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Appearance before the Standing Senate Committee on  
Human Rights

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Syrian Refugee Children

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Madam Chair, Honourable Committee Members, Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Madame la Présidente, honorables membres du Comité, mesdames et messieurs,

Au nom du HCR, je tiens à vous exprimer ma gratitude et à remercier le Comité sénatorial permanent des droits de la personne de m'avoir invité.

Le HCR est heureux d'avoir l'occasion de s'adresser au Comité dans la mesure où il fait référence à la question des enfants déplacés par le conflit en Syrie. Avant de commencer toutefois, je voudrais brièvement vous présenter le rôle et le mandat du HCR.

Le HCR a pour mandat de diriger et de coordonner l'action internationale pour la protection des réfugiés à travers le monde et la recherche de solutions aux problèmes des réfugiés. La Convention de 1951 relative au statut des réfugiés et le Protocole de 1967 constituent le fondement même de notre travail de protection des réfugiés. Bien que notre mission principale vise à garantir les droits et le bien-être des réfugiés, notre travail s'est par la suite développé pour inclure maintenant les personnes vulnérables, les déplacés internes et les apatrides. Avec un budget de plus de quatre milliard de dollars, le HCR travaille dans 126 pays et vient en aide à près de 35.8 millions de personnes.

Madam Chair, Committee Members,

I now turn to the situation in Syria.

It is estimated that there are currently 9.5 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance. Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011 we have witnessed an outpouring of Syrian refugees across Syria's borders to reach an estimated 2.8 million registered and unregistered refugees in neighbouring countries. In addition to refugees, an estimated 6.5 million Syrians have been internally displaced by the war.

The exodus of Syrian refugees accelerated dramatically in 2013. UNHCR data indicates that between May and November 2013, an average of 127,000 people were registered each month. Based on a recent analysis of population movements within and from Syria, UNHCR

and its partners foresee up to 4.1 million refugees in the region by the end of 2014. This would make Syrians the largest refugee population in the world under UNHCR mandate.

Madam Chair, Committee Members,

In August 2013, the one millionth Syrian refugee children milestone was reached. Today, half of registered refugees in Syria's neighboring countries are under 18 years of age. This means that there are today about 1.4 million Syrian refugee children, 75 per cent of which are under 12 years old. Jordan and Lebanon alone are hosting more than 60 per cent of all Syrian refugee children.

Last November, UNHCR published a report that reveals the devastating impact Syria's conflict is having on its children who have become refugees. It shows immense suffering and surveys a number of children's protection challenges including physical and psychological trauma, child labour, children missing out on schooling and unregistered births.

Madam Chair, Committee Members,

I would like to briefly review these issues and give you a sense of how UNHCR and its partners are trying to respond to them.

*[Physical and Psychological Trauma]*

The conflict in Syria has taken an acute physical and psychological toll on refugee children. They have witnessed unspeakable horror, which they struggle to forget. Bombs and missiles have destroyed their homes, communities and schools. Friends and family members were killed, sometimes before their own eyes. Children suffer from trouble sleeping, horrifying flashbacks, bed-wetting and even speech problems.

The most important support network for psychologically affected children is usually at home. Yet Syrian refugee parents and caregivers, struggling with their own scars, can find it difficult to support their own children emotionally.

UNHCR and its partners, mainly UNICEF, provide psychosocial support to Syrian refugee children including those subjected to sexual violence and early marriage. Our effort includes family counseling and psychosocial support in schools; recreational activities at child- and adolescent- friendly spaces. Children also receive psychosocial support through NGOs and community centres, as well as at UNHCR registration centres where possible.

*[Child Labour]*

Madam Chair, Committee Members,

UNICEF estimates that one in ten Syrian refugee children in the region is engaged in child labour.

A recent assessment found that nearly half of households with one or more working family member relied partly or entirely on the income generated by a child. Many children work

intermittently, picking up short-term jobs that may change from day to day. Many children work long hours in hazardous or demeaning environments.

Child labour is directly linked to the basic survival of refugee families. Assessments on child labour, conducted both within Syria and in host countries, indicate that the primary reason children work is to support their families, mainly to pay for rent and food.

UNHCR's efforts in order to address this complex problem include the provision of financial assistance to help vulnerable Syrian refugee families cover urgent and basic needs, including medical expenses and rent; the creation and maintenance of a functioning referral systems to identify children who face protection risks, manage their cases and refer them to appropriate services; and the provision of social counseling and emotional support by case managers and social workers. All these efforts can prevent families from resorting to negative coping strategies, such as taking their children out of school to work.

#### *[Education]*

Madam Chair, Committee Members,

A recent assessment found that 80 per cent of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon and 56 per cent in Jordan were not in school.

According to a recent World Bank report, failure and drop-out rates among Syrian children are twice the national average for Lebanese children. UNHCR estimates that 20 per cent of Syrian refugee children drop out of school in Lebanon—the biggest problem being among children over 12 years old.

Despite the efforts of the governments and international community, the costs associated with going to school prevent some families from enrolling their children or to take the painful decision of choosing whom should attend.

Classrooms in Jordan and Lebanon are also overcrowded, and the growing number of Syrian students is putting the national education system in both countries under considerable strain. For example, in Lebanon, there are currently over 200,000 school-aged refugee children who lack access to age-appropriate education due in part to the fact that the capacity of the public education system is overstretched.

To the extent that resources allow, UNICEF and UNHCR provide Syrian refugee children in Lebanon and Jordan with uniforms, books, bags and stationery. Also, in an effort to keep children in school, UN agencies and partners offer remedial classes in areas such as literacy, numeracy and languages.

#### *[Birth Registration]*

Madam Chair, Committee Members,

Let me now address the very important issue of birth registration.

First of all, let me emphasize that birth registration is a right of all children under international law. In addition to proving a child's legal identity, birth registration also provides proof of age, which is critical for ensuring the enjoyment of rights and child-specific protections.

Families are increasingly forced to flee Syria with babies who have not yet been registered, or are facing barriers to registering their children born in exile. Unregistered refugee children can face increased risks of exposure to violence, abuse and exploitation. Birth registration can also help to prevent statelessness by documenting the child's parentage and country of birth, both of which are required by states to grant nationality to a child at birth.

While the Governments of Jordan and Lebanon permit Syrian refugees to register children born in their countries, for numerous reasons many births are not registered, for reasons including the complexity of the birth registration process and the inability to provide proper identification documents.

In Lebanon, levels of birth registration are low. As of May 24 of this year, UNHCR has registered over 20,000 Syrian children born in Lebanon. A recent sample survey has shown that up to 73 per cent of them do not have birth certificates. In Za'atari camp, Jordan, over 1,400 children born between the end of November 2012 and the end of July 2013 have not received birth certificates.

UNHCR and partners have been working with the authorities in both countries to ease the requirements for Syrian refugees to register births. UNHCR is also working with refugees to raise awareness about the significance of birth registration and the process.

Madam Chair, Committee Members,

Let me now conclude these remarks by saying that UNHCR acknowledges all contributions that have been made so far to address the humanitarian situation faced by Syrian refugees in general and by Syrian refugee children in particular. But let's be clear, we are currently not able to do enough given the magnitude of the needs and the complexity of protection challenges. That is why we continue to appeal for increased and sustained financial contributions. As of April 2014, only 24% of UNHCR's funding requirements in relation to the Syrian crisis has been received. This means difficult choices have to be made and some needs go unmet.

UNHCR also urge the international community to provide more resettlement places to Syrian refugees for whom this is the only solution. States have so far responded quickly to UNHCR's call to provide resettlement places or other forms of humanitarian admission for Syrian refugees. Twenty countries have offered places towards meeting the goal of providing international protection to 30,000 of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees by the end of 2014. However, because of the gravity of the crisis, UNHCR recently called upon countries around the world to make multi-annual commitments towards a goal of providing resettlement and other forms of admission for an additional 100,000 Syrian refugees in 2015 and 2016. Such actions would not only provide a durable solution to the more vulnerable

refugees but would also serve as a gesture of solidarity and as a practical way of helping to ease the disproportionate burden shouldered by neighbouring countries.

Le Canada est un partenaire stratégique du HCR et nous sommes profondément reconnaissants envers le gouvernement et le peuple canadien pour leur soutien continu aux interventions humanitaires du HCR à travers le monde.

Nous espérons ardemment que la situation en Syrie s'améliorera et que le Canada jouera un grand rôle dans l'amélioration du sort des déplacés syriens.

Madame la Présidente,  
Mesdames et Messieurs les membres du Comité,

Je vous remercie de m'avoir reçu aujourd'hui.