STATEMENT

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Ladies and Gentlemen, it is an honor to be invited here today to share with you some thoughts about globalization and hunger. What is the impact of globalization? The world has become our marketplace. Never has so much wealth existed, nor so many opportunities beckoned. But more than 850 million undernourished people live outside the economic embrace of the globalized world economy. Their main preoccupation is scraping together enough grains or wild berries for tonight’s meager dinner. Widespread hunger is a symptom of the failure of economic globalization to reach all it should. Our willingness to end this centuries-old scourge will ultimately determine whether the history books will judge globalization a success or a failure.

Globalization means that the world has grown smaller economically and culturally. Today, the victims of fighting in distant lands such as Darfur may well seek refuge on our shores. Poverty and hunger prompt the Senegalese man to sell handbags on the street, or the Filippino woman to clean houses in Rome. Every year hundreds of thousands of people leave behind their families in search of a share of the prosperity they have heard so much about in Italy.

Globalization has reduced the sense of isolation felt in much of the developing world. Many people in poor countries now have access to knowledge well beyond the reach of even the wealthiest in any country a century ago. Let me tell you about Mohammed Sokor, a hungry Somali refugee living in Dadaab camp in Northern Kenya. WFP food rations at the camp were running out, so Mohammed took the extraordinary initiative of using a mobile phone to text an appeal to a WFP staff member in our London liaison office. It may seem strange that someone so short of food can afford a mobile phone, but
one of the great ironies of modern Africa is that mobiles are not seen as a luxury but a necessary thread that binds a fractured community together. And Mohammed’s plea was the direct result of WFP being forced – through a lack of funds – to cut rations to the refugees sharply earlier this year. Fortunately, thanks to a good donor response, we have now brought the rations of Mohammed and his fellow refugees much closer to normal levels.

As you are aware, we are less than 10 years away from the UN Millennium Development Goal of halving the proportion of hungry people – yet, as our sister agency, the Food and Agriculture Organization, announced only a week ago, there has been virtually no progress – either towards this Number One goal, or on the World Food Summit target - to reduce the number of undernourished people. These targets would require 31 million hungry people to be taken off the list each year, which is unlikely to happen when the number is currently growing by an average four million annually.

The FAO’s recently published State of Food Insecurity in the world, 2006, did have some good news. Things have improved in Asia Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean – with the most significant progress made in China and South East Asia. But the situation is worse in sub-Saharan Africa, where 206 million people (one in three) are undernourished. South Asia still has the highest number of hungry people in the world (299 million) with growing numbers in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

With such depressing figures, you might wonder why, after nearly five years at the top of WFP, I’m not throwing up my hands in despair. Well, let me tell you a little about this organization that I’ve had the privilege to lead.
Over the past decade, the sheer intensity of food crises has transformed WFP into the largest humanitarian agency in the world. Unlike FAO, whose primary responsibility is in agricultural development, ours is in direct assistance to the poorest through food aid. (I understand FAO’s Director General will be addressing you in the coming days.) The problem is not so much in donors not giving enough; indeed, overseas development assistance has been rising steadily in recent years – it’s more a need for greater understanding that you cannot achieve development when people are hungry. There should be a ‘food first’ policy; donors must first deal with the problem of hunger to lay the foundation for growth and development.

Sadly, the number of our beneficiaries has been increasing. Last year, WFP fed more than 90 million people around the globe, including 58 million children, in 82 countries. I am proud of our staff in rising to ever more complex emergencies, but we need to see these figures going down.

We saw how 2005 was a year of consecutive disasters – from the tsunami to Niger, to the Pakistan earthquake and the deterioration of the situation in Darfur. This year, we’ve seen a devastating drought in the Horn of Africa as well as the Middle East conflict in Lebanon, where I am happy to say we have just concluded a three-month successful operation. Besides delivering food assistance to over 810,000 Lebanese affected by the bombardment, the operation also proved WFP’s successful leadership role in providing massive logistics and telecommunications support to other agencies. In terms of U.N. reform, this showed what the cluster system can achieve when it is effectively organised. It was amazing to see how WFP geared up in a country where it had no office for many
years to an operation run by 150 national and international staff within a couple of weeks. And our donors can be satisfied that we have not stayed one day longer than necessary.

Italy played a prominent role during the Lebanon crisis and, as with numerous other hotspots, including Somalia, Darfur and Afghanistan, the Italian government has consistently given us valuable support through the WFP-led United Nations Humanitarian Response Depot in Brindisi. Every year Brindisi provides logistics, facilities and food and non-food relief items to WFP and all its partners (Italian Cooperation, UN agencies and NGOs), including an annual average of 130 flights out of the base. In fact, the Brindisi model has been so successful that we are currently establishing a network of similar rapid response bases to cover the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

And while on the subject of cooperation with Italy, I would like to mention the tremendous amount of work we do through non-governmental organizations. We work side by side with 30 Italian NGOs – such as Intersos, Alisei and the Comunità di S. Egidio. Without the support of these vital implementing partners, in 26 countries mainly in Africa, WFP would not be able to feed the hungry poor.

Another area of collaboration is through the so-called debt swap arrangement with Italy in Egypt. As a donor country, Italy has agreed to forego repayment of a debt incurred (in this case by Egypt) on condition that the money is invested in a mutually agreed scheme. WFP successfully lobbied for €7.8 million (US$10 million) over three years for a school feeding program in Egypt. I should add here from my experience at WFP, that
providing food for children in school is one of the surest ways of helping the next generation – especially girls – out of poverty. Just talk to anyone who has benefited from school feeding (e.g. the marathon world record holder, Paul Tergat) and they’ll tell you how it changed their lives.

WFP has also been developing exciting new partnerships with Italian institutions, such as universities and centers of excellence. A good example is the ITHACA project with the University of Turin and the Higher Institute of Territorial Systems of Innovation – in the area of early warning and analysis of natural disasters which so often result in food crises.

As the hosts of FAO, IFAD and WFP, Rome has gained worldwide respect for creating a centre for international cooperation in food and agriculture. Besides the Rome Millennium Initiative connected with the debt swap I’ve already mentioned, we are grateful for the generous support of the Italian government, in paying the rent for WFP headquarters – amounting to some €5 million a year – in Parco dei Medici (well-placed near the airport, as my predecessor Catherine Bertini said, to reach the 90 percent of our staff who work close to the hungry – in far off countries). We are also delighted with the immense talent and dedication of our Italian staff – now some 420 strong. And Ambassador Bettini, Permanent Representative of Italy to the UN agencies in Rome provides our Executive Board with tremendous wisdom and support.

Italy’s contributions have risen in recent years, placing the country among our top 10 donors in 2004. Unfortunately, this upward trend came to an abrupt halt this year, with Italy dropping to 25th position. I understand Italy’s budgetary constraints in these
difficult economic times, but with Italy still up among the leading world economies (7th) might it not consider making a contribution to WFP that was commensurate with its economic power? If we were to apply Italy’s economic might to WFP’s needs, we would expect to see a donation of roughly double the €38 million (US$48 million) that we received in 2005. An expression of debt swap projects to pay for food aid projects such as school feeding is one option. I sincerely hope that in the near future, WFP will build on its strong partnership with the Italian government, whose continued support for our development projects is particularly welcome as we’ve seen a troubling reduction in development funding overall. Italy remains in the top 10 donors in this category, you undoubtedly understand that it is better to invest a little now, to avoid higher costs later.

One of the more innovative ways we might consider to increase funding for humanitarian activities is through state-run lotteries. One in every two Italians buys lottery tickets of some kind. Last year we conducted a Europe-wide survey, and 85 percent of people who regularly buy lottery tickets told us that they thought a lottery in favor of humanitarian projects would be a good idea. Most of them said they would be willing to participate. The European Parliament and European Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs, Louis Michel, have endorsed the concept. If Italy were to add just one lottery draw each year, the proceeds of which could be used to fight hunger, it would not add to your government expenditures, but would count as Official Development Assistance. A wonderful way for the people of Italy to show their solidarity with the world’s hungry in which everyone wins!

Speaking of strong partnerships, we are also working closely with UNICEF whose Executive Director, Ann Veneman, and I recently briefed the U.S. Senate Committee on
Foreign Relations. Our topic was child hunger and how it can be conquered. While much work is already being done to tackle this issue, we have to face up to some horrifying statistics – 18,000 children die each day from hunger related causes – that’s one child every five seconds. I think we would all agree this is completely unacceptable in the 21st century.

Dr Norman Borlaug, the father of the 1960s ‘Green Revolution’ which saved the lives of more than one billion people, said: “If you are dealing with hunger and starvation, you better use the information you have and use it courageously to get political leaders to see the benefit.” It seems to me that in view of the fact that there is now enough food in the world to feed everyone, the political issues around hunger are our biggest challenge today.

It is an astonishing fact that, in caloric terms, there is enough food available in Italy to feed every Italian plus all the undernourished people in Ethiopia; in France the “extra” calories could feed the hungry of the Democratic Republic of Congo, while the European Union as a whole could provide enough for every one of its citizens plus every hungry person in Africa (over 200 million).

So why is one in three Africans still undernourished? Why are 38 percent of young African children stunted by malnutrition and weakened by disease? We know today that it’s not simply a question of not getting enough to eat; it is about getting the right micronutrients – like Vitamin A, iron and iodine – to meet a growing body’s needs. And it’s about basic hygiene – like washing your hands with soap to stop bacteria and having clean drinking water. That’s why together with UNICEF, WFP has developed an
‘essential package’ of services to be made available to the families most at risk of hunger and malnutrition at a cost to donors of less than €63 (US$80) per year – not a high price to put on saving a human life.

Through the initiative to End Child Hunger, WFP, UNICEF and NGO partners, propose three basic actions:

1. Locate the children most in need. We know that three quarters of them live in just 10 countries;
2. Support local organizations that can provide them the essential package of nutrition, health and hygiene help;
3. Push others to focus on these priority areas for services such as immunization and education.

During my audience earlier this year with His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, we spoke about a world in which children could grow and learn safe in the knowledge that they need not fear hunger. We need partnerships with people of all faiths. The spiritual, moral and practical support of the Church and the Pope is a special blessing.

If globalization fails, the cost will be paid by our children. There is an enormous price to continuing global instability – as Italy knows well, having experienced waves of desperate people landing on its shores, in search of a better life, and with so many of its military deployed in peacekeeping missions abroad.

As Italy prepares to take up its role as a member of the U.N. Security Council for 2007 and 2008, it would give us, in WFP, great pleasure if we could count on a true advocate
in that forum for the hungry. We need your support to ensure that the Security Council decisions taken on places like Darfur, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the occupied Palestinian territories, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, are in the best interests of the children, who are the most vulnerable, and in whose hands all our futures lie. Nigerian President Obasanjo told our Executive Board that “a hungry man is an angry man”. Let’s not allow the children of war to grow up hungry and angry.

On a personal note, it has been an honor and a privilege to live in Italy these past five years as Executive Director of the World Food Program. It was a relief to know that I could count on the firm support of the Italian government and people to fight hunger. I am truly humbled and honored to be named a Grande Ufficiale dell’ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana by the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, later this afternoon.

Thank you for your attention. May I leave you with a Sardinian proverb, which I think captures the spirit of what we should all be doing – whether we work within or alongside the World Food Program: “When you share a meal, an angel lands on your plate.”

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