

Statement by H.E. Sayed Hussain Alemi Balkhi Minister of Refugees and Repatriation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan at the Sixty-ninth Session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme

Madam Chairperson,

Mr. High Commissioner,

Distinguished colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and privilege to represent the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan at this Sixty-ninth Session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme.

Allow me to express my Government's sincere gratitude and appreciation to the High Commissioner, Mr Grandi, for his most recent visit to Afghanistan in early September together with the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr Lowcock. I wish to thank the High Commissioner for highlighting the humanitarian needs in Afghanistan during his visit and UNHCR as well as other humanitarian agencies for standing with Afghan refugees for the past 39 years.

With Afghan displacement entering its fourth decade, this is a historic and timely meeting as we come together to discuss the ways and means to support refugees around the world as well as recommitting our efforts to find ways of improving their living conditions – and importantly, to seek durable solutions for them.

Despite the difficult conditions including conflict in some parts of the country and natural disasters, the Government of Afghanistan together with its international partners have made important strides over the past four years. Noticeable achievements under the Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework have been made. Creating a conducive environment for the voluntary, safe return and reintegration of Afghan refugees is at the centre of our efforts. Significant initiatives have been undertaken to ensure the inclusion of displaced persons and returnees in our national programming, including a Presidential Decree 305 on 29 August 2018 addressing land issues for returnees, investing in provinces of high return and displacement, and ensuring return and reintegration is sustainable over the longer-term and that the root causes of displacement and humanitarian crises are addressed.

To address refugees and migrants needs which remains essential to maintaining stability and security in the region, the government of Afghanistan has identified the return and reintegration of its citizens as one of its key priorities and the building blocks of peace and reconciliation. In acknowledgment of this importance, the Government of Afghanistan has included this issue high on the agenda of the Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan in November 2018 in Geneva with one of the four scheduled side events on 27 November is on "People on the Move" aimed at strengthening the humanitarian and development nexus, which is important in the context of seeking sustainable solutions for refugee returnees and IDPs in Afghanistan.

Mr High Commissioner!

As you noted during your visit to Afghanistan, we have included the issues of Afghan refugees and their return as part of a larger dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In addition to those displaced by conflict internally now numbering more than 1 million, the drought also sadly is affecting hundreds of thousands of families across the country. Inadequate access to basic services and economic opportunities perpetuates internal displacement. As we take firm steps to

pursue peace and stability in Afghanistan, the need for continued support of the international community to support solutions for the world's largest protracted refugee situation remains high.

Unless there are serious efforts to resolve the humanitarian needs of returnees in Afghanistan and to link them with development action, our humanitarian efforts alone remain limited.

A comprehensive refugee response begins with strengthened partnerships for sustainable support for Afghan refugees outside the country as well as displaced populations inside Afghanistan. We look forward to working with the international community to invest in the education and skills of the displaced Afghan population.

We sincerely believe that the way forward in addressing the problems of the nearly 70 million displaced people lies in more international cooperation and burden-sharing. It is in this spirit that Afghanistan has committed itself as the first country in Asia, as well as the first country of origin, to the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework and the Global Compact on Refugees.

As H.E. our President has said before, it is important to think of refugees and returnees as a positive contribution to all countries.

Madam Chairperson!

While Afghanistan remains committed to fighting the war on terror and is paying a high price every day, we remain equally committed to fighting smuggling of migrants to prevent irregular migration in accordance with sustainable development goals of the United Nations.

Expressing concern over the situation of migrants in transit countries, especially some of the islands, we invite countries of transit and destination to join us for an organized efforts to struggle against smugglers.

Yet, there are still some 6 million Afghan refugees and migrants living in Pakistan, Iran and other countries. They constitute the largest protracted refugee population in the world. A majority are young people whose contribution to the future of Afghanistan is key. My Government is more than ever committed to helping the millions Afghan refugees and migrants still living in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran return home voluntarily. As you know, more than 9 million Afghans have returned home over the last 17 years.

In conclusion and using this opportunity, I once again expressed my gratitude to the governments of Pakistan, Iran, the European countries, Turkey and all the countries that have supported Afghan refugees. And would like to remind you that Afghanistan is still not the right place to expel forced migrants and that there is still need for your more tolerance and more generosity.

Thank you very much