

**74th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Executive Committee of the  
High Commissioner's Programme**

**05– 07 March 2019, Conference Room XVII, Palais des Nations, Geneva**

**Introductory remarks by George OKOTH-OBBO, Assistant High  
Commissioner for Operations to Agenda Item 6, “Regional Activities and  
Global Programmes”**

Thank you very much Chairperson.

Greetings to you all.

As we turn now to our global operations, I hope that you will have studied the written updates that we have provided. Our new Director of the Africa Bureau, Mr Raouf Mazou who has since January this year succeeded Mr Valentin Tapsoba who is now our Regional Representative for Southern Africa, will shortly introduce the Africa operations. As you see on the agenda, Middle East and North Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe will then follow.

Mr Chairperson, what are the over-arching themes that are cued by the updates and which we are interested to review with you?

The first with which I have to begin is that in all our country and regional operations worldwide, hand in hand with the Governments, partners, donors, receiving communities and civil society at large, our staff continues relentlessly to drive forward and maximize all opportunities to secure protection, assistance, inclusion and solutions for the 24.5 million refugees and 68.5 million forcibly displaced people in all falling under the accountabilities which we have been entrusted.

In many cases, this work is carried out in tough, unforgiving and even dangerous conditions. From here at our Headquarters, our working day and night is dedicated to extending to them all support that they require to do their work. More than anything else, that quantity and quality of support to our Field teams is what, in everything we are presenting to you today, we seek and look forward to receiving from this Committee.

Secondly, Chairperson, new or intensifying spells of the forced displacement of people externally as refugees or internally as IDPs continue to be a commanding feature of the landscape of our work.

The Burundi, Cameroonian, DRC, Eritrean, Myanmar, North Central America, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Ukrainian, Yemen or Situations Libya / Central Mediterranean situations as we refer to them all continue to be characterized by very strong emergency aspects either of people still being displaced from or within their countries or critical protection and humanitarian conditions having to be addressed. At this time last year, we were highlighting the situation of Myanmar refugees in Bangladesh as by far the most urgent global operation as they were then poised to face the onslaught of the annual monsoon and cyclones. We were warning that up to 200,000 of the refugees would be directly in harm's way if we could not relocate them as a matter literally of life and death.

Thankfully, the massive and decisive preparedness and response by all, including, notably, the Government of Bangladesh, agency actors both within the UN system and NGOs and, permit me to emphasize again, our UNHCR team members managed to avert a catastrophe.

But 12 months on, the situation that is most evocative of this same imperative to rallying to an effective, systematic, and sustainable is that of the now Venezuelan refugees and migrants who collectively now number over 3.3 million. An important foundation has been laid down for the response to their situation across the region, including, on our side jointly with IOM as the lead agencies for that response, a regional coordination platform on which we know there continue to be questions to which we are ready to speak. Generally though, a lot more still needs to be done to underpin and consolidate a sure and dependable protection

response, especially as some restrictive measures, including on admission, are seen to emerge; other complex features also come into view; to ensure immediate assistance while factoring in the pathways to meet medium to long-term needs.

In both this situation and all others I included in my roll call of emergency or critical operational typology, we have continued to reinforce, optimize and fully deploy our emergency preparedness and response capabilities as our Director of Emergencies will elaborate more fully tomorrow. But if I highlight that in the period since the Committee met last year, we have had a 16.5% increase in our global emergency deployments as compared with the previous year, a total of 51,687 mission days, I am sure you will all understand why we are keen for the Committee to follow closely this area of our work and extend all feasible support to ensure that we continue to maintain and sustain the most robust organizational emergency preparedness and response posture and capacities possible.

Thirdly, Chairperson, as the Deputy High Commissioner and my colleagues who engaged with you yesterday highlighted variously, we continue to encounter and to wrestle with a range of issues, problems and challenges for which the Committee's engagement remains very important.

To allude to just some, in the lead-up to this meeting, many of you have asked us about the plight of Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya and Somali refugees in that country. About whether Myanmar refugees in Bangladesh are receiving access to education; or about their relocation to the island of Bhasan Char and what this would mean for the prospects of freedom of movement and self-reliance. There are deep questions about the prospects, feasibility, preparedness, conditions and realization of return to the country of origin in voluntary, safe and secure conditions for not only this refugee group, but as well for Syrian, Somali and indeed even for the earlier – mentioned Venezuelans. In our operation in Uganda

we unfortunately had to battle with some of the most acute problems we have encountered in this time in relation to refugee registration and population data management and the broader contagions of fraud and corruption which attracted so much critical donor, media and other attention both locally and internationally including our very own. Furthermore, even as for the most part, solid and dependable asylum and solidarity to refugees and asylum-seekers continues the world over, reinforced as in the case of the proclamation recently adopted in Ethiopia by very progressive and forward-leaning new or revised legislation, we also still face serious inadequacies in policy, capacity, services and transformative effect in the overall response, with refugees in many cases left entrenched in or exposed to conditions which can be as paltry or sometimes even worse than those they have escaped. When structural faults in the global operations are added to the picture, such as, to cite some of the key ones, resource limitations which force emergency food, nutrition or other assistance including water, health, sanitation, shelter or education to be cut or restricted; or security or topographical restrictions which limit access to operational areas and persons of concern, at the same time as we highlight to you our unyielding determination to continue our work and efforts to save and restore lives, safety, livelihood and inclusion, it is important that attention remains focused on the fact that in many settings, these problems feed into fractured policy, political, administrative or law and order responses in which refugees have ended up being refouled or even lives lost at the hands of national security or law enforcement agencies.

With regard to the questions around returns, we have as transparently as possible articulated our positions and shared all information feasible with all stakeholders including in the updates before you and are ready to elaborate today yet further. My colleagues and I will assure you that we are engaging and working on these questions in tandem with the fundamental international humanitarian standards, objectives and targets that govern refugees and global displacement generally.

But with regard to due diligence, fraud and corruption, further to the assurances you heard yesterday from the Deputy High Commissioner, let me plead very strongly that a situation whereby the massive efforts we are bringing to bear in exposing and turning these problems around as we have done crucially in Uganda should not appear to be rather punished for instance when the default response is automatically to cease funding and to visit every heavier and heavier pressure and requirements on reporting and transparency which all frankly come to risk operational continuity itself. We think a balance, which also gives attention to the risk environments themselves can, and needs to be struck and let me also stress how crucially we need and rely on the engagement of States, including donor and development partners, in the battles themselves so that all responsibility is not seen to fall on only the agencies.

Fourth, let me not leave in the air a dark and disheartening picture. I thus would like to underscore that in our operations everywhere around the world, vital progress is being achieved across the spectrum of our responsibilities and accountabilities. I have already mentioned the great and successful battle to prepare for and avert any terrible consequences of the monsoons and cyclones for the Myanmar in the Bangladesh Operation last year. But everywhere, persons seeking safety from the troubles in their home countries are being admitted across borders; provided essential conditions for safety and protection and helped towards reclaiming participation and membership in society. In that region and elsewhere, even where the resources already to meet national requirements may be limited, we continue to see both new and existing refugees being provided access to national basic health, education, social, economic and employment space and even freedom of movement and the opportunity more broadly to reclaim inclusion and participate in society in ways that are truly stellar and exceptional. I would like on behalf of UNHCR to acknowledge and appreciate publicly in a most special and earnest way those States, Governments, and

peoples that have continued resolutely to accept on their territory people fleeing for their safety and to extend to them asylum or other mechanisms which yield a protection outcome. These are the paths along which we have to continue including by grasping and drawing on all the opportunities and advantages that the Global Compact on Refugees and the CRRF now present for us, the experience so far of which you will hear more fully from my colleagues both today and in the sessions that will follow on the Global Compact. With the support, further efforts and attention which it is the objective of our conversation with you today to rally, opportunities to move even further forward can indeed be realized.

Chairperson, there are a number of other cues that I would have liked to illuminate – including with respect to cash - data - but let me conclude with only three.

The first of these concerns IDPs. The Committee knows that the Office has taken steps to institutionalize for a more predictable, dependable, early and sustainable engagement with respect to IDPs through the full cycle from initial displacement to the end of displacement. A number of recommendations were elaborated ranging from early preparedness, likewise early engagement in new/evolving situations; meaningful results-bearing programming going over and beyond only coordination which were trialed out in the IDP operations which evolved Kasais/Ituri in the DRC and now in Ethiopia. Drawing on those and other lessons learned, a policy is being finalized which will cement protection and solutions as the ultimate driver of UNHCR's engagement, accordingly more closely and strategically integrate our actions across the Clusters for which we are responsible and in influencing the design and delivery of the response as a whole; systematize and firm up quick, predictable and sustainable engagement through the displacement cycle. The policy also foresees a role for UNHCR in respect to population data management in a flexible approach which includes on the one

hand, partnership and leveraging the engagement of others, notably IOM, or, as in new situations, direct agency engagement. We have engaged and will continue to engage with all stakeholders, including "host" and donor states as we finalize and institutionalize the policy, especially on those questions for which their role and input are particularly pivotal.

Next, I want to touch on partnership which, honing in on the strategic elements, my colleague the Director of External Relations yesterday underlined the crucial importance of for UNHCR especially as we now work to maximize the opportunities, pathways and new ways of working which the GCR, CRRF, SDGs have put before us. With regard now to the operational dimensions, I would like to reiterate the points she made and UNHCR's commitment likewise to elevate those strategic components. At the same time, the importance of ensuring that we have got the nuts and bolts right cannot be diminished. So, let me acknowledge to especially our partners with whom we have implementing and formal operational relationships that we have fully seized ourselves with the issues that have been highlighted to us, bilaterally and collectively, with respect to the selection of partners; ever truer joint, transparent and trustful planning and operational engagement; timely conclusion of PPAs; mitigating heavy reporting and process requirements; the issue of overhead and staff salary costs; and others. In particular cases in which these issues were raised, we have taken action as the partners know, but over and beyond this, we will continue to work hard to sort out the problems duly. And, in that context, securing our commitments to national actors in particular remains a particular priority.

And, finally, I conclude now with funding matters and, first, would like echo what the Deputy High Commissioner voiced from this same chair yesterday when, on one hand, she expressed UNHCR's appreciation for the support we have received from donors and, on the other hand, explained that we are compelled with



growing needs to ask for more funding and urged donors to provide contributions as early as possible in the year and with as much flexibility as possible in line with the Grand Bargain Commitments". In the discussions on and around this question, a lot was said about prioritization. To the responses that were provided yesterday, I would like to highlight one more consideration. This is that, in fact, the "asks" that UNHCR presents - whether in the Annual Programme or supplementary appeals - are already heavily prioritized. If one studies the character of the supplementary budgets in particular, it will be noticed that the requirements are fundamentally of necessary infrastructural establishment; core protection, basic and survival needs. There is little in these asks that might be seen as extravagant. Moreover, whether for annual or supplementary programmes, operations which are very poorly funded, and most are in the Global South (for instance the Central African Republic Situation; the Burundi situation; the Congolese situation; Somalia situation; or South Sudan situation) are already structurally literally on life support. These are situations and country operations in which funding shortfalls can be even be a matter of life and death. UNHCR will continue resolutely our efforts to broaden and deepen our donor and resource mobilization base. But I am sure you will indulge me if, for those who are already doing so much, we ask you to do yet more. And, beyond money matters to leverage political, economic, geostrategic, multilateral, regional or bilateral diplomacy in ways which will positively affect humanitarian objectives.

We look forward to a fruitful exchange on these and all the questions you will hear now from my colleagues.

Thank you very much for listening to me; thank you Mr Chairman.