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Statement of the Secretary-General
to the
High Level Meeting on Emergency Relief Operations

Khartoum, Sudan
8-9 March 1989



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Mr. Prime Minister, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It has been most gratifying to me to again note the great importance which member governments of the United Nations attach to the relief needs of the Sudan, as manifested in the response to the invitation to attend this meeting, jointly convened by the United Nations and the government of the Sudan. I wish I had been able to be here with you to participate in your deliberations, but the urgency of the situation at hand called for an early meeting at a time when longstanding international commitments precluded my presence with you. I do extend my warmest greetings to all participants and trust that the results of your discussions will be entirely fruitful.

In this modern media age, there are few people in the world who are not aware of the terrible suffering experienced by a large proportion of the people of the Sudan, sufferings which stem from a six year period of civil conflict as well as from a series of natural calamities, including a devastating three year period of famine and, last year, an unprecedented flood. Over the past several months, the world has been shocked at the reports of the number of deaths which occurred last year during and following the rainy season when so many people, displaced by the conflict in the south,

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died of starvation. This tragedy occurred despite the combined efforts of the Government, Sudan's donor partners, national and international NGO's, and international organizations. The world is demanding that action be taken to ensure that this year's rainy season brings no repetition of this tragedy.

A close examination of why so many people perished, particularly amongst the most vulnerable groups such as young children, mothers and older people, reveals that a complex inter-relationship of factors was responsible. Tragically, it is now clear that most of these deaths could have been avoided and the suffering of so many others reduced if timely action had been taken. Foremost among factors which could have been addressed was the need to ensure that food, water, medical and other emergency supplies were stockpiled before the rainy season, as transportation of these supplies becomes difficult or even impossible in many areas.

This meeting has therefore been called to focus the attention of all parties on the urgent need to take prompt and decisive action over the next six weeks to ensure, through the mounting of a crash delivery programme, that there is no repetition of the tragedy of last year. In proposing this meeting, both the United Nations and the Government of the Sudan have pledged their full support to adequate relief for the displaced and those affected by the ongoing conflict.

In the potentially devastating situation with which we are once again confronted in the Sudan, humanity itself demands of us all the maximum effort to put in place a programme that will ensure that all people in need are reached. The assistance must enable them to survive the present period of turmoil, so that when peace comes they will again be able to become productive

citizens, taking their place in and contributing to a strengthened Sudan. The consultations that are underway to find a lasting formula for peace in the Sudan, the most fundamental question facing this country, are entirely the responsibility of the Government of the Sudan. The world awaits their outcome with great expectation. In the meantime, the overriding humanitarian concern for innocent civilians demands extraordinary actions on the part of the entire international community in support of the Government to provide the relief required. It is also essential that all parties and groups in the country see this humanitarian effort as an urgent life-sustaining endeavour that transcends the issues of the conflict.

Mr. Prime Minister, I am particularly pleased to see the broad representation at this meeting from the non-governmental organization community, both of Sudanese and international NGOs. These groups, and the committed individuals whom they represent, have throughout the world shown the valuable role NGOs can play in both relief and development activities when they operate in close co-operation with government to achieve objectives mutually agreed upon in a partnership arrangement. In this period of international resource constraint they have a unique ability to raise funds from both individuals and, through their public voice, from governments. This capacity, combined with their modest operational costs and their commitment to basic human development, can make the NGO community a powerful force in helping to meet the needs of the severely affected and most vulnerable populations. These are among the reasons why I hope that their voice will be heard and taken into consideration as you put together an effective response on behalf of the displaced and affected populations in the Sudan.

In your deliberations today and tomorrow, I call upon all participants to put their minds and hearts to work to devise a Plan of Action that will overcome the constraints which have made the task of relief so difficult in the past and will made the task of relief so difficult in the past and will surmount the obstacles which have previously frustrated the most sincere efforts to provide timely assistance, particularly over the past year. Sufficient common will and commitment to saving the lives of innocent civilians, to giving this humanitarian concern priority over all other interests in this brief period before the onset of the rains; must be found during this meeting and translated into concrete actions.

What is needed is a realistic Plan of Action which will overcome the obstacles to adequate relief operations with a specific and precise schedule of implementation, clearly delineating responsibilities, so that there is no confusion over who is assigned each of the specific tasks to be carried out. With the eyes of the world on this meeting, we would risk universal condemnation if we fail to successfully carry out this humanitarian endeavour.

Mr. Prime Minister, I know you will join me in expressing the hope that all participants of this important meeting will devote themselves fully to the challenging task before them. There can be few opportunities for a committed group such as the one assembled here to directly affect the lives of such a significant number of people. The timely and effective work at this meeting and in the coming few weeks will prove to the world both the commitment and the capacity of us all to win this race against time.