



European Union

**UNHCR Executive Committee 72nd Session
4–8 October 2021**

Agenda item 3: General debate

Statement by the European Union and its Member States

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Madam Chair,

1. I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union and its Member States.
2. [Alignment]
3. What a year this has been. Although much of the world came to a halt or slowed down due to the Corona pandemic, conflicts, violence and persecution continued unabated in many parts of the world – despite the UN Secretary-General’s call for a global ceasefire – and new worrying crisis erupted and unfolded, including in Ethiopia, Mozambique, Myanmar and, most recently, in Afghanistan. This 70th Anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention has been anything but festive, as forced displacement has reached new record levels and it is clear that the work of UNHCR is more relevant than ever.
4. We are deeply concerned about the recent developments in Afghanistan. The EU and its Member States stand by the Afghan people and remain committed to support them in the country and in neighbouring countries. We are organising a High-level Forum on providing protection to

Afghans at risk on 7 October. In addition to enhancing the humanitarian response inside Afghanistan and in neighbouring countries, support could be provided in form of resettlement and humanitarian admission on a voluntary basis, prioritizing vulnerable persons, such as women and children.

5. We appreciate UNHCR ability to stay and deliver together with its partners organisations, in increasingly challenging circumstances. The EU and its Member States remain strong supporters of your work and mandate – politically as well as financially – and you can continue to count on our solid partnership.

6. We know that the immediate health effects of Covid-19 are far from over in many parts of the world, and that the socio-economic effects of the pandemic will stay with us for a long time to come. The EU and its Member States share the concern about the disproportionate effect of the pandemic, including for refugees, asylum-seekers and other persons of concern to UNHCR, who are among those most impacted by the crisis. We commend UNHCR for consistently advocating for the inclusion of persons of concern in national vaccination plans, health responses and other services to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic and urge UNHCR to support the last-mile delivery when needed. Since December 2020, the EU has exported close to 700 million vaccine doses to 55 countries. With 3.2 billion EUR in pledges, the EU remains the main financial donor to COVAX, together with the US. However, more must be done to close the persistent vaccine gap. The European Union is committed to ensuring universal and equitable access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines as part of a lasting solution to the pandemic. No one is safe until everyone is safe.

7. The EU and its Member States are particularly concerned about the impact of the pandemic on women and girls, including the alarming increase of sexual- and gender based violence (SGBV) and other forms of violence and abuse. We urge UNHCR to pay particular attention to address these specific protection challenges and needs, including by stepping up efforts to prevent, mitigate and respond to SGBV and support access to sexual and reproductive health care services as well as mental health and psycho-social support. We are also alarmed by the disruption in education for refugees, particularly for girls, and encourage efforts by UNHCR and States to increase access to education, as well as employment and livelihoods opportunities, and addressing the needs of

persons in particularly vulnerable situations, especially children, elderly persons and persons with disabilities.

8. Given the wide-ranging impact of the pandemic on refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR, the EU and its Member States believe that ExCom conclusions on international protection and durable solutions in the context of a public health emergency are timely and highly relevant and would send an important message of support and guidance from this Committee. We express our support and appreciation for the work of the Rapporteur, the ExCom Bureau and the UNHCR team, and hope that this Committee will adopt with consensus the proposed text which enjoys the support of the vast majority of ExCom members.

Madam Chair,

9. Despite the challenges caused by the pandemic, the EU and its Member States have continued to provide international protection and assistance to persons fleeing war and persecution, by granting protection inside Europe. EU institutions and agencies have supported Member States in ensuring effective access to international protection and enhancing reception conditions, while addressing the challenges of sustained numbers of mixed arrivals of migrants and asylum seekers at EU external borders by land and sea. The right to seek asylum and the principle of non-refoulement are enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. In recent months, we have seen attempts by States to exploit the vulnerability of human beings for political purposes. The instrumentalisation of migrants and refugees by States is utterly unacceptable and violates fundamental European values and principles. The EU and its Member States condemn any attempts to instrumentalise migrants and refugees by orchestrating their flow across EU external borders for political motives. We remain determined to protect the EU's external borders and prevent abuse of the EU asylum system.

10. We reiterate our commitment to saving lives and supporting those in need of international protection, as confirmed in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum proposed by the European Commission. At the same time, we need to ensure effective return of those with no right to stay, and step up efforts to combat migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings. The EU and its Member States are working to further strengthening engagements beyond our borders, through

mutually beneficial and comprehensive partnerships with partner countries, and stand by our responsibilities as a global actor.

11. We commend countries hosting large refugee populations for their continuous efforts and generosity. The EU and its Member States are committed to do their part to contribute to greater international burden- and responsibility sharing for refugees globally, as well as addressing the root causes of forced displacement. Together with its Member States, the EU continues to be the leading donor to support responses to major refugee crises, bringing together humanitarian and development efforts in line with the EU policy on forced displacement. In 2021, the EU has allocated most of its initial humanitarian budget of 1.4 billion EUR to address the needs of refugees, IDPs and their host communities. At the same time, as the global humanitarian funding gap is growing, the EU underlines the importance to make the best use of existing resources in the spirit of efficiency and effectiveness and make sure that maximum aid goes to beneficiaries. In addition, we welcome the initiative to engage with different actors and developing innovative financial mechanisms, to broaden the base of support.

Madam Chair,

12. The first Global Refugee Forum (GRF) held in Geneva almost two years ago, was an important step in this direction of bringing together a wider group of old and new stakeholders dedicated to the refugee cause. While the world has definitely changed since then, we must not lose the important momentum generated by the GRF towards strengthening global solidarity and burden- and responsibility sharing. The EU and its Member States look forward to the High-Level Officials Meeting in December, which will provide an opportunity to take stock of our progress so far towards fulfilling the commitments and pledges made at the GRF, and help identify opportunities and priorities going forward.

Madam Chair,

13. To meet the growing and more complex challenges of forced displacement, UNHCR must remain vigilant in keeping its own house in order. We appreciate that, despite all challenges, you have continued to work in this direction. The EU and its Member States appreciate the High

Commissioner's internal transformation initiative, which has grown somewhat organically over the past years from the initial HQ review and regionalisation process to a more comprehensive reform of structures, systems and processes. We are pleased to hear that the regionalisation contributed to the quality of the response to stay and deliver during the pandemic by providing greater support to operations. We also commend efforts to strengthen integrity and oversight functions, risk management and programming based on results. Lastly we encourage UNHCR to continue clarifying roles and responsibilities with other UN agencies, and investing in new partnerships.

Thank you!