



By: *Sharmila Devi*

UN says world is on fire but forced to cut humanitarian appeal



UN chiefs say the “world is on fire” but it has only requested \$47 billion to deliver aid in 2025, slightly less than it requested for this year, reflecting realism about donor reluctance to dig deep into their pockets.

The global body says it has to be “really ruthless” in its focus to help those in most need. For this year, it had appealed for \$50 billion but this figure was only 43% funded as of last month. The UN aims to help more than 189 million of the most vulnerable people in 32 countries next year, leaving at least 115 million people who will not be reached.

The UN and other aid agencies fear donations may fall next year compared with the previous year for the first time since 2010. The practical consequences include halving food rations and making disease more likely.

“The world is on fire, and this is how we put it out,” **said** Tom Fletcher, the UN’s under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief co-ordinator, at the **launch** of the UN’s 2025 Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) on 4 December.

The UN’s big annual appeal was barely reported except by mostly news agencies and specialist aid publications. The fall of Assad in Syria dominated headlines but UN appeals rarely make the headlines even on a slow news day.

Focus on domestic priorities

The US, EU and Germany account for around half of global humanitarian funding, with the US giving more than \$10 billion for the last GHO. But higher-income countries face ever strident calls to focus on domestic priorities. Europe is being forced to send more on defence spending amid uncertainty over the course of the Ukraine war.

Even the previously generous Nordic countries have retrenched with, for example, Sweden planning to cut aid from 1 per cent to 0.7 per cent of gross national income over the coming years.

“While \$47 billion is a sizeable amount, it pales in comparison to other global expenditures—it is less than 2 per cent of global military expenditure, around 4 per cent of the global banking industry’s profits, and just 12 per cent of the fossil fuel industry’s average annual free cash flow,” said the GHO.

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The UN estimates the number of people displaced by conflict, violence or persecution exceeded over 120 million by the end of April 2024. Mike Ryan, World Health Organization emergencies chief, said some states were entering a “permanent state of crisis.”

Fatalities from violent events have risen by 37 per cent year over year, with an increase in the Middle East and North Africa of over 315 per cent, and more than 200,000 people have been killed globally, said the Armed Conflict Survey 2024 by the International Institute for Strategic Studies released on 12 December.

Growing geopolitical fragmentation

The survey described a world marked by growing geopolitical fragmentation, the resurgence of inter-state conflict, and competition between Western powers and what it called revisionist powers such as Russia. It said the prospects for a final end to the Ukraine war were remote despite speculation that Donald Trump may push for a settlement.

The areas of the world swept up by conflict and war has risen by 65 per cent over the last three years, including the Middle East, Ukraine, Myanmar and the Sahel, said the latest Conflict Intensity Index (CII) published by risk analysts Verisk Maplecroft last month.

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Conflict deaths are set to top 200,000 by the end of this year, a rise of 29 per cent compared with 2021, while emerging market risk has risen significantly in 27 countries including Ecuador, Colombia, India, Indonesia and Thailand, said the report. There are also multiple potential geopolitical flashpoint pairings in China-Taiwan, North Korea-South Korea and China-Philippines.

Higher funding for humanitarian aid looks unlikely under Trump, who in his previous presidency ended the funding of some UN agencies but left UN aid budgets in place. Now, some of Trump's advisors include those who speak of "wasteful budget increases" by USAID, the main US relief agency.

The UN's Fletcher said he expected to spend a "lot time" in Washington in the next few months.

Crises last longer

Aid agencies have called the UN's appeal "devastating". "At a time when the richest people on earth can go to space as a tourist and trillions of US dollars are used annually on global military expenditure, it is incomprehensible that we as an international community are unable to find the necessary funding to provide displaced families with shelter and prevent children from dying of hunger," said Camilla Waszink of the Norwegian Refugee Council.



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One of the challenges facing the UN is that crises now last longer and for an average of 19 years while armed conflicts are increasingly brutal. The UN said it had to carefully prioritise its response plans, which unite more than 1,500 humanitarian partners to provide assistance.

But some aid agencies said prioritisation by the UN should go no further and it should make clear that humanitarian needs were high and growing or else more people would die and suffer, particularly women and girls. "It is unclear who will target those left behind," said a joint statement by 109 non-governmental organisations.

They urged donors to fully fund UN aid operations and warned of the "normalisation" of violations of international humanitarian law (IHL), such as indiscriminate attacks on civilians and humanitarian workers, the bombing of schools and hospitals, and the use of starvation and sexual violence as methods of warfare.

"The 75th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions is also a year of unconscionable IHL violations," said the statement. "Nothing will reduce humanitarian needs unless civilians are protected."

The UN's Fletcher said the world needed "a surge in global solidarity" but it is hard to envisage such a scenario.