



World Humanitarian Summit
Roundtable on Natural Disasters and Climate Change
by Mr. Kunio Mikuriya, Secretary General of the World Customs Organization

The WCO appreciates this opportunity to share its experience and announce a new initiative on humanitarian assistance in the case of natural disasters and major health catastrophes.

Whenever disasters occur whether they are caused by the likes of earthquakes, storms or epidemics, the first reaction of the international community is to provide humanitarian assistance. The WCO and Customs administrations around the world make significant contributions in this respect.

In case of disasters, the WCO is often asked by its partners, particularly the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), for emergency assistance in contacting local Customs to facilitate the movement of disaster relief personnel with their essential possessions and to help speed up the clearance and release of relief consignments that arrive at the border. The WCO then helps national administrations to establish contact with the relevant international organizations and to manage emergency situations on the basis of the WCO's international standards and guidance.

Based on this experience and in response to the devastating earthquake in Haiti, the WCO adopted a Resolution in June 2011 on the role of Customs in natural disaster relief operations. The Resolution invites Members to implement the WCO instruments and guidance on relief consignments and incorporate them in their national legislation. It also suggests that Customs administrations carry out diagnostics and simulation exercises to test and improve their level of preparedness in case of disasters.

Since 2012 the WCO has been organizing seminars for Customs administrations with UN OCHA and the IFRC given that it is critical to ensure regular and refresher training for officers to ensure their awareness of WCO instruments and to enhance preparedness to cope with situations that may arise. We have so far delivered joint seminars in Thailand, the Dominican Republic, Kazakhstan and Ethiopia, thus covering a vast range of Customs administrations on a regional level.

We have learned lessons from these seminars but also from the difficulties we have encountered in coping with an increasing number of natural disasters, many of which may be attributable to the effects of global warming. Moreover, health-related disasters, such as the outbreak of diseases and epidemics, have an effect on human lives equivalent to that of natural disasters. The lessons learned include the following :

Firstly, it is vital for Customs administrations to ensure an open flow of information in times of crisis, in particular by providing partners - including international organizations, non-governmental organizations and the private sector - with all necessary information about the regulations and procedures applicable to relief consignments. Those partners play an essential role in managing humanitarian emergencies and act with the best of intentions. However, Customs also applies the



principles of risk management essential to maintain an appropriate standard of border control to protect society. It is therefore of utmost importance to maintain smooth communication between Customs and other actors in order to ensure mutual understanding and comprehension and also to ensure that aid reaches those in need in a timely manner.

Secondly, it is crucial for Customs administrations to strengthen cooperation and coordination with other national government agencies involved in border management to secure the smooth flow of relief consignments. As already indicated, Customs is required to carry out risk management to ensure compliance with laws and regulations that are administered by a number of ministries and agencies of the country concerned. We often find that the delay in the clearance and release of consignments occurs because of these non-Customs requirements. It is therefore essential to work with other government agencies in developing national emergency plans and to carry out simulation exercises, preferably under a national coordination body. This government-wide cooperation and coordination is also indispensable in the phase of trade recovery after the immediate emergency phase.

Thirdly, it is fundamental to provide Customs and other border officers with the equipment necessary for self-protection, especially in the case of health-related disasters such as the spread of pandemic and epidemic diseases. These measures to mitigate the health and safety risks provide reassurance and motivation to those dealing with the cross-border movement of people and goods.

The 2011 WCO Resolution contains provisions covering these situations. However, the WCO intends to increase its work with administrations that have experienced emergency situations in order to collect concrete cases on their practices and to develop best practices and standards.

In this regard, I am pleased to announce that the WCO is launching a new initiative to support Customs administrations in West Africa thanks to funding from the Government of the Netherlands. This assistance programme will enable the Customs administrations of the countries most severely impacted by the Ebola virus disease, as well as other countries in West Africa, to be better prepared in the future to cope with health-related and natural disasters, through better equipment for self-protection and through streamlined procedures for the release of relief consignments and their forwarding to the areas where they are required. The WCO intends, in cooperation with its partners, to incorporate the lessons learned in the capacity building assistance component of this programme.

I believe that this is a good example of a positive contribution to the global preparedness efforts with the necessary support in terms of resources, facilities and training.

I look forward to enhancing our collaboration with all of you in respect of this very important effort.

Thank you very much for your attention and support.