

**Lake Chad Basin Regional Protection Dialogue
Abuja, Nigeria, Wednesday, 8 June 2016**

Remarks by Volker Türk, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection

His Excellency the Vice-President (tbc),
Honorable Minister of Interior for the Federal Republic of Nigeria,
Honorable Minister of Interior for the Republic of Cameroun,
Honorable Minister of Humanitarian Affairs for the Republic of Niger,
Excellencies, colleagues, and other distinguished guests,

Let me start with a word of deep appreciation to the Government of Nigeria for hosting this Lake Chad Basin Regional Protection Dialogue and, importantly, for affording us the occasion to review together both the protection challenges and opportunities for solutions. Let me also thank the Governments of Cameroun, Niger, and Chad for your willingness to forge a regional approach to what is undoubtedly a regional problem. With your participation, as well as that of regional organizations, the donor community, international organizations, and civil society, we are confident that solutions to an increasingly complex situation in West and Central Africa can be found.

It is my pleasure to be here today to deliver on a promise that I made on behalf of UNHCR some three months ago when I visited Nigeria and Cameroun. We pledged to support a regional forum to identify and respond to the most urgent protection risks in the Lake Chad Basin. This forum will provide the opportunity for us to agree upon actions at local, national, and regional levels to enhance protection and outline a roadmap for potential solutions, particularly for refugees and the internally displaced.

I would like to acknowledge the important work of the expert teams, which charted a plan of action to address the many challenges identified over the last two days, in the lead-up to today's event. We look forward to hearing shortly from the Rapporteur, who will present their proposals and recommendations.

When I visited Nigeria and Cameroun in mid-February, it was clear that the humanitarian situation in the north east and elsewhere in the region is extremely dire, with millions of civilians affected, many of whom are in inaccessible areas. Millions are internally displaced, and some 155,000 have fled to neighbouring countries as refugees. With livelihood activities interrupted by the conflict, many civilians are in need of humanitarian assistance and are food insecure. Violence, landmines, and kidnapping of thousands of girls have terrorized whole communities. Families have been separated, more than a million children are out of school, and child-headed households are increasingly common. The lack of documentation of many civilians impedes access to services. I was struck by the deep levels of trauma so many had endured.

At the same time, there was tremendous hope that the situation in northern Nigeria would be stabilized, with a view to allowing people to access urgent humanitarian assistance and protection and to rebuild their lives. Since then progress has indeed been made. Yet, as access is restored, we have been confronted with new and harsh humanitarian and protection realities. Survivors of violence and human rights violations need psychosocial support and urgent care; camp management needs to be transferred from military to civilian administration; and community-based protection needs to be strengthened.

Despite improved access to parts of northern Nigeria, the insurgency has intensified in the border areas of Niger and Chad, further threatening the region's fragile stability and worsening an already complex humanitarian situation. Border areas in north-western Cameroun also remain fragile. Counter-insurgency measures are forcing governments to relocate communities to safer locations. Livelihoods, including from cross-border trade, continue to be severely jeopardized, and the social connectedness among communities has been badly damaged.

The intensity and brutality of the violence that has characterized this conflict inside Nigeria and throughout the Lake Chad region has fomented fear, suspicion, mistrust, and stigma. This has both created and widened ethnic, religious, political, and geographical divisions. In many communities, the social fabric is eroding. Relations are deteriorating between citizens and government, ethnic and religious groups, and communities and even extended families. This presents new challenges for the leadership in the countries affected as well as for future recovery and development.

These challenges are nevertheless surmountable if we can provide the building blocks for solutions. Sustainable solutions for displaced populations in the Lake Chad Basin will depend on creating the conditions needed for safe, voluntary, and dignified return to home areas or local settlement elsewhere. Return is already happening spontaneously and needs to be supported, to the extent possible. Interestingly, intention surveys conducted by UNHCR show there is strong interest in return once conditions are favourable.

Proper arrangements are needed now to realize these solutions. We can achieve this through a comprehensive, inclusive, and protection-based approach to recovery and stabilization, which is necessary to restore day-to-day life. Particular emphasis has to be placed on prioritizing the welfare and needs of affected populations. A multifaceted approach is required, which looks beyond a solely military and security approach to also encompass a strategy that responds to the humanitarian situation, focusing on protection of civilians, and reconnecting with the people while helping them to rebuild their lives. Security mechanisms to protect civilians on the one hand need to be complemented by a humanitarian response to build the resilience of communities on the other. Investments in food security, housing, livelihoods, access to assistance, and services will need to go hand-in-hand with efforts to restore security and national protection. Development initiatives will also be critical to rehabilitating areas affected by conflict and insecurity.

There is also a need for a concerted focus on peace-building, inter-faith dialogue, and peaceful co-existence – both to foster social cohesion and trust among displaced populations and those in host and return areas, and to reduce the likelihood of fresh violence. This presents an opportunity for the concerned governments to forge a new social contract with the displaced and affected populations that will help to build confidence and revitalize trust.

I would like to conclude by reaffirming UNHCR's commitment to collaborating with you to enhance protection and facilitate solutions for the people most acutely affected by the crisis, and I anticipate a fruitful exchange that will yield forward-looking commitments in this direction.

Thank you.