"Disaster Preparedness:  A View from the Border".

21 March 2023

Opening Remarks

Ambassador Abdulhamid, (Nigeria), Chair, CTF

Good morning colleagues and welcome to this Trade Facilitation Committee event that will discuss

By way of introduction for today's event, I will ask you to cast your mind back to recent disasters that I think has shocked us all in its scale and impact.

**Turkiye and Haiti earthquakes**

On 6 February 2023, at 04:17 in the morning, a [magnitude](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seismic_magnitude_scales#Mw) 7.8 [earthquake](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earthquake) struck southern and central Turkiye, and northern and western [Syria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria).

The earthquakes caused widespread damage over an area of about 350,000 km2. That's comparable in size of Germany. As of 13 March 2023, more than 55,700 deaths have been confirmed.  The cost of this event in lives and livelihoods is hard to comprehend. Our sympathies of course go out to those affected.

Cast your mind back further and many of you will also remember another catastrophic earthquake.  The one in 2010 that hit Haiti - one of the poorest countries in the world.

Following Turkiye's call for international help, more than 141,000 people from 94 countries have been involved in rescue efforts.  In the case of Haiti, some 140 countries and 30 international organizations were involved.

While I grieve for the human impact of these events, I take comfort in the desire of so many people and nations to respond and support recovery.

**View from the border**

One of the terms that you will likely hear discussed today is "**surge**". This is a term used by the humanitarian community that refers to the rapid deployment of humanitarian personnel, specialized equipment and goods in response to a disaster.

Otherwise explained, this is the physical manifestation of our common human desire to help those affected by disaster.

The consequence is that **customs and other border agencies are in the frontline of supporting response when disaster strikes**.

One of the first points of contact for the humanitarian community, both domestic and foreign, will be the border agencies.

Put simply, the first challenge, as ***viewed from the border,*** is how to ensure that customs and other border agencies are not themselves overwhelmed by the surge.

Research by the WTO on the link between natural disasters and trade found that the border agencies in some disaster affected island states had to clear many times the normal volume of trade in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. And from a very diverse range of different actors, many of whom were dealing with the border agencies of the disaster affected country for the first time.

Furthermore, a range of factors also impeded their ability to do clear the import surge.  Factors such as physical damage to port infrastructure, border staff and their families affected by the crisis event, internet access disrupted etc, etc

But the research also points to some other issues. Legal and regulatory.  Factors such as border agencies not being legally empowered to expedite consignments.  Staff uncertain of their revenue collection obligations or if they can set aside the usual documentation checks and requirements.

**Disaster preparedness**

All of which brings us to the theme of today's workshop.  How can we prepare **in advance.** Before disaster strikes? And what tools do we have at our disposal to do so?

Following this logical thread further, this is what connects us back to the Trade Facilitation Agreement and the work of this Committee.

At its heart, the TFA is about the simplification, modernization and harmonization of export and import processes.

So question that we'll look at today is  how could the TFA help border agencies face the challenge posed by disasters.

Unfortunately, the outlook is not very encouraging.  We're going to have to deal with a growing burden of such events

* The World Meteorological Organization [estimates](https://public.wmo.int/en/media/press-release/weather-related-disasters-increase-over-past-50-years-causing-more-damage-fewer) that the number of weather-related disasters has increased by a factor of five over the past 50 years. [Research](https://www.undrr.org/media/79595/download) by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction suggests that the number of disasters per year globally may rise 40% by 2030.
* And some of these disaster hazards are by their nature hard to predict. The United States Geological Survey estimates that there are about 20,000 earthquakes around the globe each year.  That's approximately 55 per day. Knowing in advance which of these earthquake events will result in a disaster like those that have hit Turkiye this year or that destroyed Haiti in 2010 is impossible.

My own country, Nigeria, was hit by devastating floods last year that displaced over 1.4 million people. (ADD A SENTENCE ON THE CAPACITY IN WHICH S/HE IS SPEAKING) Indeed, that was one of the reasons that I was so happy to accept the invitation to open today's event.

As my colleagues from southern Africa know this is not an academic issue. Even as I speak, Tropical Cyclone Freddy is making its devastating way through Madagascar, Malawi and Mozambique

Many were the voices that warned about the risk of zoonotic pandemics.  But who could've foreseen COVID-19's emergence and impact of this disease on the global economy?

I hope that these remarks underscore the **need for preparedness** in the face of this uncertainty.

While we cannot know if and when an event will hit us, we can still prepare for it.

Indeed, given the critical role that customs and other border agencies play in times of crisis, I think we have a duty to do so. And there may be ways that the TFA can help us to prepare.

With these words of introduction, let me hand over now to Christina Kopitopoulos, Deputy Assistant U.S. Trade Representative for WTO and Multilateral Affairs.