

- **Check against delivery** -

Madam Chair, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for this opportunity to update you on developments in Europe and to complement the information provided in the Regional update —which we hope was helpful.

As we embark on yet another virtual, socially-distanced meeting, it will come as no surprise to anyone that the COVID-19 pandemic has touched upon every aspect of UNHCR's work. This in turn has impacted our collective efforts to protect and assist refugees, asylum seekers, IDPs and stateless people across Europe.

The spread of the pandemic has prompted states to impose a range of containment measures. These have included temporary border closures, movement restrictions, and limitations on public gatherings. No one disputes that these actions have been necessary to safeguard public health and save lives. However, there is also no denying that they have tended to disproportionately impact people of concern, and that the socioeconomic consequences will continue to do so. They are often the most vulnerable, have the weakest social capital within host communities, and face a range of practical obstacles in accessing services. The pandemic has forced us to innovate and to redouble our efforts to promote inclusion. Perhaps most importantly, it prompted all of us to reassert the importance of maintaining access to asylum and protection—even in the midst of a global public health emergency. Allow me to begin, therefore, by highlighting a few key areas of **progress and opportunities** for the future.

Madam chair, distinguished delegates

The past year has tested the strength and resilience of existing **asylum systems** and challenged states to innovate. While some early border management measures raised concerns, the majority of States were able to undertake corrective actions in law or in practice in ways that balanced legal obligations and public health considerations. We have compiled emerging good practice and shared with states and partners.

The majority of UNHCR's people of concern were—and continue to be—**included in national responses to the pandemic**. This is no small achievement. Many countries in Europe have now also confirmed their inclusion in national vaccination plans. Exclusion will only put more lives at risk. No one is safe until everyone is safe. I would also like to express UNHCR's

gratitude for the solidarity and support of many European states to the COVAX facility, which seeks to ensure global equitable access to vaccines.

Covid has also resulted in new challenges—and a new sense of urgency—in reaching out to populations of concern and communicating critical public health information. NGOs, civil society groups, municipal authorities, community activists and individual volunteers across Europe responded admirably—and with much-needed ingenuity. New technologies were harnessed and deployed to strengthen **communication with communities** and share crucial public health information in culturally appropriate and linguistically accessible ways. Nonetheless, administrative and practical barriers to vaccines remain and need to be addressed as a priority, particularly for asylum seekers and stateless people who often lack a secure legal status or key documents.

We have also increased our **operational support** in a number of states. In the Greek Islands, where overcrowded reception centres exacerbated the risks associated with Covid, we partnered with authorities on a shielding initiative which successfully transferred more than 2000 vulnerable asylum-seekers to alternative accommodation. In Georgia and Ukraine, we worked closely with partners and local authorities to address specific hardships faced by IDPs in non-government-controlled areas. Elsewhere, cash-based interventions were expanded to help refugees and asylum seekers survive lockdowns and preserve economic assets. In total, some 75,000 people of concern in 12 countries in Europe benefited from enhanced cash distributions. Allow me to express our gratitude to the member states who responded quickly to UNHCR's emergency Covid-19 appeal—and to the countless NGO and private sector partners who worked closely with us to facilitate the operational response both in Europe and around the world.

Later in the year, UNHCR also strengthened its operational engagement in Armenia and Azerbaijan in response to the impact of the recent conflict, and we continue to work with all parties to fully implement the mandate given to UNHCR in the November ceasefire statement.

Madam Chair, distinguished delegates

The pandemic has also had a crippling impact on what has long been Europe's most visible and tangible demonstration of solidarity—refugee resettlement – with many countries forced to temporarily suspend activities. But signs of solidarity were evident in other ways—and I

would like to commend the steps taken by a number of countries to provide **relocation and family reunification opportunities** for unaccompanied and vulnerable individuals on the Greek islands. In response to the EU's call for action, a number stepped up and worked closely with Greek authorities, IOM, UNICEF and UNHCR, to relocate nearly 600 unaccompanied children and over 1,600 vulnerable individuals. This remains a work in progress—and I urge states to take action to implement outstanding pledges.

In the past year, refugees have demonstrated how much they can contribute to host societies if given the opportunity. They have engaged in the production of masks and other protective gear. They have volunteered to help care for the elderly and vulnerable in their communities. When seven European states publicly appealed to refugees and migrants with a health background to identify themselves in support of overwhelmed medical facilities, they came forward in large numbers, often willing to risk their own health to volunteer. We worked with the Council of Europe to help states identify candidates and assess skills through the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees initiative.

We welcome the launch of the EU's five-year **Plan of Action on Integration and Inclusion** which was developed in consultation with people of concern. It prioritizes action in education and skills training, jobs and livelihoods, access to health care and housing and provides a good basis on which to move forward.

States have also made significant progress with respect to efforts to eradicate **statelessness**, particularly in relation to the forty pledges made by 14 countries at the 2019 High-Level Segment. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Iceland on its accession to the 1961 convention on Statelessness in January this year.

Madam Chair, Distinguished Delegates

The positive developments I have just highlighted cannot obscure the fact that we continue to face significant challenges.

Most concerning to us and despite fewer arrivals in 2020 than in years prior, **pushbacks at land and sea** continued along Europe's external borders, sometimes very violently. Such measures constitute a serious violation of international law and put human lives at risk, including those of women and children. They must stop. Legal obligations concerning the right

to asylum must be upheld and, as we know, managing borders is not irreconcilable with upholding international obligations on *non-refoulement*. Nor should it be done at the expense of other states hosting large numbers whether in Europe or elsewhere.

At the same time, **states on Europe's external borders** should not be left alone. Continued financial resources, technical capacity and concrete demonstrations of solidarity are needed to support those receiving the highest numbers of new arrivals, as well as those hosting the largest number of refugees. **Search and rescue capacity** in the Mediterranean also remain under considerable stress, with quarantine requirements having further hindered progress towards predictable disembarkation arrangements.

These are longstanding challenges, but the proposals outlined in the **EU's new Pact on Migration and Asylum** offer a basis for a way forward—if member states seize the opportunity. Its adoption would not only uphold the necessary legal rights and principles at the core of international law and central to European values, but it would also send a clear message—in line with that of the Global Compact on Refugees—that protecting refugee rights remains a shared responsibility and that Europe stands in solidarity with refugees and their hosting states everywhere. We stand ready to support states in developing pragmatic and fair border procedures, as well as robust and predictable solidarity mechanisms, that will ensure access to territory and safeguard the rights of asylum seekers with well-founded claims. We also welcome the Pact's recognition of the need to support refugee hosting states elsewhere. I take this opportunity to reiterate, however, that solidarity and support for refugees outside of Europe cannot be at the expense of continued direct access to asylum in Europe.

Madam chair, distinguished delegates

Allow me to draw your attention to the issue of reception conditions within Europe. Across the continent, new arrivals continue to reside in **overcrowded reception arrangements**. COVID-19 has exacerbated an already dire situation. We can—and must—do better. While we can expect that conditions may vary in different contexts across states, we cannot allow this to become a race to the bottom.

Linked to the issue of reception conditions, further action is also needed to respond to the needs **of children and survivors of gender-based violence and trafficking** across Europe. This requires immediate response capacities, as well as a long-term strategy.

Finally, allow me to return to the issue of refugee **resettlement and access to complementary pathways in Europe**. In 2020, Only 11,000 departures were able to take place against nearly 30,000 places pledged by EU member states. UNHCR urges states to prioritize the resumption of refugee resettlement and an expansion of complementary pathways as soon as the public health situation allows.

Madam chair, distinguished delegates

I would like to express our appreciation to our Executive Committee member states and our many operational and advocacy partners in Europe. It has been an unusual and very difficult year for all of us and we are grateful to member states, host communities, private sector and civil society partners who have continued to deliver on pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum.

The strength of the collaboration with our partners played in an important role in ensuring that UNHCR could effectively respond to new challenges during the past year. UNHCR held five regional dialogues with NGOs on an array of thematic issues, which were jointly organized with the European Council on Refugees and Exiles and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies. These exchanges have proved fundamental to our work. They allow us to share information and coordinate efforts, strengthen our collective resolve and sense of common purpose, think differently, and respond better.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to your questions.

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