Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
Event
The Red Zone: Charting Paths to Resilience in the Climate-Conflict Nexus
Opening Keynote: The U.S. Climate Pledge and Humanitarian Action featuring Martin Griffiths and Sonali Korde

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FEATURING
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Sonali Korde
Assistant to the Administrator, USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)

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Good morning. It is my absolute privilege to welcome you today to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. My name is Michelle Strucke. I’m the Khosravi chair for Principled Internationalism, the director of the Humanitarian Agenda, and the director of the Human Rights Initiative here at CSIS.

We are absolutely delighted that you decided to take time out of your day to come join us for we think a very important and exciting array of conversations at our annual 2024 Washington Humanitarian Forum. Today our theme is Charting Paths – The Red Zone: Charting Paths to Resilience in the Climate-Conflict Nexus.

This is such an important topic at a time when, on the world stage, we see the dramatic impacts, both of climate change, that are happening as we speak to vulnerable people around the world, as well as to our own neighbors, friends, and people in our countries and, as we also see, humanitarian crises that are proliferating, they’re longer than ever, and now a record-breaking number of 300 million people in need, according to U.N. OCHA, projected in 2024.

Against this backdrop, I think it can be very easy to feel that solutions are not in our grasp, and that’s all the more reason why I’m so honored and delighted that you decided to join us today here in person or online because discussing specific solutions that break down silos, that allow us to engage what, in many of these spaces, is more of a calling than it is a job. People generally don’t run into harm’s way for fun. It’s something that is a deeply seated feeling that brings us together. So it is my hope that, in addition to hearing from distinguished panelists and great speakers in our conference today, you also speak with each other, you connect with each other as people, because humanity is one of the central, important humanitarian principles. And it is that that brings us to do this very difficult work.

A lot of people in this forum today will be asked what brings them hope. I hope you connect with that question. And I would add to it something I heard Heba Aly from The New Humanitarian say before she finished up her term there. She said, in quoting a NASA climate scientist who was asked about climate change, what gives you hope? And the climate scientist said: nothing gives me hope. We’ve already seen irreparable damage to our planet. And I know we can say that in the humanitarian sector too. We’ve had seen losses of life that are unfortunately also record breaking. Just in the last seven months in the conflict in Gaza alone we’ve seen a record-breaking number of aid workers die. And I’ll come back to that in a minute.

But in response to this question of what gives you hope, when she said
there isn't hope in this loss of life, she talked about grief and the fact that we might be feeling mourning as a community. And we should be. And we are. But she also talked about the fact that what we need today is courage. So, having resilience in the face of uncertain outcomes, in the face of damage, in the face of loss is something we can all do together. And to reach across our sectors – we have here today development practitioners, we have humanitarian professionals, and we also have climate folks that focus specifically on climate. Even though I know many of us would raise our hand and say, I’m not a climate person. I’ve seen that in every job I’ve ever been in, now is the time when we do need to also be climate people. So, I’m very grateful to thank USAID’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance for supporting this conference.

And, back on the issue that I raised earlier, I would say that if we could please collectively, before we begin this conference, in recognition of the incredible sacrifice that so many humanitarian aid workers have made in the last seven months but also in the many years since we’ve been doing humanitarian aid. We know that 2023 is said to be the deadliest year on record to be a humanitarian aid worker. So, in recognition of that loss of life, the loss of life of the victims of conflict, and people you may even know, I would just ask us if we could please take one moment of silence to reflect and think about that before we begin these important discussions.

(A moment of silence is observed.)

Thank you. So, on that note, I hope, of courage, of hope, of a recognition of what is at stake if we do not come up with solutions, I’m delighted to announce and to describe our keynote speaker today.

Mr. Martin Griffiths, who is the United Nations undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs and the emergency relief coordinator. Mr. Griffiths has served as advisor to three special envoys of the secretary general for Syria and the secretary – and deputy head of the United Nations Supervision Mission in the Syrian Arab Republic, UNSMIS, from 2012 to 2014. He was the first executive director of the European Institute of Peace and the founding director of the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva, where he specialized in developing political dialogue between governments and insurgents in a range of countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe.

He has a distinguished background in resource mobilization and donor relations, managing response to natural disasters, to international advocacy and diplomacy, having worked within the British diplomatic service, the United Nations’ international humanitarian organizations, and nongovernmental organizations, including the U.N. Children’s Fund,
UNICEF, Save the Children, and ActionAid. He also served in Geneva as the director of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, which preceded the establishment of OCHA, as deputy to the U.N. Emergency Relief Coordinator in New York, and as U.N. regional humanitarian coordinator for the Great Lakes and in the Balkans.

I’m absolutely delighted to have his remarks, especially as he’s announced that he’s concluding his tour at OCHA. And with deep gratitude for everything you’ve done, I pass it to you. Thank you.

Martin Griffiths: Thanks, Michelle. Thanks very much indeed. Thank you for inviting me and thank you for that overwhelming introduction of all the different things I’ve done and run away from.

So, thanks to CSIS. Thanks to Michelle. Thank you for specifically homing in on, I guess, one of the principal challenges of our time. As you say, climate is no longer a threat. It’s a reality. The threats of climate change are a reality for poor communities around the world. And importantly – and this will be the theme, I think, of my brief remarks this morning, Michelle – it is a challenge which is beginning to outstrip conflict as the key driver of humanitarian assistance, those 300 million people you’ve been talking about.

And in the last 20 years indeed, we have seen a staggering 800 percent increase in climate-related humanitarian appeals, humanitarian projects, for which we’re trying to raise money globally. And we’ve seen frequent extreme-weather events in the last year, very, very tangibly – high temperatures, wildfires, flooding, and droughts.

And as you said in your introduction, Michelle, this is something which is affecting all the countries that both we work in, and we live in. And it is no surprise to anybody in this room that the most vulnerable people, communities, and countries which are hit the hardest are almost always those who have done the least to deserve these threats and these challenges but who deserve our help and our understanding, and, as I will say towards the conclusion, are listening.

And I want to take a look at Syria. You mentioned that I’d worked for a number of U.N. special envoys for Syria, and indeed, since 2012 and up to today, very much involved in the issues of Syria. Syria is a situation where each year, in the 12-13 years of war that’s still really ongoing, each year the plight of the Syrian people has become more difficult.

The economic situation has, you know, become worse. The numbers of those below the poverty line have increased. And I think they’re over 90 percent now. And more people need humanitarian assistance now than
ever, despite the volumes of work and money that has been poured into Syria and the surrounding countries which have taken refugees.

The shocks – the economic shocks, the conflict shocks, the climate shocks – combine to make Syria a poster boy for the issue that you have decided to highlight today. We talk a lot in the Syrian context about the role of the conflict, naturally enough – it is what drove us to go there in the first place – but much less about the role of climate change.

Rising temperatures, decreased rainfall and water scarcity, all climate shocks, have all led to reduced water levels in the Euphrates. And I notice, because having been involved myself in negotiations about how to remedy some of the damage done to Euphrates beneficiaries as well as the infrastructure, damage to water infrastructure itself has a knock-on effect on electricity, itself has a knock-on effect on the provision of basic services. So, the water-supply problems of the Euphrates is a direct line to humanitarian invulnerability of communities.

Drought also, a completely different shock, have compounded the impacts on agriculture. In As-Suwayda Governorate, 97 percent of the cultivated land relies on rainfall for irrigation, and, because of the droughts, has been especially hard hit. And elsewhere we’ve seen frequent forest fires throughout the country stoked by warm eastern winds, dry vegetation and so forth. So, Syria is a clear example of that nexus that you are focusing on today.

Another example, Afghanistan, where this year we’re seeking to reach 17 million people with humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian crisis has been fueled, of course, in Afghanistan by years and years of conflict – you need hardly say that in a meeting in Washington – instability, poor governance following the Taliban takeover also in 2021, but it’s been perpetuated by a major environmental crisis. This includes recurrent drought, drying land, severe flooding, deforestation, desertification, and the excessive use of farmland and pasture. In the agricultural sector in Afghanistan, the lack of investment in it due to the fact that funding, of course – aid funding has been cut with the arrival of the Taliban.

And the effect of some of their policies and positions is taking away some of the resilience and sustainability of that economy. Livestock is being depleted. Negative coping strategies are increasing, including child marriage and child labor. And again, these are actions and tragedies which are directly attributable back up to conflict and climate. Similarly outsized impacts in places like Myanmar, Yemen, Haiti, and Colombia, to name only a few.

And it’s not a one-way street. The effects of climate change are feeding
conflict as well as conflict feeding them. In the Sahel, for example, resource scarcity associated with climate change is thought to be linked to increased intercommunity tensions in Niger and elsewhere, including conflict between farmers, herders, pastoralists, and non-pastoralists.

The impacts, as we know well, are not gender neutral. Women and girls are more vulnerable to and negatively impacted by climate risks due to deeply rooted gender inequalities that we all see daily on those frontlines. They’re more vulnerable to slow-onset climate events such as droughts due to high dependence on climate-sensitive work such as farming and, indeed, their limited access over time limiting and limiting to economic resources.

We, therefore, were pleased in the last COP to see the establishment of the first relief, recovery, and peace day in Dubai last year. For the first time at COP, this signaled important international recognition of the intersection between climate change, peace, and security. I had been at the COP in Sharm El-Sheikh the year before, where we did not see – where we were not, as a humanitarian community, anything like as focused and as well-organized as we became – with much more to do, by the way, as we became for COP-28.

But I’d like to turn to what I would like to suggest are the priorities for effective action. First, obviously, I’ve just mentioned in the COP more climate-sensitive support and investment in resilience and adaptation. This means breaking down the silos to ensure that communities affected by these challenges of economic inequality, climate, and conflict get a full range of support they need for the full range of challenges they face. And they see no distinction between development and humanitarian and climate money; they simply know they are in need of and deserve assistance from the full spectrum without silos.

Humanitarians are providing climate-sensitive support, including the rehabilitation of water infrastructure, solarization, smart irrigation systems, but we need to do more. We need to use climate data in our programming so that we are aware of the trends and themes and patterns in that particular area, and we need to do it with the benefit of our – as, Michelle, you said – our climate folks. We can’t do it alone. Much more investment is needed across the board from governments, development bodies, to the private sector. It’s very welcome that – the signing of so many states at COP-28 of the Declaration on Climate Relief, Recovery, and Peace happened, but the record of converting – as we all know in this room particularly – converting promises into practical reality on the frontlines is not a great one.

Although I have to say I was – I had the privilege of listening in a
meeting of humanitarian coordinators from around the world last week in Istanbul to at last some good news coming out of Somalia, where we have all said that there has been an absolute scandalous absence of climate investment and investment in resilience. And I’m hearing that it’s beginning to come through thanks to the leadership of the Somali government supported, of course, by international organizations – the U.N. and others.

In OCHA, my office, we were pleased – and we thought about this quite carefully – to launch the new climate action account in our Central Emergency Response Fund. We didn’t want to look as if we wanted to raid the climate kitty for humanitarian, but we were eventually persuaded that the CERF – the Central Emergency Response Fund – which has a good record of fast disbursement at times of crisis and getting it to local organizations, which of course are the tip of the spear, that this also should be at the service of the need for climate resilience funding.

Number two, we need to adopt more innovative humanitarian solutions to address climate-related emergencies. And I’ve already referred to the need for using climate science in our programming. Anticipate reaction, I think we all come across this, is the original idea and a prime example of how this can work. So, we should be less reactive and more proactive, better at building community resilience, using science about extreme climate and weather events, and if they’re predictable acting in anticipation.

Anticipatory action itself minimizes human and economic costs of crisis, getting money to people before the sale of assets or their own displacement. And I’m pleased with what OCHA is contributing to this. By using our pooled funds, both the Central Emergency Response Fund and others, we currently fund 70 percent of all anticipatory reaction responses globally, and 50 percent of all prearranged funding. So we’re trying to play our role and provide an opportunity for the generosity of donors to be translated into reality. We need to make our response plans more risk-based, not just needs-based. And we need to build stronger partnerships, back to that problem of the silos that, Michelle, you also referred to in your introduction.

And finally, and for me most importantly – it’s at the heart of my time in OCHA this time around – is the need to listen. It was evident to me when taking up this time in OCHA three years ago that we will not, as a humanitarian community, listening properly and making the community the guide and director of the way we work and the way we serve their needs. Listening to communities is something that development and other communities have been, on the whole, better
than we have. So, we’ve had to learn from them.

We have decided – we decided to start a process of radical change of our programming posture by having the listening to communities come first and the programming come second, and then the supply chains come third. And we’re rolling this out in four countries. But what is so encouraging to me is how the humanitarian coordinators who represent all our community, not just the U.N., and so many of our different countries around the world are picking this up and running with it, whether it’s the Central African Republic, whether it’s Afghanistan, whether it’s Yemen, in addition to the four countries where we have prioritized this – South Sudan, Colombia, the Philippines, and Niger.

Listening to communities, I hope – which is a generational issue for the humanitarian community but is one which is essential in all kinds of ways. It’s essential for moral reasons, for purposes of values. But it’s also essential because they know that the nexus, Michelle, that you refer to as the focus of our talk here today, is to them as natural as the sun that rises in the morning. They do not see this as a complex policy problem. They see this as the reality of their lives. I thank you very much. (Applause.)

Ms. Strucke: Thank you so much for those remarks. And definitely, that responds so well to the theme of today.

I’ll now introduce Sonali Korde, who was the assistant to the administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance. Sonali Korde is the – is the – yes, Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, which is called BHA, which is the U.S. government lead for international disaster response. With a mandate to save lives, alleviate human suffering, and reduce the impact of disasters, BHA monitors, mitigates, and responds to global hazards and humanitarian needs. The bureau also promotes resilience by preparing communities for disasters before they strike and by helping people recover and move beyond crises.

Ms. Korde previously served on the National Security Council staff as director for global health and development. In this role, she supported all aspects of the U.S. government’s global health portfolio and linkages to broader development, security, and bilateral diplomacy and cooperation goals. She supported NSC’s coordination of the interagency Ebola response, other emerging infectious disease responses including MERS and Zika, and the global health security agenda. And prior to joining the NSC, she served as USAID foreign affairs fellow in the office of Congresswoman Nita Lowey, ranking member of the House
So please join me in giving Ms. Korde a warm welcome. (Applause.)

Sonali Korde: Hi. Good morning. Sorry, one minute while I get my papers in order. (Laughs.)

Good morning. And thank you, Michelle and CSIS, for inviting me to participate in this year’s Washington Humanitarian Forum.

I’m pleased to follow ERC Griffiths and his remarks, a great friend and leader of this time of crisis. Martin has my thanks for all he has done to support the most vulnerable and the most difficult places around the world.

So, to start, let me share a few of my own reflections about the critical role humanitarians play in addressing rising needs around the globe, especially those created by the cumulative and compounding impacts of conflict and climate change.

The consequences of the climate crisis grow devastating and enduring with every – each year. Its impacts are most keenly and disproportionately felt by frontline communities in low- and middle-income countries facing underlying fragilities. When compounded by conflict, political instability, and social tensions, climate-related disasters can exacerbate environmental degradation and land-tenure issues, degrade food systems and sociopolitical dynamics, and leave communities more vulnerable and exposed.

At BHA, we are working to support the transformation of the humanitarian sector to better adapt to this growing challenge that’s created and exacerbated by climate change. BHA is the single – large single donor of humanitarian assistance, and we respond to emergencies in more than 60 countries every year while also supporting early recovery, risk reduction, and resilience efforts.

Coordinated efforts are required to address needs at the nexus of conflict and climate. And we are centering our response around three key objectives.

First is to anticipate climate risks and trends and invest in and implement the vital early-warning systems that enable early interventions.

Second, we are focused on innovating across the continuum from
emergency response interventions that protect lives to development assistance that uplifts livelihoods and promoting diverse food systems and building longer-term resilience.

And finally, investing in climate adaptation in fragile crisis-affected areas, working to reach local communities where there is limited institutional capacity, ongoing conflict, or both, which makes it that much more difficult for these communities to absorb the brunt of increasingly frequent and severe climate-related disasters.

Early warning and anticipatory action are our first means of approaching climate-conflict nexus challenge. BHA is proud to advance USAID’s 2022 to 2030 Climate Strategy and the priorities of the President’s Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience, or PREPARE, through our longstanding disaster risk-reduction activities, scaled-up investments in early-warning systems, and local capacity strengthening and resilience programming.

So, for example, USAID’s flagship Famine Early Warning System, FEWS NET, monitors the effects of climate change on crop productivity and resource scarcity globally. The FEWS NET climate science has increased the predictability of La Niña drought in the Horn of Africa, improving forecasting of the recent historical five failed rainy seasons in the Horn that nearly resulted in famine in conflict-affected Somalia. FEWS NET’s ability to forecast the combined effects of climate and conflict on food systems has enabled the forecast of emergency food and security, and this is allowing all of us to get ahead of some of these food crises with the delivery of assistance before they devolve into full-fledged humanitarian and security crises. Critically, FEWS NET’s analysis has found that the two biggest drivers of food insecurity are climate change and conflict. This also underscores why we need to invest not only in adaptation and early warning, but also the conflict prevention and mitigation work around the world.

Additionally, another example is BHA’s partnerships with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the World Meteorological Organization, and the Hydrological Research Center. We have implemented a flash-flood guidance system that enables national authorities across 74 countries to monitor flash-flood early warnings to more than 3 billion people. By 2027, we will expand implementation to over 20 countries, of which eight are in a fragile conflict-affected context. There’s been several flood events in recent weeks that we’ve seen around the world, and floods can be devastating. I was in Pakistan during the big flood as well and can speak firsthand to the devastating context of a – of a flood, but then all the ongoing after-effects on agriculture and disease that can emerge after that.
In pursuit to reduce disaster risks and promote locally led and equitable climate adaptation, we must also recognize that disaster risk-management efforts must be linked and coordinated into a broader holistic approach with other stakeholders across the humanitarian-development peace nexus, to not just avoid the duplication but create collaborative responses that are more than the sum of their parts, to maximize impact and protect hard-earned development gains in the face of these kinds of shocks.

I think one of the cornerstones of this work in BHA is our Resilience Food Security Activities, also called RFSAs in BHA world. These programs are multiyear, multisectoral initiatives that aim to strengthen community capacity, to prevent and mitigate recurring climate disasters and support integrative solutions to disaster response and food insecurities.

RFSAs are intended to reduce the overall need for ongoing and recurrent humanitarian assistance. So, for example, in Ethiopia, our RFSAs work across the nexus as they operate in some of the most challenging environment, such as Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray, where communities have been devastated by the effects of drought and conflict.

I was in Ethiopia recently and saw firsthand the deadly troika of conflict, climate shocks in the form of persistent droughts and food insecurity just come together in devastating ways. These programs aim to build resilience in the face of these shocks by adapting to changing conditions on the ground.

In Amhara, the RFSAs are pivoting to provide continuative services in areas where the government is currently unable to fully operate and lay the groundwork for early recovery.

In Tigray, after the cessation of hostilities was signed in November 2022, these programs are working to reestablish a crucial safety-net program that had collapsed during the years of conflict. This program is intended to provide either cash or food programs to poor households.

And in Burkina Faso, RFSA programming is working to strengthen community and governance capacities to reduce conflict, improve wash and nutrition and practices, advance natural-resource management and agricultural production and livelihoods, all in an integrated way to promote overall economic wellbeing and address all of these issues in a multisectoral way.
Enhanced coordination and complementarity across this nexus and among sectors has to be a key priority when exploring new ways to leverage more predictable climate funding for fragile and conflict-affected communities, where the funding gap remains the widest. We do need to continue to leverage new and existing ways of working together, including the multi-development – the multilateral development banks, climate funds, the private-sector philanthropic foundations and financial institutions to just improve these operations.

We’re finding our humanitarian partners look for and introduce new ways of bringing in more funding. As Martin had already mentioned, and again, OCHA, thanks to his leadership, recently launched a climate-action account within the Central Emergency Response Fund. This is crucial to bringing in additive investments from a variety of sources to prioritize helping the world’s most vulnerable address these climate shocks.

We’re also seeing huge momentum on this issue with the pivotal COP-28 Declaration on Climate Relief, Recovery and Peace, which calls on international financial institutions, development, humanitarian, civil society and governments to find ways of building resilience through accelerated climate action supported by finance in countries affected by fragility and conflict. We all need to carry this forward, including through future humanitarian days at COP.

And finally, we need to connect all of these efforts better with frontline communities and actors and strive to provide every country with the robust capacity to prepare for, respond, and reduce the impacts of their own disasters, especially in conflict settings. Our support for frontline community’s links to USAID’s priority focus on finalizing a locally led humanitarian action policy.

In line with the agency’s broader vision for localization, this policy is supporting the transformation of the humanitarian system to one that operates more fully on the basis of local decisions and priorities. So, for example, we’re working with the University of Arizona to advance local capacity in local universities around the world to reduce the impact of climate.

We’re also looking at ways to work with youth and young professionals and support local research to address local climate issues in Africa, the Pacific, Latin America, and the Caribbean. And we also have the Climate Smart and Disaster Ready Program. We are supporting local organizations – NGOs, PIOs, and others – to reduce the risk of climate-related disasters. So, for example, for this program we’re providing $4.4 million dollars to establish a Melanesian Youth Climate Corp, which will
equip young leaders in Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea with the skills and knowledge and resources needed for their communities to advance adaptation and risk reduction.

I think all of us here understand the challenges we’re up against, but the escalation and overlapping impacts of climate and conflict require all of us to really work together to undertake a multifaceted response. Anticipation, innovation, adaptation will all be required to respond to these needs. And we’re committed to working with you all to meet them. Thank you. (Applause.)

Ms. Strucke: Thank you so much. I think it’s very inspiring and encouraging to hear how many innovative approaches that USAID BHA is taking to this issue. And I’m delighted to have a conversation with you about some of the key trends and issues within this topic, as well as some areas of, you know, some of the broader questions, and then some of the specific approaches that you’re taking. So thanks for taking the time.

So, I’ll start with something quite general. In your work, you have this unique vantage point. You get to speak with USAID’s considerable humanitarian partners, donor governments and funders, private sector actors – all of whom are, you know, working to achieve help to vulnerable populations around the world every day. So what are some of the trends that you see overall in the humanitarian space that are impacting our community that people in the room and people watching online should be paying attention to in 2024?

Ms. Korde: Sure. So, thanks for that question. It’s a tough question in a lot of ways, because I’m sure we all see different elements of it. But from my vantage point, I can mention a few things which are what are occupying a lot of my time, but also just my worry meter. So really, one of the things that’s top of mind for me right now is just the growing needs from conflict and very difficult access issues. And, you know, what comes top of mind is obviously Ukraine, and Gaza, and Sudan. And the very difficult environment that humanitarians are working in, and just difficulties on access.

This tells me that really, we as a community need to engage on humanitarian diplomacy and just concerted action together, which really – we have to talk to everyone who can help solve a problem. This includes countries in the region, regional actors. In our case, we are working very hard to stay linked up with the State Department, with DOD. And we’re increasingly talking to security counterparts around the world. And, again, this is interesting for, I think, humanitarians to have to do this. But, you know, it kind of tightens our cooperation as we do seek the advice of, for example, you know, DOD colleagues as well. So, as
Michelle was a huge support to Sarah, your successors are huge support to me in just sort of understanding some of these complex dynamics.

I think the other thing that I worry about is there’s a lot of parts of the world that are being overshadowed by the sort of front line, what’s in the newspaper, conflicts. And Martin mentioned some of these places, but I also worry about the Horn of Africa. Not just Sudan, but South Sudan, and Ethiopia, where I personally saw some of the most devastating impacts of food insecurity, malnutrition in the aftermath of conflict. Somalia. I worry a lot about the Sahel. And I worry a lot about the Congo, a country that is very close to my heart. And all of these conflicts, all of these places have a conflict nexus to them. And they’re exacerbated by climate-related shocks – floods, droughts, storms – that’s just to name a few.

So, it’s the – it’s the things that are not making the news that are also worrying me, and I think we, as a community, need to focus on those as well.

Ms. Strucke: Thank you, and I hear so much in your words that I think is relevant to our community here at CSIS, too: the need to often explain what humanitarian action is, and the fact that humanitarians have to negotiate across lines and conflict. They have to negotiate with parties to the conflict in order to gain that precious access that allows them, through impartial humanitarian action, to actually deliver aid.

But I think that’s something I know – you mentioned that I was at DOD before – that it’s not always very understood by the broader security community, so I wanted to highlight that you said that and emphasize that having these conversations again, across silos, it might feel repetitive to have to explain ourselves over and over again, but that is, I think, what now demands. So, thank you so much for that response.

So, you mentioned, you know, parts of the world being overshadowed and the really important links that we’re here to discuss today between climate and conflict. You know, it’s widely recognized that our current international aid system is not attracting enough resources to meet the demand developing economies have to adapt to the impacts climate changes is going to have on their populations.

And so, you know, USAID Administrator Power, I loved how she called it the $2 trillion question at COP this year. She said, understanding how the world will raise enough resources to meet the $2 trillion per year that is needed by 2030 to adapt infrastructure, food systems, serve a huge amount of people – 3.6 billion people on this planet – help recover from climate shocks and build clean energy sources for the future.
BHA at USAID has such a unique vantage point, again, from which to view the funding gap as well as a role in discussing what barriers to financing are specifically inhibiting donor governments and private sector actors who, you know, as Administrator Power also said, are really viewed in this field as largely the answer to this – to this enormous, unfathomable gap from dramatically scaling up.

So, I think it would be wonderful if you could tell us a little bit about what are the kinds of changes needed to help humanitarians, government donors, and private sector actors make those greater investments to meet this unprecedented challenges – unprecedented challenge.

Ms. Korde: Great, so you know humanitarians have a unique perspective, and for our part, we’re focused first and foremost on the humanitarian funding gap, which is enormous. The humanitarian needs have surged, doubling since 2020, so with an additional 140 million people possibly needing aid by 2030 and a $41 billion funding gap, this is already forcing us to make very difficult prioritization decisions based on focusing on just the most acute emergency needs.

You know, I will take this moment right now to say thanks to our Congress for appropriating the supplemental funds. It literally is a lifesaver, and I know that a lot of people in this room were instrumental to telling the stories on the ground and making the case. And so, thanks to you, as well, for telling the stories and advocating, and the bipartisan support that we have received as a community to try to continue this life-saving work.

So, you know, as today’s humanitarian crises are caused by extreme weather, whether it’s sudden or slow onset hazards, floods – as we already talked about – droughts, cyclones, extreme heat, and then other disasters around the world, we cannot afford to let these impacts increase humanitarian needs and widen the humanitarian funding gap. But it’s happening. And again, it’s the politically fragile and conflict-affected countries that are hardest to invest in and draw in private sector funding or other types of fundings because of very real risks and instability, as well as elevated perceived risks. So that’s a major challenge to drawing in that kind of investment.

Another challenge is just the capacity to access what we call vertical climate funds such as the Green Climate Fund and Adaptation Funds. The barriers include just lack of harmonization of requirements for accreditation, or just the application processes that can be hard to navigate, and just the resources to complete these kinds of application
processes.

So, we’ve heard that it can take applicants up to two years to apply for some of these funding, without any guarantee of success. And for countries that are already war torn and may not have functioning institutions, this is even more challenging. So there’s temporal challenges, you know, advancing longer term or interannual efforts to address climate change. They’re often not a priority for implementing agencies and communities. And, you know, even we at USAID are living on a fiscal year by fiscal year cycle. So, we have challenges with that as well. And then, of course, I’ve already talked about this, is just the capacity to absorb the financing, especially in difficult or just conflict-ridden countries.

So, I think some ways that we can think about trying to address it is to work on considering small grant facilities which target local smaller organizations in these fragile settings. The processes would really need to be simplified and tailored to the limited fiduciary and bureaucratic capacity of local organizations. We also grapple with this in our localization policies, on how do we simplify things. So this is something that I think all of us as donors need to think about. How do we simplify, how do we tailor things to local actors? And I think we can collaborate to ensure that a portion of this funding is accessible to these high-risk contexts.

So, we are looking at our own tools on how to do this. As I said, like, simplify procedures. We have also used what we call crisis modifiers in our grant agreements to support our partners to inject emergency funds through existing programs and quickly address changing situations on the ground. But, you know, the real, I think, challenge is finding ways to attract investment from the private sector, especially in these contexts. And how do we think about reducing risk for those partners and – or, managing, or mitigating them? And that’s a hard conversation. I think that’s something where we really require a lot of creativity and expertise.

We have seen U.S. corporate interest on the larger climate action agenda. So 31 companies have invested in the PREPARE Initiative, the broader U.S. government PREPARE Initiative. And that investment is valued at $2.3 billion. So we just need to figure out how to mobilize some of that in some of these harder contexts.

Ms. Strucke: Thank you so much. That’s such a comprehensive answer. I think that brings up so many of the things that I know that, as watchers of USAID, as appreciators of USAID, we’ve seen the agency take such a different approach to risk. And I know how hard that is in this Washington
environment, where the kind of – the impetus from Congress and others that are providing oversight is to kind of squeeze tighter and have more and more control. When in reality, the paradox is – as my former employer, Oxfam, used to say – the paradox of control is that you – you know, in a place with constantly changing circumstances, like a conflict zone, that’s exactly where you need more flexibility. So, thank you so much for describing the crisis modifiers and the ways that you’re thinking about risk.

I want to pick up on what you said about localization. You know, it's continually been a focus of USAID for more than a decade. Administrator Power includes, of course, it in her list of priorities, which is welcome as successive U.S. administrations have worked within USAID to greater increase localization. And this is happening against the backdrop of everything from, you know, large development actors and private sector agencies now focusing on this topic, all the way to interest from members of Congress.

So, it would be really interesting to hear more about how greater localization can help us meet the needs of populations impacted by both climate shocks and conflict. And, as you mentioned, you know, seeing in Ethiopia on the ground, the populations themselves don’t specifically distinguish between those different sectors. So they view their needs as being local and they have local capacity. So what changes is USAID making to make it easier for local actors to maybe partner beyond some of that – those things you mentioned about, you know, increasing simplicity and allowing them to apply?

Ms. Korde: Great. Thanks.

So, yeah, as you’ve noted, it’s a top priority for USAID and BHA, and it has been over successive administrators and administrations. And we all need to do more to empower local actors and local systems and be responsive to affected communities.

And so, I think locally-led solutions, it’s – you know, you can quantify it in terms of how much of our funding is going to local NGOs, but I think it’s also more than that. I think it is also a mindset. So, we’re also looking at this more broadly.

So, for example, we are trying to offer more opportunities to engage in award-making and processes in other languages, other than English, including trying to translate solicitations into local languages and support to translate applications back into English. And there is an agencywide effort to issue new guidance and tools on how to access funding opportunities. There’s a workwithUSAID.gov website to better
explain to organizations who are – who may be new grant recipients and not as familiar who are looking to partner with us on how some of our Byzantine processes work.

Another thing that we are looking at is there’s a – revising the tool that we use to determine an organization’s readiness to manage U.S. funding. Another fun acronym called the NUPAS – I think it's NUPAS, or – (changes pronunciation) – NUPAS – the Non-U.S. Organization Pre-Award Survey. And again, it’s intended to be more flexible and tailorable, and kind of shifting away from a pass/fail approach to just more of a risk-mitigation approach.

So, we’ve been making strides step by step towards growing BHA’s local partnership base. And in between fiscal year ‘22 and ’23, we more than doubled our local funding. So, we’re very proud of that. And we’ll – the agency will soon be issuing an agencywide localization progress report for fiscal year 2023, so that’ll have more facts and figures.

We do have USAID’s forthcoming policy on locally-led humanitarian assistance, LLHA – another acronym – which articulates our vision for local humanitarian partnerships across the – across contexts, all of the things we’ve already all talked about. So the policy aims to further support for local actors in designing, leading, and assessing humanitarian action. We want to increase direct funding, but also advocate for equitable partnerships, and just enhancing local places and leadership.

So, we will hold a global virtual launch event for the policy this year. I don't have any news on timing. We’re still finalizing it. It’s getting through our building. But stay tuned for more information and hope you can all participate.

Ms. Strucke: Thank you. I certainly look forward to being on that virtual event, so I hope you all will join as well to learn more about that.

And thank you. It’s hard to overstate, I think, how complex it can be for local actors to understand all the compliance rules/regulations, and then not only that but submit a polished product. So I really appreciate hearing about those changes to the – to the process to allow them to have that risk-mitigation approach, which also fits the theme today of understanding, really, some of the world’s most complex places. I think there’s a tendency in lots of issues to say we want to find places where we can win and we can show progress instead of looking at the places where the needs are the most concentrated. And what I really appreciate about BHA and all of your work is that by letting the needs lead you are not shying away from looking at places where it’s, frankly,
just the most complicated to do any kind of humanitarian action.

You know, on that note of thinking about specifically the risks that – you know, both in terms of we’ve talked about risk mitigation by the agency, flexibility on risk, and the need for a risk-based approach, but then the basic risk that USAID staff and partners are taking right now, you know, we face challenges for aid workers for many of the partner organizations that are in this room today who are seeing the basic protections that should be afforded aid workers in this 75th anniversary year of the Geneva Conventions – we see those being eroded by parties to the conflict around the world. And those protections put aid workers, whether local or international, in harm’s way when they’re trying to deliver aid impartially. As I mentioned in my opening, last year was the most deadly on record for aid workers.

So, what message do you have for partners and governments about why protecting aid workers is so vital? And what more can be done to ensure that aid workers have the protection that they deserve?

Ms. Korde: This is – this is the thing that really, I think, keeps us all up at night. I’m very deeply troubled by the levels of violence against humanitarian personnel, particularly our local and national staff, who account for 90 to 96 percent of fatalities in recent years. And I think as you said, the experts in humanitarian safety and security describe the last 24 months as frighteningly violent for aid workers. I mean, this week alone there are so many incidents that happened, and I am writing far too many condolence notes to partners. It’s heartbreaking.

And just to share a few additional stats, I think since January 157 U.N. personnel and humanitarian aid workers have been attacked; ninety-nine lost their lives, making this the most violent quarter for aid workers in recent memory. And year on year, nearly all deaths, injuries, kidnappings of humanitarian staff are local and national staff, and they are members of the communities that they serve. And we need solutions to protect them, and we need to re-instill the fundamental protections that humanitarian workers should have.

And you know, the body of research over the years basically challenges, like, certain false misconceptions, that the aid workers are inadequately trained or unprepared or – you know, sometimes there’s a narrative that they didn’t follow all the processes. And this cannot matter. I mean, what matters is that they’re protected, and just no excuses about that. And I think for all of us in every forum we have to advocate strongly for protections, and deconfliction systems, and making sure that notification systems are robust and are adhered to.
What amazes me is that humanitarian workers still go to work every day after things happen. I am amazed at just how strong our community is. Even after heartbreak, time and time again they will say we’re going back to work immediately because people need us. So, like, if that isn’t compelling enough for – (laughs) – people to respect and protect these – our brave colleagues who are out there, you know, I don’t – I don’t know what else is.

And so, it’s a bit of an emotional – (laughs) – response to your question. But we just need to continue to advocate and do more.

You know, just another fact. Just last year, BHA funded 31 million in humanitarian safety and security programming, research, and coordination. And I think we all need to increase our investments in this very important area.

Ms. Strucke: Thank you so much. I really appreciate that. And especially having worked at humanitarian organizations where I had to ask the procedures for notifying a person’s family member should they – should they get kidnapped in a place where there’s high kidnapping rates, and found kind of a flurry of, well, there’s a – there’s kind of a secret process for doing that but it’s not well-known, that shouldn’t be the answer, you know. I think in 2024 being prepared for these scenarios, unfortunately, is the reality, and doing more to ensure that parties to conflicts understand that this is not optional – this is not something they can pick and choose whether to do when it’s convenient – they have to do it. So, thank you, and thank you for all the work you do with partners to support them in these instances when they have the horrible thing happen.

You know, that does bring me to this question that I previewed earlier, that, you know, considering the fact that the challenges before us are so big, and yet as you said humanitarian, development, and climate professionals keep showing up every day – they still go to work. They work from tents, as we saw happening in Gaza. They work from their cars. They are themselves often displaced, and still continue. It humbles me. And I think that’s a characteristic that I’ve seen in the humanitarian sector, that our strongest leaders are themselves very humble people, because they’re humbled by the needs and the fact that there’s no way to possibly meet them, yourself included Assistant to the Administrator Korde. It’s really – it’s really inspiring. But for someone that is mired in this, that really probably can’t take your eye off the ball at any minute of the day – even maybe when you need to sleep – (laughter) – what makes you keep working on these issues? And where do you find – I would say hope, but I’ll add to that from my intro, where do you also find courage?
Ms. Korde: Thanks. Well, this is my favorite question. And, you know, it’s the dedication of our partners and the strength of the communities. And so top of my list is the people that I’m working with day in and day out, and that’s my team at BHA. BHA team, you’re brave, tenacious, skilled, and fiercely advocate for vulnerable people in need and humanitarian principles. So my team gives me hope. And then it’s the frontline humanitarian aid workers that are going into the most dangerous conflict zones and taking chances every day to serve people in the most difficult places. And I’m seeing this, that no matter what happens I see them go back day after day, night after night, to reach those in need. No matter how dark their world is. And that gives me hope. And it’s the communities themselves that when I have the privilege to meet communities that we’re all working with, it gives me hope.

So, again, a small story. When I was in Ethiopia and went to a far region, I had a – I had a chance, as whenever I’m able to travel I always try to do a little group huddle with the women of the community. And basically, we talked about a lot of what they had experienced and a lot about what was their life. But they had one ask. And their ask was that we – and it was at a food distribution site – that we increase food distributions because their neighbors are not also getting the same food distribution they are, and that they are sharing their food distributions with their neighbors. And that was really beautiful. I think that that gives me hope, because it’s really communities taking care of each other and concern for their neighbors and their communities over themselves. And that really is – that’s resilience. That’s resilience, right? So, and that’s hope.

And, you know, I could share a lot of these stories, but it’s really these anecdotes of courage that give me courage. So, you know, in a programmatic note, we had – I had mentioned this, I think, in my remarks, and Martin had also talked about it, but it is supporting local actors to design and lead the disaster risk reduction resilience work. So we have a lot of this work happening in Latin America and Caribbean. There’s a rapid response fund for local organizations and community groups to take – to lead responses and take proactive disaster mitigation measures. In Peru, we have a program that’s working with local governments and developing and maintaining disaster risk management. So, we have this work in the Philippines. And it’s really important.

And just to share, again, another very small story in my short tenure about just the power of these kinds of risk reduction investments. I think most of you would remember that about a month ago there was news of an earthquake in Taiwan. And I was getting the flash reports
from my team, and the USGS pings on my phone, and it looked pretty big. And our team was ready to go. They were ready to mobilize. We were looking at thresholds for USR. We were all watching the damage reports. The whole team was up all night and ready to, like, get their backpacks and go in there, if needed.

And then hours later, we just got the word that the local authorities could handle it. And this, you know, we believe was in part of investments and partnership that BHA has had with the Taiwan Red Cross. And they have specifically done disaster preparedness programs since 2021 on search and rescue capacity for local first responders and response teams, and skills for local communities. So, what gives me hope is the disasters that we don’t respond to, because the local communities and actors have the knowledge and skills to deal with it themselves. So, I will leave you with that. (Laughs.)

Ms. Strucke: Thank you. I love that answer. And it’s so inspiring, I think, that this community – one thing we put in our description of this conference is that the humanitarian communities worked so hard over decades to build up that disaster risk response capability, train governments, made strategic long-term investments – really, the hardest kind of investments because when you have emergent, immediate, huge disasters in your face to be able to make that long-term thinking to invest in essentially insurance for the future, to build up that capability and capacity of local actors, is what means, like you said, we don’t need to respond. And I was also impressed by that same spirit and my humanitarian work where the idea that people are just really ready to go, their motivation when they see a crisis is, how can I help? How can I help? And I know that’s what all of you will bring today to the spirit of these discussions.

So, in our last few minutes, I am happy to open up to the audience to take just one or two questions. So please raise your hand and say your name. We’ll have a microphone that will be brought around to you, so – but just announced where you’re from so that our folks online and in the room can know who’s asking the question. So, give you time to think about it, I’m looking around. Do we have any questions? There we go, in the back.

Q: Hi. My name is Neelima Grover. I am from Q2 Impact. Our official name is QED Group, but we’re doing business as Q2 Impact.

My question is about how do you operationalize what’s in the WPS Act of ’17 as part of your work that you’re doing on the ground? Thanks.
Ms. Strucke: Thank you. And for those who are listening online, she’s referring to the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017, I think a really important issue of gender.

Ms. Korde: So, thanks. Thanks for that question. You know, I think my team probably has a much more comprehensive answer on how BHA is operationalizing WPS. I think over the years I’ve, you know, watched how our agency – you know, we have our Conflict Prevention Stability Bureau, our other economic bureaus, our gender teams. And I know BHA has been working on all of this. So, I will have to get back to you with a proper answer. But I will give you just my quick, two seconds on it. Which is, women are essential to peace and security. I mean, it goes without saying. And I love the purpose of the act and what it’s intended to do, which is make sure that women are part of these processes and part of these conversations, you know, at the national level all the way down to the local level.

I mean, women are just key to enabling stability at the community level, and are pretty good negotiators, if I might say so myself. I think all of us are, right? And I always think, like, your question is perfect to even my little story about the community of women that I met with in Afar. It’s those women that are creating stability in their communities by sharing their food baskets and sharing what they have, and, like, telling their stories, and knitting their community together. And that, in and of itself, is also, I think, an example of how this happens. So anyway, great, great question, and absolutely agree with – (laughs) – how essential us women are.

Ms. Strucke: Thank you. So, I’ll take another question. We have one – we have one last – great. Thank you so much.

Q: Hi. Good morning. George Devendorf with Church World Service.

I wanted to ask a question really about prevention and anticipatory action. So, you head up the largest humanitarian response donor out there. So, obviously, there’s tremendous pressure and need for that response function. But I’m curious if you could speak a bit more about what something Martin Griffiths mentioned this morning, which was focusing not just on response, but on risk. And can you tell us a bit more what that looks like for BHA and how you try to balance those two imperatives in your work?

Ms. Korde: Thank you. It’s very hard to do, just given how enormous and rising the response needs are versus the need to make these investments so that we have to do less response. Because ultimately, we want to respond less, you know? (Laughs.) We would like to, basically, see the needs
shrink and grow.

We have a category of – like, a budget category of early risk and resilience – we call it ER-4; I think I'm missing an R in there – Kara could probably tell me what that R is – of budget funding where we really intentionally make these investments and carve out some of this funding to make these investments around disaster risk reduction and around early-warning systems, specifically so that it doesn't get completely subsumed by the response needs. That funding – I don’t have exact breakdown in my mind right now on how much that category is vis-à-vis the response funding. I mean, the response funding is our overall – well, the lion's share of funding needs and funding priorities, but I think all of this is to say that it's very important that we continue – not just USAID, but as a community – to invest in these kinds of activities, because it's really the local communities who are always on the frontlines of these disasters. They are the ones who can respond first and fastest. And making these investments pays off even, like, with my little Taiwan example.

Ms. Strucke: Thank you so much. And certainly, prevention – just considering the incredible state of the world today, preventing loss – preventing loss of life, of property, of community resilience, of ties, all of that is, I think, the most essential thing that we can think about. So, thank you so much.

I want to thank you, Assistant to the Administrator Korde, for joining us today. It’s been a real delight to have you. For the rest of the program, we hope you'll stick around. We've got great food coming up after our next panel; we have lunch. The next part is that we'll have a coffee break. It says networking, but I hope, again, you take that as an invitation to reach across silos, talk to each other, and think about how you can work together. And after that we'll have some really fantastic panels with speakers that are delving into specific crises in specific regions, because the heart of all of our humanitarian work is going to be in the specifics. So, we organized this is a way where you can go to breakout panels to hear about countries from Burkina Faso to Afghanistan to Myanmar to the DRC, so really a range of regions and crises. So please stick around and definitely make yourselves at home. If CSIS staff can do anything to make you more comfortable while you’re here, don’t hesitate to let us know. And last, just please join me in thanking Sonali for being here with us today.

Ms. Korde: Thank you. (Applause.)

(END.)