
Chairperson's summary of the general debate

The Chairperson summarized the general debate of the sixty-eighth session of the Executive Committee as follows:

Let me say that I have been struck by the depth and substantive nature of the interventions at this Executive Committee meeting. It is a challenge to do any justice to them in a chair's summary. I will cluster them into six categories: the general operating environment, protection, solutions, the comprehensive refugee response framework, the global compact on refugees and UNHCR.

Let me begin by recalling four days ago the message of the High Commissioner. In his opening remarks to the Committee on Monday morning, the High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, recalled the historic commitments made by all 193 United Nations Member States in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants in September 2016. He expressed deep concern about new and protracted situations of forced displacement, dangerous movements by sea, and the deteriorating protection environment faced by refugees in some countries. But he also expressed hope. Hope that fundamental change is underway through the comprehensive refugee response framework, or CRRF, and the global compact on refugees. Hope that these initiatives will enable us to work together to make the international refugee response more equitable and predictable. And hope that empathy and solidarity will prevail over prejudice and fear.

In the special segment that followed, the President of the World Bank Group, Dr. Jim Yong Kim, confirmed that addressing forced displacement is an important part of the development agenda and outlined the steps that the World Bank Group is taking in this regard. We also heard a diverse range of perspectives on the CRRF from States implementing the framework, countries hosting large numbers of refugees, civil society and the private sector. These perspectives converged on number of key points in terms of the road ahead. In particular, panellists identified the best practice approaches of countries hosting large numbers of refugees and advised that the support they receive from the international community is meeting neither expectations, nor needs. They called for enhanced burden- and responsibility sharing; a renewed focus on solutions; and earlier, more innovative engagement to help prevent and resolve these crises.

General operating environment

More than 820 individuals registered to attend this year's Executive Committee meeting, including representatives from 149 States. A record number of interventions were made during the general debate, demonstrating that protecting, assisting and finding solutions for refugees are truly global issues in need of a global response. Delegations expressed unequivocal concern for the 65.6 million people around the world who have been forced to flee their homes. In addition to persecution, conflict and other situations of violence, you noted that underdevelopment, poverty, climate change, environmental degradation, epidemics and exclusion were also contributing factors in forced displacement. While the situation in Bangladesh was often at the forefront of discussions, you did not forget the protection and assistance needs of other displaced people. In fact, you asked the international community to remember that, just like the big crises, smaller, often overlooked ones continue to take a toll on countries around the world.

Protection

Many delegations recognized that the responsibility for protecting refugees continues to fall disproportionately on low- and middle-income countries, most of which struggle to keep their borders open despite development challenges of their own. While the generosity of these countries was commended, you acknowledged that there needed to be a more equitable

application of the international refugee protection regime - that forced displacement is a new normal, requiring a new way of working.

You highlighted the efforts underway to establish and strengthen national asylum systems and noted that the ability to return people not in need of international protection was essential to the integrity of these systems. You underscored the importance of adopting age-, gender- and diversity sensitive approaches, and preventing and responding to sexual and gender based violence. You encouraged States to see border security and refugee protection as compatible goals, and to find alternatives to detention, to counter xenophobia, and to offer better protection to those displaced by disasters and the effects of climate change. The suggestion that our treatment of refugees and host communities could be considered a litmus test of our humanity gave us all pause for thought. At frequent points we asked ourselves: as countries, as regions, as a community, how do we fare?

UNHCR's #IBelong campaign to end statelessness by 2024 continued to receive widespread support, noting that the denial of citizenship can impact negatively on the enjoyment of other rights and further drive displacement. A high-level event on statelessness is planned for 2019 so that progress towards the campaign's goals can be reviewed and additional momentum can be built. Ahead of the 20th anniversary of the "Guiding principles on internal displacement" in 2018, delegations also reflected on the need for stronger and more predictable engagement in support of IDPs. Conscious that they could become the refugees of the future, UNHCR's increased efforts to protect and assist IDPs were welcomed.

Solutions

In line with the international community's call for a renewed focus on finding durable solutions for refugees, delegations drew attention to developments in voluntary repatriation, third country resettlement and local integration. You stressed that returns must be voluntary and take the reabsorption capacity of countries of origin into account. As an important protection mechanism and expression of solidarity with refugee host countries, concerns were also raised about the gap between resettlement needs and available spaces. Addressing the root causes of forced displacement was identified as the ultimate solution and an urgent priority for the international community. Pending durable solutions, States were encouraged to continue to pursue complementary pathways to admission, include refugees in national health and education systems, and implement initiatives aimed at fostering greater self reliance, especially through access to labour markets. We were asked to treat refugees not as burdens but as assets capable of participating fully in the decisions that affect their lives and contributing to the communities in which they live.

The comprehensive refugee response framework

You reiterated your support for the commitments made in the New York Declaration and welcomed UNHCR's "whole-of-society" approach to developing and initiating the CRRF. Delegations expressed strong support for the 11 countries applying the CRRF, applauding the progress that has been made to date and the regional approaches that are being pursued in Africa and in Central America. You appealed for refugees to be at the centre of the framework and for its application to empower people with specific needs, including women, children and those with disabilities. While the CRRF was characterized as a practical mechanism for enhanced burden- and responsibility-sharing with refugee host countries, we were reminded of the need for concrete action, increased and more predictable funding, and a means of better capturing and communicating the significant contributions that have been made to date.

Global compact on refugees

Never before have we been in such urgent need of a global compact on refugees. This was what you conveyed time and time again. Having underscored the importance of inclusivity, delegations committed to continued and constructive participation in the thematic discussions, stocktaking process and formal consultations that will lead to the compact's development. You also made a number of requests. Protection must be at the compact's core.

International responses to large-scale refugee movements must be made equitable. Additional obligations must not be imposed on refugee host countries. The good practices and lessons learned from contexts outside of the CRRF must be incorporated. In addition, you asked for a practical programme of action and noted that complementarities with the global compact on migration need to be addressed. There was a sense of optimism about what we can achieve but also an emphasis on the political will required for us to get there.

UNHCR

You reaffirmed your support for UNHCR's protection mandate and welcomed the five strategic directions - "protect", "respond", "include", "empower" and "solve" - that will guide the Office's engagement with people of concern from 2017 to 2021 and beyond. You acknowledged the risks that UNHCR staff often face in safeguarding the rights of the displaced and expressed appreciation for their dedication. The reform initiatives currently underway in UNHCR were considered necessary to ensure the Office's ability to respond rapidly and effectively to future crises. And while States and other partners have responded generously to recent humanitarian appeals, delegations highlighted the negative impact of funding gaps and inequalities, particularly on operations in Africa. In line with the "Grand Bargain" commitments, you advocated that States provide more multi-year and un-earmarked funding to UNHCR and encouraged the Office to find more innovative and cost effective ways of working, including by further increasing engagement with the private sector and expanding the use of cash-based interventions.

Conclusion

Out of the many valuable contributions that have been made over the past few days, two key messages have emerged that warrant repeating. Firstly, there is no country or region that can address the current global forced displacement crisis on its own. We need to work together, with refugees at the heart of our response.

Secondly, and notwithstanding the significant achievements that have been made to date, it is clear that we are at a crossroads in terms of turning the commitments that were made in the New York Declaration into action. We have, in the form of the CRRF and the global compact on refugees, a true opportunity to transform the ways in which we respond to large movements of refugees. We must not let it pass us by. We must find the political will to genuinely ease the pressure on host countries and communities and to help those displaced to rebuild their lives. We must translate our expressions of solidarity into practical policies and mechanisms. As one delegation said in their statement yesterday, this will be an exercise of humanity and solidarity the world has never witnessed before. We must turn the hopes that we have all expressed for the future, said so clearly by the High Commissioner on Monday morning, into a reality.
