: Final question from Majeed at Rudaw Network. Does the SG think there should be any special financial support from developed countries to the developing countries, especially the ones dealing with other crises, such as wars?

Secretary-General: It is absolutely essential to have solidarity at the present moment. It's absolutely essential that the effort that the developed countries are making to support their own citizens is extended to those countries that have not the capacity to do the same to their citizens and where poverty is much more widespread and the conditions to fight the disease are much less effective.

Ms. Fleming: That's the end of this press conference. Thank you all for tuning in, and those who tuned in online, also, thank you very much.

Secretary-General: Thank you very much.