

[INTERVIEW: Global humanitarian needs have never been higher, says UN official](#)

2 October 2017 – The number of those needing humanitarian assistance is at its highest since the end of the Second World War – some 145 million people. Several protracted crises in Africa and the Middle East are deteriorating and climate-induced emergencies, sometimes combined with violent conflict, continue to wreak havoc on vulnerable communities. Amid all this, United Nations-coordinated response plans remain severely underfunded.

It is against this backdrop that Mark Lowcock began his tenure as the [UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator](#). The British national brings to the position more than 30 years of experience leading and managing responses to humanitarian crises across the globe.

In his new role, Mr. Lowcock serves as the head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)), oversees efforts to bring together humanitarian actors to ensure a coherent response to emergencies. He has hit the ground running, traveling to the Lake Chad Region just days into the job, attending his very first UN General Assembly high-level session, and now preparing to see first-hand the plight of the half a million Rohingya refugees who have fled Myanmar and sought safety in Bangladesh.

Mr. Lowcock spoke to *UN News* about why he accepted the post of the UN humanitarian chief, his first weeks on the job, and what he hopes to accomplish during his tenure.

UN News: What is your overall assessment of the current humanitarian situation around the globe?

Mark Lowcock: There's never been a larger need of humanitarian assistance in the world – 145 million people right now. We are, through the appeals we are in the UN running this year, trying to reach 100 million of those people. What I can tell you is the global humanitarian system is an effective system. Every year we reach tens of millions of people and we save millions of lives, but we don't have all the resources we need and we're facing some big challenges. So, the system needs to step up a bit more, and we need to get a bit more support for our work.

VIDEO: Head of UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Mark Lowcock, shares his vision for bringing together global partners.

UN News: The Lake Chad Basin was your first visit, just a week after taking up the job. Why?

Mark Lowcock: At the end of last year when I was doing a different job, I was worried that there was a potential for four famines in the world in 2017, and one of them is in the Lake Chad Basin region, so I wanted to go and see what had happened. What I found is there's still 10 million people in that region just a step away from starvation. But, the international community, the UN, the NGOs, the Red Cross have rallied behind the governments of the region and have provided life-saving assistance to millions of those people. So I listened to the people whose lives have been affected by this crisis. I heard their stories, and I brought them back to the leaders of the world at the General Assembly last week. And one of the things that I really want to do as the Emergency Relief Coordinator is to be an advocate for those people, to listen to their stories and bring them to the wider world. So that was why I went there.

UN News: The Lake Chad Basin was also the subject of a high-level event here in New York. Did it get the global attention you wanted?

The origins of the Myanmar crisis lie in Myanmar, and the solutions lie in Myanmar.

Mark Lowcock: We had a very good meeting actually. I was pleased on a number of levels. Firstly, that the governments of the region came and told a very compelling story about how they are taking the lead in managing the crisis. Secondly, a number of the donors generously pledged new resources. But thirdly, crucially, we were able to tell the stories of people whose lives were affected. We showed pictures and we told their stories. I recounted the words that people who I met sitting under a tree, or under an awning, told me and I think that's an important thing to do. We also were able to get beyond the immediate challenge. So we talked about root causes. We talked about addressing conflict. And we talked about the things that need to happen not just to deal with immediate need but to help people rebuild their lives and get some hope back into the future.

UN News: Let's talk about Myanmar. Daily reports indicate that the humanitarian situation of the Rohingya people, who have now fled into Bangladesh, remains dire. Is there an end in sight? And also, there are accusations of the UN not doing enough. Do they have any merit, and what needs to be done?

Mark Lowcock: Well the origins of the Myanmar crisis lie in Myanmar, and the solutions lie in Myanmar. But one thing we must do is make sure those 480,000 people who have fled, terrified for their lives, into Bangladesh are well looked after there. My very first weekend at this job in the beginning of September, we saw the flow starting to happen and that weekend, from the Central Emergency Response Fund, I allocated money to help the agencies scale up their response.



UN agencies are scaling up efforts to assist the over half a million Rohingya who have fled violence in Myanmar and sought refuge in neighbouring

Bangladesh. Photo: UNHCR/Paula Bronstein

Since then, as you say, the problem has got even more difficult and even bigger, and we're working on a further response at the moment. I'm expecting to be in Bangladesh myself very, very soon to assess the situation, to make sure that the scale-up is going well. At the moment, we think we're reaching, with some form of assistance, about 80 per cent of those who've come across into Bangladesh. But we need to do better.

And one thing we are going to need to do is seek further generous assistance from our donors, as this problem is significantly bigger than we thought it was going to be. And we need to do that in collaboration with the Government of Bangladesh. Bangladesh and its people have shown exceptional solidarity and generosity, and we need to help them tackle this problem which they're taking the leadership on.

UN News: What made you accept this role as the UN's top humanitarian official?

There's never been a larger need of humanitarian assistance in the world.

Mark Lowcock: Well you know I spent the whole of my adult life working on these issues. My first job was working on the famine relief effort in Ethiopia in 1984-1985. I've always loved doing this work. I like doing things which make a difference. But the real, specific thing on this job, which when the Secretary-General called me in April and asked me about it, that made it such an easy decision for me, is that I think the vision he has for the United Nations in the period ahead to deal with the problems the world faces, and to build a United Nations which is fit for purpose, is just an inspiring vision. So, it was an enormous honour for me to receive the request from him and it was not a difficult decision to come here and play a part with tens of thousands of other colleagues, to try to realize that inspiring vision.

UN News: What do you see as the biggest challenges ahead in your new role?

Mark Lowcock: Well there are three, big areas where I hope, when, however many years from now, I look back on the time I spent here and what we've been able to do, which we've made some progress on. The first relates to the way combatants, belligerents behave in conflict. Because the single biggest challenge we face relates to atrocities, conducted in conflict, and the enormous human suffering that they cause for unfortunately millions of people at the moment. So if we could make some progress on that, that will reduce a lot of suffering and that's a good way of spending some time.

Secondly, we need to extend the number of countries who cope better with protracted food crises. You know famines used to be ubiquitous, very common across the whole world. Now there are small numbers of countries which are at risk from time to time of famines. What we need to do is get that number down, essentially to zero, in the period ahead and that is a completely

achievable objective. I told you that my first job was working on the famine in Ethiopia in the mid-1980s. Because Ethiopia's developed and has good safety net systems, they deal with even worse droughts now than happened in '84, '85, better than they were able to. And there's no reason why other countries can't be supported to make similar progress.