

Remarks of Mr. Ayman Gharaibeh, Director of the UNHCR MENA Bureau

**80<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee**

Geneva, 24 March 2020

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Madame Chair,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be with you today **despite the persisting challenges imposed by COVID on all of us.**

**By the end of 2020, the region hosted the largest number of IDPs globally with more than 12 million, and over 3 million refugees and asylum seekers, in addition to some 365,000 stateless persons.**

**The COVID pandemic added unprecedented pressure on all operations in the region; and I want to give a moment to express appreciation to the resilience and dedication of UNHCR field teams that stayed and delivered. We continue to operate and deal with the complexities in the region relying on the solidarity and compassion from host communities, that are also confronting heavy socioeconomic conditions.**

We have regrettably crossed the 10-year mark for **conflict in Syria**, and despite the generosity of host countries, the living situation for Syrian refugees in the region has become increasingly challenging.

In 2021, UNHCR will maintain large-scale cash assistance for the most vulnerable Syrian refugees, alongside ongoing multisectoral assistance and other necessary support through the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan targeting persons of concern alongside host communities.

**Jordan** is commended for having graciously included all individuals on its soil in the COVID response and allowing refugees access to the vaccination campaign and overall strong posture in ensuring health and safety to all people residing in Jordan.

**For Lebanon**, a united response is critical to address both the rising needs of the refugees and of their hosting communities, which have shown incredible resilience. Increased solidarity through humanitarian and development funding, as well as third country resettlement, is required to protect the lives of all who are most acutely affected. Otherwise the protection space and hospitality is at risk of further shrinking, which can add to scapegoating and pressures on refugees to return against their will.

**Speaking of our efforts inside Syria**, food-security and economic conditions have worsened. Nevertheless, in 2020, UNHCR provided protection-related services to over 1 million people, including some 170,000 children; we also provided basic relief items; shelter support; and health assistance. We have equally continued our provision of cross-border assistance from Turkey to respond to the large-scale displacement of December 2019.

The COVID-19 crisis caused a reduction in returns, with some 38,000 Syrian refugees returning in 2020, a 60% decrease compared to 2019. **In line with the Comprehensive Protection and Solutions strategy, UNHCR continues to advocate to mitigate barriers to return and support those who choose to return voluntarily, in full collaboration with host governments.** Based on the findings of the UNHCR Return intention survey carried out this year, the majority of Syrians wish to return to

Syria one day, however, a much smaller number (2.4% of the surveyed) intend to return within the next year. The results of the survey emphasize the continued importance of the international community maintaining a comprehensive protection and solutions strategy to maximize the likelihood of Syrian refugees obtaining a durable solution.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

**Yemen** remains the largest humanitarian crisis globally, with over 24 million people in need of assistance. In 2020, we distributed \$57 million in cash assistance, alongside non-food items and emergency shelter kits. UNHCR operated eight community centres to provide protection services and assistance. We continue to maintain the Assisted Spontaneous Return programme for Somalis subject to health and security conditions. **UNHCR welcomes the Saudi Arabia new peace initiative to end the war in Yemen.**

**Turning now to Iraq**, over 4.8 million IDP returnees continue to face protection risks, constrained access to basic services and insecurity, while contending with limited access to livelihood opportunities and shelter, and the threat of explosive remnants of war. Following the decision to accelerate the closure of IDP camps in late 2020, UNHCR increased its support to mitigate the effects of camp closures. The systematic inclusion of persons of concern in national development plans and programmes, remains our target.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

**Moving to North Africa, and particularly Libya, we are closely monitoring the ongoing political process; and are encouraged by the formulation of a new government hoping that it continues its path to stability.** While a significant number of IDPs returned to their places of origin in 2020, some 316,500 remain displaced due to the prevailing insecurity.

In **Egypt**, high inflation rates and living costs, coupled with COVID-19 challenges, have impacted the welfare of 260,000 refugees and asylum-seekers. **We welcome the continued host government commitment to preserving and expanding the protection space.**

The Government of **Morocco** expanded efforts in 2020 to dismantle smuggling and trafficking networks. This year, UNHCR will continue cooperation with the government to strengthen the capacity of national institutions and civil society for a gradual transfer of responsibility.

UNHCR continues to work with **Mauritania** and the World Bank to include refugees registered at Mbera Camp in national social protection mechanisms.

For **Tunisia**, the number of registered refugees and asylum-seekers nearly doubled for the second consecutive year. Our priorities are to expand the protection space and support the socioeconomic inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers.

In **Algeria**, UNHCR will continue processing asylum cases. **The Office will also maintain its life-saving assistance to vulnerable Sahrawi refugees in the five camps located near Tindouf. We look forward to positive developments on the political front and reiterate our commitment to addressing the most urgent and pressing humanitarian needs of vulnerable persons of concern.**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Movements to Europe by sea and land continue, and about 300 crossing from Lebanon to Cyprus, while 500 people reported missing or dead at sea. Because of the pandemic, numbers crossing the Red Sea to Yemen decreased by 70%. **Coordination among**

**governments and other actors is required to ensure protection and predictable rescue and disembarkation procedures.**

**In addressing our strategic priorities, we strived to ensure sustained delivery of services to persons of concern despite the restrictions imposed by COVID-19.** Our remote modalities have enabled the continued processing of asylum applications. With COVID impacting some 2.2 million school-aged refugee children, we had to step up our support. We also embarked on implementation of activities for children through the “Blueprint initiative for a joint action for refugee children” alongside with UNICEF. UNHCR carried out Gender-based violence prevention for more than 140,000 persons through online awareness campaigns, hotlines for reporting incidents, and remote case management. We also developed remote arrangements to ensure that UNHCR and partners provide community services to assist 5.2 million persons of concern. Our teams strengthened the advocacy and technical support for addressing COVID related mental health and psychological needs for persons of concern, a step that was welcomed by the League of Arab States.

The impact of the pandemic on the resettlement process was similarly substantial, shrinking our submissions to some 23,000 persons in 2020. We look forward to the increase of resettlement this year, and hopefully more departures as well.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These are not easy times for our region, with COVID pushing many persons of concern and host communities further into poverty. **All appreciation goes to the resilience of countries hosting large numbers of refugees like Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt** for their close collaboration and inclusiveness of refugees in national programmes. International solidarity to put an end to protracted displacement situations is urgently required given the challenges imposed by the pandemic.

**Thank you.**