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Intergovernmental event at the ministerial level of Member States of the United Nations on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (7-8 December 2011)

Statement by H.E. Mr. Andris Teikmanis, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia

Geneva, 7 December 2011

PM

Mr. Chairperson,

Mr. High Commissioner,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here today at the culminating event of the commemorations year to mark the 60th anniversary of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

Firstly please allow me to thank High Commissioner Mr. António Guterres for his commitment and leadership and to pay particular tribute to the remarkable efforts of the UNHCR's staff who devotedly and effectively carry out the organisation's operations on the ground, in conditions which are often difficult and challenging.

Mr Chairperson,

The 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees was the first international agreement to comprehensively address the situation of perhaps the most vulnerable group of persons. The Convention was drafted in response to the large-scale movements and displacement of people during Second World War. Unfortunately, many Latvians know very well what it means to be a refugee. During the end of the Second World War around 200 000 Latvian inhabitants fled to the Western Europe to escape the repeated occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Army. A majority of these Latvians ended

up in refugee camps where they spent a number of years before their resettlement to democratic countries where they were able to live without the fear of totalitarian terror, killings, deportation and persecution. The adoption of the Refugee Convention in 1951 gave refugees fleeing totalitarian regimes the much needed legal basis for protection and assistance.

After the restoration of its independence Latvia acceded to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol and furthermore implemented all the provision in close co-operation with UNHCR. I would like to express Latvia's full commitment to the spirit and provisions of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, together with its 1967 Protocol. We consider it as a fundamental and vital international legal instrument which continues to provide the basis for international protection to asylum seekers and refugees.

Mr. Chairperson,

The Latvian delegation supports UNHCR activities related to the issue of statelessness, particularly its role as a guardian and promoter of two important international conventions: the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Latvia is a state party to both of these instruments and fully complies with the obligations deriving from those two instruments. However we note that the conventions have attracted relatively few ratifications or accessions. Therefore we are pleased to see that UNHCR has used the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention to generate momentum to increase its universality and we note that several countries have acceded to the Convention in 2011. We would like to encourage other countries to consider the accession to this important international instrument when respective conditions are met at national levels, especially those countries that are reminding about their concerns in relation to the situation of stateless persons in other countries.

Mr. Chairperson,

Over the years UNHCR has developed from a novice UN agency into a strong and effective organization. This would not be possible without assistance of states, including their voluntary contributions to the budget of UNHCR. I am pleased to announce that despite an austerity programme Government of Latvia has recently decided to renew our voluntary contributions to UNHCR.

The 1951 Refugee Convention has proved to be an important instrument in addressing the problems of millions of people who have left their countries because of wars and

persecutions. The 60th anniversary of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees is a time for a serious reflection, not only on past achievements, but on the work needed to ensure the relevance of the refugee protection regime in the future. We believe that in this regard a serious consideration should be given to the consequences of global climate change.

Finally Mr. Chairperson, I would like use this opportunity to commend the work of the UNHCR and High Commissioner Mr. António Guterres in the challenging tasks that lie ahead.

Thank you