

Statement by H.E. Mr. Ali Abdollahi
Deputy Minister of Interior of the Islamic Republic of Iran
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In the name of God

Mr. Chair,

Before I begin, I would like to thank all who have contributed to the organization of this meeting. I would also like to thank the High Commissioner, Mr. Guterres and his colleagues for their efforts in securing the lofty goals of the international protection regime.

Mr. Chair,

Throughout the years, the Islamic Republic of Iran, as the immediate neighbor of two major sources of refugees has given shelter and played host to millions. There were even times, during the past three decades, when Iran was sheltering close to 4 million refugees from neighboring countries, inside its borders.

In past decades, every effort was made to provide the refugee population with the highest internationally accepted standards of health, cultural, educational, social and urban services. A witness to this claim is the housing of 97 percent of the refugee population among ordinary citizens and free schooling for more than 667,000 refugees and their children. In this context, free education has helped lift the literacy rate of the refugee population from 6 percent, back in 1981 to 70 percent in 2011. To this number is added subsidized higher education for 300,000 refugee children and roughly 5000 university students, in the current scholastic year. As for health services, more than 95 percent of the community has received a full complement of routine vaccines as well as free access to other services, which include mother and child programs and treatment for hard to treat diseases and injuries caused by car accidents. These and conditional work permits have come together to provide most refugees with living conditions

that are similar to ordinary Iranian citizens. It must however be said that such humanitarian gestures -- which have been ongoing for 30 years and with very little international assistance -- have had a toll on the Iranian economy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The gathering of members of the international community to mark the 60th anniversary of the Refuge Convention provides an opportunity to discuss the important issue of refugee distribution. The geographical distribution of refugees tells us that the final destination of refugees -- or hosts that are willing to provide en mass shelter -- are by and large, developing countries. A prime example of this, are the two countries of Iran and Pakistan who single handedly are sheltering 40 percent of the world's total refugee population. Conversely, developed countries are both far removed from centers of crises and because of their stringent immigration and refugee policies and regulations, have rarely given shelter to groups of refugees. However, it must not be taken for granted that my country alone will always provide shelter to a large part of the world's refugee population without any contribution or assistance from other countries to help manage this global predicament. Although the sheer numbers of refugees is increasingly straining the country's economy, nevertheless the Islamic Republic of Iran has so far performed above and beyond its obligations. With this in mind, it would only be fair if new and additional obligations are accepted and shouldered by states which so far have contributed little to the whole issue of refugees.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

From 30 years ago, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been sheltering the largest Afghan refugee population in the world, and although in the past ten years 900,000 refugees have voluntarily returned to Afghanistan, my country is still providing shelter to one million registered Afghan refugees who generally are eager to return to their own country and have grown tired of living life as a refugee. With this in mind, we are strongly calling on the international community to

provide extensive assistance, as a sign of international solidarity and shared responsibility.

I am pleased to report that the Islamic Republics of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, working with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, are engaged in quadrilateral talks to find long term solutions for the question of Afghan refugees. We plan to organize an international conference in 2012 to share the solution that we will settle on, with the rest of the international community.

Mr. Chairman,

In our opinion, not enough attention is being given to promoting the concept of voluntary return by long term refugees – such as those living in Iran – as an effective solution to living life as a refugee. As it stands, most donor countries are using the possibility of local assimilation by such refugees as an excuse to refrain from assisting host countries. But as far as my country is concerned, I point out that the local assimilation of refugees is basically impossible. At the same time, resettlement as a solution that helps share the burden of sheltering refugees has produced dismal results. Although we are grateful to countries that are providing opportunities for resettlement, I have to say that the handful of existing resettlement programs fall far short of providing a sizeable remedy.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as the single most involved country in the issue of long term refugees, believes that the traditional policy of accentuating the role of sheltering countries or insisting on local assimilation as a solution, must be replaced with new strategies that accentuate a multilateral international cooperation that in turn would involve the country of origin, as well as the host and third countries. I close by offering to share – through UNHCR -- the 30 year experience of the Islamic Republic of Iran in sheltering a multimillion strong refugee population. I would also like to announce that the Iranian post office will be issuing a commemorative stamp to mark the 60th anniversary of the the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.