

Statement at the 80th Standing Committee

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Madame Chairperson,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In January, I had the opportunity to travel together with the High Commissioner to two of our major operations within the East, Horn and Great Lakes Region. In one, I saw the hopefulness of peace slowly taking hold (South Sudan), and in the other I saw fear and anxiousness as refugees became caught in the middle of unrest within their host country (Ethiopia).

This is the complexity of the region. We are working with governments and partners to protect and assist our persons of concern at different stages of conflict, peace and stability.

One year ago, I gave my remarks to the Standing Committee just a few months after the launch of the newly regionalized bureau. As I reflect back, I had noted at the time the optimism and opportunities that we had planned to pursue, just a few months after the GRF with the numerous pledges made by host governments, partners and private sector toward more inclusion and support for host communities, along with promising political developments within the region that gave rise to a hope for longer lasting solutions for the thousands living in exile.

Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all that we planned to achieve and brought about numerous obstacles, despite which, I am proud to say that UNHCR teams in the eleven countries stayed and delivered to the best of their ability in challenging circumstances.

As shut downs and border closures began in order to prevent the spread of the virus, some countries in the region, commendably, still allowed people who were forced to flee to seek asylum. Sudan welcomed some 60,000 refugees since the end of last year and continues to do so.

An unimaginable and very difficult situation developed for the Eritrean refugees in the Tigray region, who were caught in the midst of the conflict there. Our concerns have been repeatedly addressed to the highest levels within the government of Ethiopia, who have reconveyed their commitment for the protection of all refugees on their territory.

In addition to these new emergencies, I am very worried about the seemingly never-ending food ration reductions that we continue to face. As we move into the lean season, a full 75% of the refugees in the region are severely impacted by food cuts. In most of our operations, many rely on food aid. Refugees who were on their way to self-reliance suffered severe setbacks during the pandemic. The negative repercussions of food insecurity are evident – stunted growth of children, negative coping mechanisms, increased gender-based violence,

and a push toward premature returns. In Uganda, refugee women told us how the ration cuts are leading to particular vulnerabilities for woman and girls, with many seeing no alternative but to engage in risky behaviors or unhealthy relationships to cope.

In a similar manner, the high incidence of SGBV continues to be a preoccupation within new emergencies and even in more stable displacement settings and will be a focus of increased attention.

It is clear the repercussions of this pandemic will be felt for years. As I have said before, one of my deep concerns is that the small but significant gains made in getting more girls into school threaten to be undone. As refugee families plunge deeper into poverty, many parents are choosing to send their school-aged daughters to work or into marriage hoping to improve their family's finances. We are redoubling our efforts to help all children get back to school safely.

Engagement with refugee communities and their response to the pandemic gave us a crash course in how to truly support refugees at the forefront of response. Many of the countries in the region are committed to including refugees in their COVID vaccination plans which is a very positive development and something we will need to support. In Rwanda, refugees working in health centres have already received their first dose of the vaccine, while in Kenya, the health clinics in the Dadaab refugee camps are serving as one of the vaccination sites for residents of Garissa county. We hope other countries in the region will soon follow suit in making vaccines available to refugees within the established national criteria.

Aside from the pandemic, climate change is also ever present and similarly its impact doesn't distinguish between its victims. Floods, droughts and locusts have hit nationals and refugees alike – many losing homes and livelihoods. Given the region's vulnerability to climate change we will need to focus more on ways to minimize its impact. Recognizing that seasonal flooding may impact the new refugee camps in eastern Sudan, mitigation measures are already being put in place.

UNHCR has, as promised, strengthened its IDP response in several countries – Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan. The sheer numbers of people displaced within their borders is daunting.

Not all of the optimism felt last year has been dampened. Opportunities for solutions still remain for Sudan and South Sudan as peaceful prospects and agreements incrementally advance. Last December, the two governments agreed on a roadmap toward a comprehensive strategy which will outline the next steps toward long-term solutions for seven million forcibly displaced persons including IDPs and refugees originating from and hosted by these two countries. UNHCR is looking forward to the collaboration with IGAD on the High Level Meeting on Solutions planned to take place this year.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to take this opportunity to highlight a related key achievement. In November last year, despite pandemic related logistical and connectivity challenges, a group of 40 South Sudanese refugees, IDPs and returnees participated in the National Dialogue of South Sudan – a key step in the peace process. Woven into the fabric of the conference's final communique, are their views and recommendations on the economy, governance, security and social cohesion.

The Global Compact for Refugees calls for refugees to be included in peace processes and this example shows that doing so is not only possible but critical for the future of the country.

Progress has been reported on the 45 GRF pledges specific to the region. Additional pledges have been made since, such as in Rwanda, where the government added a pledge focused on energy and environment and is committed to finding alternative energy sources for the refugee and host community alike. Overall commitment to the implementation of the pledges is still strong, and I am confident we will progress further this year.

In particular, I commend Uganda's comprehensive refugee response model which remains one of global relevance. As the High Commissioner noted after our visit to the country just two weeks ago, "collective efforts are needed to address the humanitarian-development nexus and accelerate the transition to sustainable local government services."

We are continuing our efforts to address statelessness through the pledges made at the High Level Segment in 2019 and have also made some progress despite the challenges. I would be remiss if I did not take the time to express my appreciation to the government of Kenya who granted citizenship to nearly 3,000 people who have been stateless for decades. I hope more countries in the region will do the same – and continue their efforts to implement their pledges from 2019.

In its first year of operation, the regional bureau has been able to fulfil its role in supporting the country operations. We have been working diligently towards strengthening oversight and mitigating risk. Risk registers, established in each country, are regularly reviewed and updated, and we are working to implement a variety of audit recommendations.

We greatly appreciate the funds provided by our donors and the support from our partners and remain committed to ensuring they are used judiciously. The quick response to our appeals for resources to respond to the COVID-19 challenges, the recent refugee emergencies, and to support our regular programmes is something for which we are very grateful.

I would like to close with the words of Bahati Ernestine, a 26 year old nursing student (and DAFI scholar), a refugee from Rwanda who helped treat COVID patients in Kenya. She said in June, QUOTE: *"I am so happy to see so many refugees and so many of their host communities coming together to fight this pandemic. We should, however, not forget the precarious position refugees find themselves in. This whole pandemic, in my opinion, has put us in a place where we acknowledge each other's vulnerabilities. We acknowledge that we are in this together."*

We are indeed in this together, and together we can move forward.

Thank you.