

As delivered

**Opening statement at the 69th session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme**

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Madam Chair,  
Distinguished Delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am at the midpoint of my mandate.

I look back, and the state of the world does not look good.

In the last two and a half years, the principles and values of international cooperation have come under immense pressure.

Internal conflicts have escalated, fueled by regional and global rivalries.

Crises have intensified, driven by poverty, exclusion and the growing impact of climate change.

Governance failures have created space for extremists and criminals.

The language of politics has become ruthless, giving licence to discrimination, racism, xenophobia. Refugees and migrants have become targets and casualties of power-driven agendas.

Political leadership should strive to unite, but now - too often - prides itself on dividing.

And the number of refugees globally has risen by almost one fifth, going beyond 25 million for the first time ever.

Yet, amidst so much adversity, multilateralism has held its ground. But as the Secretary-General said in New York last week, we must reinvigorate it.

I am proud that we at UNHCR are part of this effort, every day. I am proud of what UNHCR has achieved – through the immense dedication of my colleagues, and our partners, and of course with your support.

The New York Declaration, too, was a milestone - a political commitment at the highest level, grounded in international cooperation and refugee protection standards.

And the global compact on refugees charts a clear way forward - through a stronger, fairer, better response model.

This, I believe, is where multilateralism has strength – as a practical counterpoint to the rhetoric and electoral grandstanding that often pervades public debates on refugees and migrants.

And as a rallying point for solidarity - that places the dignity, rights and aspirations of refugees and their hosts at the centre of a shared endeavour.

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When I took office in January 2016, global displacement was already at record levels.

The Syrian crisis was in its fifth year, with the number of Syrian refugees approaching five million. Conflicts in Iraq and Yemen were escalating.

Europe was struggling to chart a common response to the arrival of one million refugees and migrants.

In Africa, a series of crises had recently affected Burundi, the Central African Republic, Nigeria, and South Sudan, triggering large refugee movements.

In northern Central America, a complex flow, driven by poverty, exploitation and gang violence, was gathering pace.

Conflict in Ukraine had uprooted hundreds of thousands of people.

And millions remained trapped in exile or internal displacement by protracted conflicts in Afghanistan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia.

Almost three years on, all these situations have continued to evolve. Some - as in South Sudan and Yemen - have escalated.

Elsewhere - as in Syria - repeated military operations have led to massive waves of new displacement and return, with geo-political shifts playing a pivotal role.

Other situations, such as in Iraq, and in the Lake Chad region, have moved towards greater stability, but without definitive resolution.

New crises have emerged, with harrowing consequences. A brutal security operation drove almost 700,000 Rohingya from Myanmar's Rakhine State into Bangladesh.

Some 5,000 people are now leaving Venezuela daily – the largest population movement in Latin America's recent history.

And thousands continue to cross the Sahel into Libya and across the central Mediterranean - driven by despair, and exposed to unthinkable cruelty and dangers.

Global forced displacement has climbed - reaching 68.5 million in 2017. Forty million of those are internally displaced.

Neighbouring countries have largely - although not invariably - kept their borders open, receiving and hosting refugees with generosity, despite enormous constraints.

Yet further afield, often in rich countries, the trend is towards making it difficult for people to seek asylum - even by closing borders and pushing people away.

Children separated from their parents, leaving psychological scars that will last a lifetime. Asylum-seekers stranded at border fences, or detained indefinitely, having committed no crime. Refugees dehumanised, treated as a commodity, passed from one state to another.

Today, when I engage with the leaders of countries neighbouring those in crisis, how am I to tell them to take more people, when some in richer countries are discussing how to close their doors?

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In the first year of my mandate, we embarked on an ambitious exercise to chart key orientations to guide our work in the coming five years.

The result was our Strategic Directions - including the core elements of protect, respond, include, empower and solve. Let me review them briefly.

Over the last three years, our work to protect has remained grounded in international standards. But to be an effective custodian of principles, we need to show practical ways of applying them.

Protection work - preserving human dignity and rights for refugees, and access to asylum - has given rise to new complexities in the context of today's increasingly mixed flows.

The movement of refugees and migrants from Africa through Libya, for example, has presented very difficult challenges.

Libya itself is the theatre of a conflict where solutions continue to be elusive. Meanwhile, international concerns have focused on reducing arrivals in Europe. The Libyan Coast Guard has been reinforced, but not other institutions. And boats carrying migrants and refugees are brought back to Libyan shores.

That means more and more people exposed to exploitation and detention – in horrific conditions.

The first priority, clearly, is an all-out effort to bring stability back to Libya. Meanwhile, emergency solutions must be pursued. The Abidjan agreement between the African and European Unions and the UN offered a good framework, in which IOM and UNHCR have been able to operate - IOM by helping thousands of migrants return home, and UNHCR trying to evacuate the most vulnerable refugees whilst getting people out of detention.

Close to 1,850 asylum seekers and refugees have now been flown to safety so far - mostly to Niger - with the aim of onward resettlement.

Many partners have mobilised - I am especially grateful to the Government of Niger, and to the 15 countries that have offered resettlement places. But working in Libya continues to be extremely dangerous, and insecurity limits our scope of action.

With tens of thousands asylum-seekers and refugees in the country, and numbers rising, more solutions are needed, and quickly - alternatives to detention in Libya; other evacuation options; more and faster resettlement; genuine, targeted investments in countries of asylum and transit; and of course tackling much more strategically and with substantive resources the root causes of these movements, especially conflicts and significant development challenges.

Preserving asylum in Europe remains equally crucial. Recent events in the Mediterranean have been deeply troubling. More than 1,700 people have died or gone missing while trying to reach Europe's shores this year.

Rescue at sea – a marker of our shared humanity – has been taken hostage by politics. Responsibility-sharing has been replaced by responsibility-shedding.

So, rescue at sea must be restored. Pushing people away cannot be the answer - and negotiating disembarkation boat by boat, even when successful, is not a good option. Together with IOM, we have offered a concrete, practical proposal for a regional disembarkation arrangement. This would complement the much needed reform of the Common European Asylum System.

The outflow of Venezuelans across Latin America and beyond is another example of protection challenges amidst complex population flows.

With more than 2.6 million people now outside the country, a non-political and humanitarian approach is essential to help States receiving them in growing numbers.

I welcome the regional approach adopted in the Quito Declaration, and commend States in the region for keeping their borders open and providing access to asylum or alternative legal stay arrangements. Yet more work is needed on ensuring regional coherence in the protection response.

We know that more operational support is also needed. Again, working with IOM has been crucial. We have established a regional inter-agency coordination platform and we have appointed a Joint Special Representative, Eduardo Stein, who will work with Governments and partners, to build regional alliances and foster support for hosting countries.

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Our second core strategic direction committed us to respond quickly, reliably and effectively in emergencies, laying the ground for solutions from early on.

The massive outflow of refugees into Bangladesh last year called for an 'all of UNHCR' response.

Refugees who had endured unspeakable hardship and trauma arrived destitute, and in shock.

Local people were the first to respond, with profound generosity and compassion.

As the monsoon season approached, the Government of Bangladesh steered a large-scale emergency preparedness exercise, together with humanitarian partners, national and international NGOs, and refugees themselves. This was relatively successful. Shelters were strengthened, bridges built and reinforced, new land made ready, and tens of thousands of people relocated.

This massive effort reaffirmed what we are collectively capable of, when people desperately need our help.

We now require investments in medium term arrangements in Bangladesh, to reinforce economic opportunities, local infrastructure and essential services for refugees and host communities - the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank must be thanked for their contributions.

But solutions to this crisis lie in Myanmar. Its root causes – including entrenched discrimination, arbitrary denial of citizenship, and lack of development – must be addressed.

Addressing them is the responsibility of the Government of Myanmar. Together with UNDP, we have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to support the government in this work. Phase one of the planned assessments has been conducted, but access remains slow and constrained. Phase two must urgently start.

The government of Myanmar must show the commitment required to bring far reaching changes. These are necessary to build the confidence of refugees that they have a safe and dignified future back in Myanmar. Improving conditions for the Rohingyas still in Rakhine State, granting freedom of movement and pursuing suitable solutions for internally displaced people, would be compelling first steps.

This crisis has proven that humanitarian action is crucial to save lives, but a broader solidarity approach, encompassing bilateral and multilateral development aid and supporting sustainable solutions, is equally needed.

In Syria, too we need to retain the ability to respond, with the flexibility to adapt to new developments. We must hope that recent agreements regarding the situation in Idlib will prevent further, massive loss of lives and forced displacement.

And as the conflict continues to evolve, the prospect of refugee returns has emerged prominently in discussions around the future of the country.

Let me be clear. Refugees have the fundamental right to return home, in safety and dignity, at a time of their choosing. We support all action that contributes to the full exercise of that right. Free and informed decisions are key, as is action by those responsible to remove obstacles to return. This position is not dictated by political circumstances. It is consistent with established international standards, and with our position on refugee returns elsewhere.

More than 750,000 Syrian internally displaced people are estimated to have returned home this year, particularly to areas where destruction has been contained. But the number of refugee returns has been low – less than 1% of refugees last year, and even fewer in 2018.

The direction the conflict takes in the coming months, and the way in which hostilities are conducted, will be important factors in decision-making by refugees. Security, they tell us, is a big concern, along with basic needs – shelter, health care, education for the children, and jobs.

But they also have other concerns, of a legal and administrative nature. Civil documentation; conscription; land and property; amnesties; and for some, citizenship issues. Unfettered access by UNHCR and humanitarian agencies will be critical, to help build confidence.

We are engaging with the Government of Syria on these matters, and providing legal support with civil documentation, as part of humanitarian and reintegration assistance given to those returning.

But we must not forget that neighbouring countries host 5.6 million refugees across the region, and will continue to do so. Donors have been generous, but funding – and resettlement places – are insufficient, and I am worried by signals of declining support. Commitments made at recent conferences in London and Brussels must be fully honoured and sustained.

In this context, two general points must also be made.

Cash-based interventions are playing an important role - in countries hosting Syrian refugees, and elsewhere. This year, we are providing cash in 100 operations globally, up from 42 in 2015, with a total value of half a billion US dollars. Not only does this require donor support,

but it calls as well for increased cooperation with other organizations engaged in cash-based interventions, especially the World Food Programme. We are working on that.

Supporting Syrians illustrates also the synergies between UNHCR's refugee responsibilities and our engagement with the internally displaced. Stepping up that engagement was an important commitment in our Strategic Directions. I would like us to develop the same reflexes in situations of internal displacement that we have for refugees.

In 2017, we completed an operational review, and we are now working on policies, preparedness and early engagement, data management, and building versatility and specialization in our workforce. We are also working with OCHA and partners in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to develop more coherent approaches, oriented towards solutions.

We now lead, or co-lead, 24 of 26 protection clusters in the field, working to have protection as an overarching objective in humanitarian operations. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, we stepped up our capacity in protection and shelter in Kasai, South Kivu and Tanganyika, as political violence continues to drive massive internal displacement, and to prompt significant cross-border movements.

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Our third and fourth Strategic Directions - include and empower - have taken centre stage in a transformation which Kristalina Georgieva will speak about this afternoon, and which has been accelerated by the application of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework.

The leadership and expertise of the World Bank have helped trigger a fundamental change in how development entities engage with large-scale refugee flows and internal displacement.

We begin to have a deeper understanding of the development challenges posed by displacement - especially when this becomes protracted. We are keen to collaborate on a Joint Data Centre which will be established soon in Copenhagen.

The World Bank is also paving the way in developing innovative financial instruments that build the resilience of refugees and their hosts - partnering with States and UNHCR to leverage their potential and facilitate refugee inclusion.

The IDA18 refugee sub-window, and the Global Concessional Financing Facility are truly trailblazing. Millions of refugees and members of local communities stand to benefit from the resources being made available.

But other investments by bilateral development entities and regional and international financial institutions are also growing. Notable examples include the work of the European Commission, Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom, as well as the African Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the Inter-American Development Bank.

Through these collective efforts, some 6.5 billion USD of development funding has been mobilised in support of refugees and their hosts – a substantial expression of solidarity. Now we must ensure that resources are disbursed rapidly, and programmes implemented. The full effects will take time to emerge, but some changes are already visible.

These resources - I wish to stress - are and must remain additional to humanitarian funding. Humanitarian action, in fact, will remain vital.

I am deeply grateful for the strong confidence that UNHCR continues to receive from its donors. Funds available this year are estimated to reach again 4.5 billion US dollars. I wish to thank the United States, the European Union and Germany for their particularly strong support; and Sweden, the United Kingdom, Norway and the Netherlands for providing critical substantive unearmarked funding. However the gap between requirements and available resources continues to grow and will reach 45% this year.

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A few more thoughts on include and empower.

Too often, we see sobering examples of refugees and asylum seekers being excluded and pushed away.

Sometimes these have overshadowed a quieter, yet profound transformation – in which decades of keeping refugees apart, consigned to camps, or on the margins of society, are giving way to a fundamentally different approach: of including refugees in national systems, and the societies and economies of their host countries, for the time that it is necessary; and enabling them to contribute to their new communities and secure their own futures, pending a solution to their plight.

I wish to acknowledge the many States which have taken humane and sometimes courageous decisions to review their laws and policies, reinforce refugee rights, expand access to national programmes, labour markets and social protection systems.

The private sector is also playing a prominent role, along with faith groups, sport organisations, and cities. There has been important progress on financial inclusion, as the financial sector increasingly recognises that refugees offer a viable market for services such as bank accounts, business loans, remittance and savings facilities.

The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework has provided a vehicle for these efforts in the 15 countries where it has been applied, and will grow in significance as an integral part of the global compact on refugees.

At the General Assembly last week, there was a notable focus on refugee education. Here, there has been progress – thanks to the many states who have opened access to their national systems, and to innovative initiatives, such as the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait, that have mobilised resources and support.

These investments must be sustained and accelerated. Primary school enrolment for refugee children rose from 50% in 2015 to 61% in 2017. But this is still far below the global rate of 92%.

One million refugee children who were previously out of school have now been enrolled in primary education, through our Educate A Child programme, supported by the Education Above All Foundation.

In tertiary education, Germany's valuable DAFI programme has almost tripled in size in the last three years.

And digital learning platforms, such as the Instant Schools Network, are also playing an increasingly significant role.

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Our final core strategic direction relates to the search for solutions.

Sadly, paths to solutions are becoming more and more complicated. Peace is seldom achieved in a thorough, complete way, and where greater stability emerges, this is often linked to military or security operations that are not always accompanied by measures that address root causes.

Pursuing a constellation of solutions, and building the resilience that can pave the way towards these, are important aspects of the Comprehensive Refugee Response model. These have inspired its regional application to Somali displacement by IGAD, and in northern Central America through the approach agreed upon in San Pedro Sula last year – the MIRPS. This has also proven to be adaptable to new contexts, including a recent outflow of Nicaraguans in this region.

Attention to other protracted situations, including Afghanistan, must also be sustained. On a recent visit, for example, I saw how the countries in the region are taking important steps to look at Afghan displacement in a holistic manner, with a renewed interest in solutions.

I welcome recent developments in the Horn of Africa, including dialogue between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and hope that they will act as a catalyst also towards finding solutions to displacement in the region.

In South Sudan, the revitalised peace agreement re-opens the door for some hope. International attention must be sustained, and the rights and perspectives of refugees and the internally displaced considered as part of the peace process. I was encouraged to learn that the President of South Sudan signed last week the instrument that will pave the way to accession to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol. We were also pleased to facilitate a dialogue in Khartoum between South Sudanese refugee representatives and signatories of the peace agreement. It is important that this dialogue continues, as part of the effort to avoid a new, catastrophic failure of peace.

Resettlement, too, must be restored and reinforced - as a tool for solutions, and an instrument for international responsibility sharing. The drop in available places is of deep concern. We need to seize this moment to make resettlement a truly global instrument, engaging as many states and communities as possible. Creative efforts like the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative are welcome in this regard.

We must also boldly follow through on our commitment to end statelessness.

I was delighted to be present in New York when Spain acceded to the 1961 Convention on Statelessness, and I also wish to congratulate Haiti, which acceded to both statelessness conventions last week. This makes 20 accessions since the launch of the campaign.

Next year, we will mark the mid-point in the ten year #IBelong Campaign through a High Level Event at ExCom to take stock of achievements and encourage progress, including through specific pledges.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Pursuing our Strategic Directions requires UNHCR to adapt to new dynamics and opportunities – including those presented by the global compact on refugees.



This relies first and foremost on flexibility and agility in the field, and is why – as you know – we initiated a new reform process in 2016.

The first changes, to realign Headquarters functions in support of the field, are well under way. We established a new Division of Resilience and Solutions, reconfigured our partnership and communications functions, and are transforming our human resources capacities.

We are now about to embark on a decisive new phase, moving towards a truly decentralised model in the course of 2019. Its main purpose will be to build strong, empowered country offices, by moving authority closer to the point of delivery while remaining coherent and effective in upholding refugee protection principles and standards.

Regional Bureaux will be moved from Geneva to their respective regions, and redesigned and equipped to provide effective support and oversight to country operations.

Key systems and processes will be realigned and simplified to devolve further authority to the field. At Headquarters, executive management - supported by streamlined functional divisions - will ensure leadership, global coherence and guidance, and I take this opportunity to say how grateful I am grateful to the Deputy and Assistant High Commissioners for helping me to shoulder this responsibility.

Over the next three months, we will develop a road map to take these decisions forward, including costing and other aspects that are of interest to you. We will continue to consult with you, in a transparent manner, as we move forward.

This work is in line with our strong commitment to the Grand Bargain. It is also in sync with broader UN reforms. As part of this commitment, I am proud to co-chair the Business Innovations Group together with the Executive Director of the World Food Programme. The “BIG” is the fastest moving and most concrete piece of the reform. We are striving to transform UN business operations and back offices to create efficiencies and re-focus resources on our core work.

UNHCR is also a value-based agency, with a strong commitment to integrity.

But as you know, we operate in fluid, high-risk environments, in which the potential for fraud, corruption, exploitation and abuse is sometimes heightened.

We have experienced recent instances in which the actions of some colleagues and some partners have fallen short of our principles and values. This has very harmful consequences for the people we serve, and the credibility and legitimacy of our programmes.

I am firmly committed to tackling fraud, corruption and other forms of misconduct - robustly, transparently and effectively, and this starts with prevention.

At last year's ExCom, I announced the launch of our Risk Management 2.0 initiative. This temporarily embeds additional risk management expertise in selected operations, to help strengthen systems for identifying and managing risk, build the integrity of our programmes, and address root causes. The approach is now being rolled out in six countries this year.

We have continued to improve our oversight architecture, including through new strategic oversight capacity in the Inspector General's Office.

We have intensified our emphasis on ethical conduct in UNHCR - striving to embed values such as tolerance, respect, diversity and gender equality into our institutional culture, and personal attitudes.

As awareness has grown, with more allegations being filed, the system has also been reinforced in response to the increased volume of complex investigations.

Tackling sexual exploitation and abuse, and sexual harassment, has been a key pillar of this work, and a senior coordinator is now steering these efforts across UNHCR.

Alongside other measures, we have instituted an independent review of our policies and processes, strengthened protection against retaliation, and launched a new 'Speak Up' helpline. Allegations of sexual misconduct are prioritised and assigned to trained investigators.

We are working closely with partner agencies, and in June next year I will succeed Henrietta Fore, the Executive Director of UNICEF, as IASC Champion on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment.

I am personally committed to steering real change on these matters. Together with senior colleagues, we are taking every opportunity to convey that sexual misconduct has no place in our organisation, and that our working environment must not be defined by the use of power, which legitimizes abuse, but by the exercise of authority, which is founded on respect.

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Now, before I conclude, back to where I started, the crucial importance of international cooperation.

We have undertaken an important journey together, in developing the global compact on refugees.

I wish to thank you all for your diligence and commitment, and for our rich exchanges over months of consultations.

The final document reflects a realistic balance of the interests and aspirations of hosting countries, of donors and others, and is informed by decades of experience in addressing refugee crises.

As we move towards its validation by the General Assembly, let me make an important plea: when the time comes, and given your investment in crafting the global compact, I very much hope you will welcome and strongly endorse it, as the culmination of our collective efforts. This will add to the strength and credibility of the compact. And that strong spirit of partnership will be vital, too, as we start implementing it in 2019.

When adopted, this historic compact will be the first of its kind in more than half a century – a powerful expression of multilateralism in today's fragmented world.

For too long, refugee hosting countries have borne the brunt of what is a collective responsibility. And too many refugees have had their lives on hold: confined to camps, just scraping by, unable to flourish or contribute.

The compact recognises that in delivering protection and support, host countries and their citizens act on behalf of us all – delivering a global public good, contributing to regional and international peace and security, helping refugees find a renewed sense of stability, easing the quest for solutions.

The compact is a rallying point for humane, practical people from all parts of society, ready to express their solidarity through concrete actions, like the citizens of Cox's Bazar providing the first assistance to Rohingya refugees; the people of Valencia welcoming in their thousands the survivors of the "Aquarius"; the Ugandans sharing farmland with refugees.

Granting asylum is one of the most ancient and shared gestures of solidarity in the history of humankind. It has helped save lives, build and rebuild nations, and preserve our sense of humanity. The compact will help us translate the values upholding this noble tradition into concrete measures, shielded from the vagaries of politics, adapted to our challenging world.

It will be up to all of us to make it work; to ensure that its promise becomes a reality for the millions who are counting on it.

Thank you.