KEYNOTE SPEECH

William Lacy Swing
Director General, International Organization for Migration

DUBAI INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN AID AND DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION
Session 2: Moving Relief Items, where/when required, efficiently

"Mobility"

25 March 2015, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

(As delivered)

Excellencies.
Distinguished delegates.

It is an honor to be with you today at the "Dubai International Humanitarian Aid and Development Conference and Exhibition." This is the 4th consecutive DIHAD in which I have had the honor and pleasure of participating in. Let me start by congratulating the organizers and the Emirate of Dubai, for the huge success of this event since it was first held in 2004.

I have taken the liberty of talking about human mobility. To be comprehensive and inclusive, a discussion on humanitarian aid and development, should include migration and human mobility, and I am so pleased, therefore that mobility is inscribed in the experts' agenda. Let me first try to set mobility in a global perspective -- and then make three points for your consideration and reflection.

I. Unprecedented mobility

We live in a world on the move. There are more people on the move today than at any other time in recorded history. With more than 1 billion migrants — one in seven people in the world — migration, that is human mobility, is a megatrend of this century. By now you know the figures by heart: 250 million international migrants, and 750 million internal migrants. Increased migration is inevitable, due to demographics and disasters; it is necessary, for durable and equitable economic growth; and desirable, if well-governed. Were the 250 million international migrants form a nation, migrants would constitute the 6th largest nation in the world -- slightly larger than Brazil and somewhat smaller than Indonesia. Their annual remittances of 580 billion in 2014 dollars would equal the GDP of a medium-sized European economy.

Migration and human mobility are also important aspects of preparing for and responding to crises and disasters. When countries are beset by calamities, whether natural or man-made, the immediate response of people is to flee. Mobility becomes a matter of life and death for the affected population. Different humanitarian actors, therefore, need to respond effectively and in a coordinated manner to save the lives of these people. This perspective is particularly relevant in DIHAD 2015.

II. Unprecedented Disasters

Unfortunately, we are also living in a time of unprecedented disasters – simultaneous, complex humanitarian emergencies of all sorts: armed conflicts – Syria now on its fifth year; on-going violence and instability in Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Somalia; civil war in South Sudan; ethno-religious cleansing in the Central African Republic; Ebola in West Africa; armed conflict in Ukraine; and multiple other problems in various parts of the world which contribute to the growing number of people that are forced to move.

Humanitarian actors are operating in a context of an increasing numbers of vulnerable mobile populations affected by natural disasters and conflicts. The international community is currently facing five Level 3 emergencies: Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, Central African Republic, and Ebola in West Africa. Sudden and onset natural calamities have displaced 170 million people in the last six years -- the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, the typhoon in the Philippines, the Haiti earthquake, the floods in Pakistan and Mozambique. Meanwhile, more than 50 million people are forcibly displaced—a large number of them affected by crises in the Middle East and North Africa -- the largest number of displaced persons since World War II.

Ten days ago, on March 15, the armed conflict in Syria entered its fifth year. And there is no end in sight. The humanitarian situation continues to worsen. Syria's crisis has spilled over to neighboring countries. All four of Syria's neighbors are bearing a heavy load as did all of six of Libya's neighbors in 2011. Humanitarian needs have increased twelve-fold since the beginning; 12 million people now need humanitarian assistance; almost half of all Syrians have been forced to leave their homes, making Syria the world's largest displacement crisis (7.6 million IDPs, and 3.7 million refugees).

In South Sudan -- the world's newest and one of its poorest countries -- some 2.5 million people are in a state of dire emergency – only steps away from a famine. The death toll is unknown, but at least 50,000 people have been killed; the war is not over; and there is no end in sight as selfish egos fight on. And we have all followed with horror and indignation the senseless loss of human lives, even over this past weekend, in Yemen, Tunisia, and Libya.

Many other countries are afflicted by insurgencies, invasions and attacks of lawless elements—Boko Haram, al-Shabaab and ISIS—displacing millions forcing them out of their homes and communities. There are, of course, no military solutions, nor is there a humanitarian solution.

One consequence of these armed conflicts, political upheavals and natural and climatic disasters is that persons in the tens of thousands are putting their lives in the hands of criminal smuggling gangs in pursuit of security and a better life. Some 50,000 of these have died at sea and in the desert -- 600 this year alone. These are nameless, faceless persons whose families will never be able to come to closure because their loved ones are buried in the Mediterranean, or the Red Sea, or the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean or the Sahara dessert. This is a double tragedy.

In brief, the world faces the largest number of simultaneous, complex humanitarian disasters that anyone can remember. That's bad enough but the other stark reality is that there are, at present, no viable political processes or active negotiations that offer any hope whatsoever of a short to medium-term solution to any of these. In the midst of this, there is a vacuum of international leadership, and a serious erosion of international moral authority.

III. Unprecedented response: what is required and what have we learned

The world is in disarray, to some degree, because we have not been able to prevent crises from developing. When crises have developed, we have been too often too slow in responding, or our early response was too feeble or not sustained. The question is raised, therefore, as to whether this world out of control is a transitional segment in the life of humanity or is this a "new world"-- one in which political will and state authority decline relative to renegade elements that profit from a vacuum of international moral authority, the globalization of indifference, and unclear power relations.

We must re-assess and re-adjust our priorities to make saving life our top priority. Let us take a lesson from Syria's four and Libya's six neighbors who kept their borders open to welcome tens of thousands of migrants and others fleeing violence and insecurity. Not as many countries did so in the face of Ebola, instead closing down their airways and putting foreigners in quarantine, and hoping the virus would go away or just stay in Africa.

Rather, let us continue to respond urgently to these challenges, steadfastly and vigilantly. To do so we need to evaluate our performance; learn lessons, identify our shortcomings, and take corrective actions. We should not be afraid to admit failure. For example, IOM received praise for its joint response with UNHCR in evacuating and repatriating 250,000 migrant workers to 54 countries. Upon reflection, however, we discovered that we, the international community, had done the job only halfway. The 177,000 sub-Saharans we took back to West Africa were left to fend for themselves: no jobs, no public services, and no remittances.

Holding free and fair elections should not become the "exit door" for the international community, but rather, the "entry door" or the "end of the beginning". Tunisia is a good recent example. We should stay the course after elections or the end of a conflict. This is the moment at which people's expectations, understandably, are at their highest. In other words, we want to help others to become resilient, we must then ourselves be resilient.

Conclusion

With respect to all of these observations, we should draw hope, as a process of assessment has already begun. Only last week, the 3rd World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction was held, on which you received an eloquent report yesterday from Margareta Wahlström -- who deserves congratulations on a very successful conference that produced the important "Sendai Framework". So, a roadmap for reducing the risk of disasters is now available to guide us. Second, a global conference on the financing of development is scheduled for July in Nairobi. Third, the Secretary General, Bank Ki-moon, has convened a "World Humanitarian Summit" to be held in Istanbul in October 2016. These, and other occasions, give us hope that we will learn to govern human mobility in a more rational and humane way.