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The Food Aid Organization of the United Nations

Statement

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Italian Chamber of Deputies

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Hunger is Still With Us

There are no obstacles -- other than lack of political will -- that would prevent us from ending hunger tomorrow. Yet hunger is still with us. It reaches into the homes of the poor -- weakening infants so they are lost to disease, leaving tens of millions of children sickly and stunted, robbing the poor of the strength they need to fight their way out of poverty.

I am honored and pleased that you have invited me here today, because the Parliament of Italy can make a very positive contribution by moving the issue of hunger higher on the global political agenda.

Rome has long been the world's leading center for international cooperation on food and agriculture. So it is only fitting that Italy play a lead role in coming to terms with the hunger that still persists for 800 million people -- more than double the population of the entire European Union.

The task is not just a humanitarian one. The hunger and poverty that persist in so many developing countries are driving forces behind illegal immigration, crime, political extremism and terrorism worldwide. When people cannot feed their families, they are willing to do just about anything and they see us in the West living in luxury with so much excess food we store it for years on end, sell it as animal feed, even destroy it. Is it then so hard to understand some of the horrible tensions we are experiencing in the world today?

A Rising Tide of Food Crises

Here are some salient and, I think, alarming facts:

According to my colleagues at the Food and Agriculture Organization, after decades of improvement, global progress in reducing the number of chronically hungry people has ground to a halt. At the World Food Summit in 1996 and again at the Millennium Summit in 2000, UN member states pledged to halve the number of hungry people from 800 million to 400 million by the year 2015. In fact, the number has only been reduced by 19 million in the last decade. Without stronger political commitment by governments we will fail to reach our goal.

Lives continue to be lost to hunger. The World Health Organization just released a report on the major threats to life and health worldwide today. The biggest threat is not heart disease, cancer, or violence - it is just what it was a hundred years ago and a thousand years ago - it is hunger. Yet, ironically, world markets are now burdened with food surpluses that cause trade friction among traditional allies and friends, and even countries that had food shortfalls for decades have now made great strides in agriculture -- Russia, China and India come first to mind.

The underlying reasons for persisting hunger in the developing world are complicated -- poverty, poor infrastructure, lack of earning power. Nevertheless, it is hard to understand

and condone hunger in a world that is simply awash in surplus food. It is hard to understand that 18,000 families will lose a child today because of hunger.

Let me tell you a bit about the World Food Programme's role and how we use food aid to address hunger today.

The World Food Programme -- which as recently as the mid-1980s used most of its food aid in food for work, nutrition and education projects -- has been forced to become the UN equivalent of an ambulance service for the starving. Nearly 80 percent of our work is now emergency driven -- reaching out to Afghan families suffering the effects of drought and decades of war, malnourished infants and children in North Korea, and families driven from their homes and jobs by violence in Chechnya, southern Sudan and Colombia. Today, WFP has few resources to spare for nutrition and school feeding to help bring that number of chronically hungry people down from 800 million -- we are barely funding our emergency operations and, I am afraid, the worst is yet to come.

In the last decade, the number of food emergencies has skyrocketed. In the first half of the 1990s, WFP conducted 18 emergency food needs assessments per year with FAO, in the second half the number nearly doubled to 33. This year WFP and our partners will be struggling to feed at least 25 million more beneficiaries in Africa alone -- never before have we had to contend with potential starvation on the scale we face today.

The sheer intensity of these crises has transformed WFP into the largest humanitarian aid agency in the world. Few people know that -- even here in Rome. People often confuse us with FAO -- but its responsibility is in agricultural development, while ours is in direct assistance to the poorest through food aid. You cannot have development among people who are hungry.

FAO, along with the UN in New York, was one of our two parents back when we were founded four decades ago. But now we have outgrown both parents and WFP has offices in nearly 90 countries. Last year alone, we fed 77 million people worldwide. At the same time, WFP has quietly become the logistics arm of the United Nations -- providing air service and communications links for other agencies and our NGO partners.

Our annual budget already outstrips both FAO and the UN in New York and last year we received \$1.9 billion in funding. I might note -- and this is important in the age of UN Reform -- that our funding is totally voluntary. There are no dues to be paid to WFP. If donors are not satisfied with our performance, we will be closing our offices soon after. Fortunately, the record shows that we have performed and performed well -- delivering services with one of the lowest overhead rates in the UN system.

We are quite proud that WFP was the first UN agency to ever receive a contribution of more than a billion dollars from a single member state -- the United States. Members of the EU and the European Commission plus some new donors, such as India, have raised their funding for us. Italy has significantly boosted its contribution, nearly doubling it in the last two years, and we are very grateful for this sign of confidence in WFP. Yet with all this generosity, we are falling behind.

For lack of funds, WFP is now engaged in an exercise in triage among those threatened by starvation. Who will we feed? Who will we leave hungry? In North Korea we have

had to cut off rations for 3 million women, children and the elderly. In January we will be forced cut 1.5 million more from the rolls.

What is driving the current explosion in food emergencies? Basically, there are four immediate triggers for these food crises:

1. Collapsing economic systems -- the principal example here is the DPRK, but we are also working in some of the ex-CIS states such as Azerbaijan and Georgia that are struggling with the transition from centrally planned to market economies. Economic policies have also contributed to a slowdown in southern Africa, with the most dramatic troubles now surfacing in Zimbabwe.
2. Political and ethnic violence -- Sudan, Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are some examples.
3. AIDS -- There is little appreciation of how big an issue food is among AIDS victims, but Dr. Peter Piot of UNAIDS has said that in many countries he has visited the very first thing AIDS victims ask for is not medicine, not money -- it is food for their families, food for their hungry children. AIDS is decimating the rural labor force. More women are now infected than men in Africa - -and 8 out of 10 of the continent's small farmers are women.
4. And finally -- and this is really the largest threat we face -- there is the weather. Yes, the weather. The scale of WFP's activities has tracked closely with the occurrence of abnormal weather phenomena. And we are seeing those phenomena on a scale no one has ever imagined. In the last few years, we delivered emergency food aid in response to the largest floods in China in a century and to drought victims in over a dozen countries stretching from southern Sudan to Pakistan. The past two years have brought the highest number of weather-related disasters over the decade and we now anticipate a medium intensity El Nino, which has already begun to develop in the Pacific Ocean. This will mean even less rain for this year's crops in southern African and likely flooding in other regions. While we in the industrialized world can deal with these natural disasters, poor people living at the margin cannot cope without help.

Seeking Long-Term Solutions

What can we do to avoid or mitigate these food crises?

Fighting to end hunger is not a task for one country, one agency, one NGO. Hunger is, in fact, both simple and complicated. We can end someone's hunger in a refugee camp or an orphanage, and that is what we do at WFP with food aid -- but we have to do this in ways that help people to help themselves and complement the work of others seeking to address hunger's underlying causes. My friends and partners Jacques Diouf and Lennart Bage of FAO and IFAD, plus hundreds of NGOs from Italy and other donor countries and from developing countries need to work in harmony. I think if we work towards the following goals we will have a good chance of halving the number of hungry people by 2015 -- one of the Millennium Goals the Secretary-General has asked us in the UN to pursue.

First, we must work to obtain stronger and more consistent funding for humanitarian aid. If people are left hungry because of wars or natural disasters, they will never have the capacity to lift themselves out of poverty. While WFP funding has risen, global food aid has not. In fact, during the last three years it has actually dropped by more than 25 percent from 15 million to 11 million metric tons (1999-2001). More funds are crucial. At the same time, WFP and our NGO partners are totally reliant on voluntary funds and, in the food aid area, we are far too dependent on the United States. Last year, the U.S. provided 62 percent of all food aid worldwide. That is simply not sustainable. So we need more consistent and broad-based funding. All the major donors need to make a political commitment to a food aid system that works and is not dangerously reliant on surpluses or on a single donor.

In the last six months I have visited leading UN members states and talked with parliamentarians and ministry officials. I have urged them all to look for new ways to fund food aid operations. Lives are at stake. There is simply no way that we will handle the food crises we face today without loss of life if we do not soon receive either supplementary cash funding to buy food aid or donations of surplus food stocks and the cash needed to deliver them. I have delivered that message again and again in Brussels, London, Washington, Moscow, Beijing and now here in Rome.

Second, we must persuade countries to invest more in agriculture. With hunger far from solved in the developing world, more donor aid needs to be targeted on agriculture. Yet investments continue to drop. The bright point is that some donors are beginning to turn that situation around -- the United Kingdom, for example, has boosted its aid for agriculture five-fold, and the United States raised its aid by 38 percent this year.

Investment in agriculture is where WFP's close collaboration with FAO and IFAD comes into play. The Rome-based agencies are working closely together and at the policy level, we have developed a "twin-track" approach to reducing hunger, first unveiled at the Financing for Development Conference in Monterrey, Mexico last March and reiterated in FAO's anti-hunger program released at the World Food Summit, Five Years Later.

This twin-track approach emphasizes working simultaneously on long-term agricultural development and immediate programs, including food aid, to directly assist the hungry poor. Neither approach by itself will solve the problem of chronic hunger. In the field of joint advocacy, FAO, IFAD and WFP have been engaged together at the major UN summits and in developing the "International Alliance Against Hunger" proposed by Director-General Diouf at the World Food Summit, Five Years later. In 2001 WFP and FAO cooperated in implementing 24 projects with planned budgets from the two agencies of \$19 million, reaching over 3 million WFP beneficiaries. IFAD and WFP work in 14 countries together, reaching 1.9 million people directly. WFP's estimated total resources outlay to these joint initiatives was \$ 18.7 million and IFAD's investment totalled approximately \$ 64.9 million.

Third, we must free up the private sector to promote food production. What so many food insecure countries have in common is restrictions on private enterprise in agriculture. They fail to acknowledge what the introduction of market measures has done for agriculture in other developing countries. According to my colleagues at UNDP, the largest mass movement of people out of poverty in history took place in

China in the mid 1980s when the Government introduced a market system in the food sector. Roughly 125 million people rose from the ranks of the poor. Yet so many countries where WFP works still impose inflexible, state-controlled economics on food production.

Fourth, we need to invest more in nutrition, educational and school feeding programs in the developing world, especially targeted on girls. Seven out of ten of the hungry worldwide are female. In Africa, donors need to move in aggressively to support NEPAD -- a home grown effort targeted at, among other things, bringing 40 million African children into school using school feeding and other mechanisms that support education.

Finally, we need a new global trade environment. As the Secretary General has noted, we need a trading system that encourages African and other developing country farmers to produce and export. They simply cannot compete with developed country subsidies that now amount to one billion dollars a day and allow food to flood poorer countries, making investments in agriculture unprofitable. Food aid is inherently a short-term solution. The people of the developing world must be given the conditions and tools they need to feed themselves.

The Role of Italy

All of us at WFP appreciate the political commitment that Italy has already shown in a number of these areas:

The Italian Government has responded to the call for more humanitarian food aid. Its contribution to WFP operations has climbed from the equivalent of roughly 20 million euros two years ago to about 37 million euros today, moving Italy from our 14th to 9th largest donor. We especially appreciate your funding for operations in Afghanistan, Palestine, and North Korea -- we have experienced problems in obtaining resources for all three. We hope this upward trend in Italy's contribution will continue so that Italy soon becomes our 5th largest country donor, a position commensurate with its economic wealth.

We are asking Italy and other strong food producers to look at ways they can make their surplus production available to WFP to feed people in humanitarian emergencies. We are extremely pleased that EU Commissioner Nielson has agreed to take a look at this issue. It is hard to accept the notion that food can sit in warehouses, be sold off as feed at discounts, or even destroyed when there are tens of millions of people who are desperately hungry. Food surpluses should not be the driving force behind food aid. But surplus food should also not be denied to the hungry, especially in times of war or natural disasters when concerns about market displacement or negative impact on local production simply do not apply.

Several UN agencies and NGOs are profiting from Italy's investment in humanitarian logistics center at Brindisi. WFP and its partners can now move food and other emergency relief supplies faster and more efficiently in times of need.

Italy has shown particular leadership in promoting the education component of the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) at G8 meetings. Education is

crucial for the success of NEPAD -- Africa's homegrown effort to boost economic development and overcome poverty. Italian leadership within the G-8 on education is critical and we urge the Parliament to support continued Italian activism to promote the role of school feeding in improving school attendance, particularly in Africa.

WFP has expanded its school feeding programs to promote education, especially for girls, as well as help meet the food needs of poor children who might not otherwise get the proper nutrition they need to learn and grow. I would particularly like to thank the Government of Italy for supporting our global school feeding campaign since it started in 2001. Italy has been one of school feeding's strongest and earliest advocates as evidenced by Italians across the country giving from their own pockets to WFP in a recent post office campaign.

Continued Italian support and funding is vital now as WFP expands school feeding to reach millions of orphaned and other vulnerable children. In sub-Saharan Africa alone the spreading HIV/AIDS epidemic has left 11 million orphans in its wake. Keeping these children in school and nourished is an enormous task that will determine whether they will be able to overcome the hurdles they face today and become better educated and self-reliant tomorrow.

WFP is also a partner with FAO on its Flagship initiative to educate rural people and expand school garden activities in conjunction with WFP-assisted primary schools. WFP is also developing a "minimum package" in collaboration with UNICEF that will bring additional health and sanitation benefits to improve the school environment and student's nutritional status. We hope to see sustained Italian support for all these investments in the future of the world's children.

Problems with food security and HIV/AIDS are closely linked, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Your government's generous financial support to joint WFP-WHO activities on AIDS in several African countries puts Italy in the forefront among our donors. I hope that the Parliament will help keep Italy in the lead in supporting this important new area of WFP activity. Hunger cripples the capacity of families to feed themselves and can lead people to engage in risky behaviours that increase the risk of spreading HIV/AIDS. Italy is playing a unique role in addressing these issues.

Finally, let me express my great admiration for the Italians who have chosen to dedicate their careers to providing food for the hungry. At WFP we now have 279 Italians on our staff. Our Chief Officer for Humanitarian Affairs -- Francesco Strippoli -- is here with me today. Much of the creativity and energy I have found at WFP in my first six months here in Rome clearly stems from our Italian staff and the strong commitment they have made to help those in need.