

**81st Meeting of the Executive Committee
of the High Commissioner's Programme**

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Madam Chair, very distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you so much for joining us today.

Last week I received this report from one of our colleagues in the field. She said:

Overall, there appears to be a persistent trend towards shrinking of the asylum space amidst worsening gender-based violence and xenophobia with dire consequences for those seeking international protection, including killings, disappearances, repeated instances of refoulement and denial of access to asylum, especially for LGBTIQ+ people.

This report aptly describes the past year; another exceptional one for the UN Refugee Agency with unprecedented challenges to the protection of refugees and all those who have been displaced, forcibly, or are stateless.

It is also a sobering report from the field, for in just a few days we celebrate the adoption 70 years ago of the Refugee Convention on 28 July 1951, the modern articulation of the centuries old respect for asylum.

In UNHCR's Note on International Protection last year, we reported growing concerns about threats to the integrity of the global asylum system.

In this year of COVID-19, our concerns have been magnified.

The pandemic has led to the deaths of nearly 4 million people, bringing long-term social and economic impacts for the most vulnerable and the closure of borders by

most countries; today more than 50 nations continue to deny access to their territory to asylum-seekers.

The enduring value of the Convention

The anniversary of the Refugee Convention prompts reflection about its enduring value. What has the Refugee Convention achieved over these 70 years and will it be 'fit for purpose' in responding to the protection needs of displaced people in the future?

The 1951 Refugee Convention, one of the first treaties to be adopted after the Second World War, sought to formalize a minimum set of rights for people fleeing persecution. It rests on two key principles, the right of everyone to seek asylum and the absolute prohibition on returning a refugee to a place of violence or persecution. It also recognized social and economic rights of refugees. For its time, this was a landmark agreement.

Today, with 149 States party to either the 1951 Convention, or its 1967 Protocol, or both, it remains one of the most widely ratified treaties globally, reflecting a consensus, and I believe a genuine consensus, in the international community to support these humanitarian norms.

The Convention has also inspired regional agreements such as the 1969 Organization of Africa Union Refugee Convention, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration for Latin America and the common asylum system for the European Union.

Over these 70 years, the Refugee Convention has demonstrated flexibility and adaptability ensuring protection to people fleeing persecution, whether in small numbers across borders or mass movements. Underpinned by fundamental humanitarian values, the Convention has undeniably saved millions of lives over the last years and decades and we believe will continue to do so.

Displacement numbers and current challenges

Madam Chair,

While recognising the effectiveness of the Refugee Convention, we need to be clear-eyed about the challenges to its integrity and ability to respond in the future.

Let us look at the numbers. In 1951, the founding nations of the Refugee Convention agreed upon principles to protect about 2 million people who remained displaced in Europe, 6 years after the Second World War. Last month, the High Commissioner reported some 82.4 million are now displaced.

One per cent of the world's population, one in every 97 human beings on the planet, is now displaced. Most, 48 million, are internally displaced as citizens within their own country. Others, 26.4 million refugees, have sought safety across national boundaries. Despite COVID-19, the number of displaced people globally has increased by 4% this year, doubling over the past 10 years.

While the numbers of those forcibly displaced continue to mount, the root causes remain the same: poverty, inequality, persecution, discrimination, environmental degradation, natural disasters, leading inevitably to conflict and violence.

While armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Myanmar and Yemen have continued, about threequarters of a million people are newly displaced in the Sahel region of Africa. More than 1.7 million people have been displaced in Ethiopia and over 46,000 refugees from Tigray have found refuge in Eastern Sudan. Hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan have also displaced tens of thousands of people. Millions remain displaced from Venezuela and South Sudan.

Earlier this year, my colleague Raouf Mazou, the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations and I, went on mission to northern Mozambique, where an estimated 800,000 thousand people have escaped deadly violence in Cabo Delgado, seeking protection both in their own country and across national borders.

We visited a settlement for families, about two hours away from Pemba. Here we met grandmothers caring for their infant grandchildren whose parents had been slaughtered by insurgents fleeing from burning villages. They had no milk, little food, relying on root vegetables dug up in the surrounding fields. The plastic sheeting provided little shelter from the rain, medical care was rudimentary and children had little opportunity for joining the local school. This, among so many others, is a humanitarian tragedy.

The global health crisis and regional and national armed crises have, in turn, led to a protection crisis.

Reduced Solutions

The traditional and less traditional protection solutions have declined dramatically over the last year:

- In 2020, over 39,500 refugees were referred for resettlement by UNHCR to third countries while 22,800 departed. The year before, nearly 63,700 were resettled, marking a dramatic 64 per cent decline – at a time when 1.4 million refugees are in urgent need of resettlement; we are optimistic however that this year and next will see a rise in resettlement as nations rebuild their capacities as COVID-19 subsides;
- Only a quarter of a million refugees were able to return in safety to their country of origin in 2020, a declining number;
- For those millions displaced in their own country, returns to villages and homes proved impossible. In 2019, for example, 40 per cent fewer citizens displaced in their own country were able to return in protracted conflicts, and of course;
- COVID-19 restrictions have also impeded regular pathways through labour mobility, education, community sponsorship and family reunification.

UNHCR will continue to advocate for more states to broaden the base by offering more resettlement places and to assist with voluntary returns where this is possible in safety and dignity.

But for practical purposes, inclusion and integration in the host community offer the most realistic opportunities for protection for the millions who will never be resettled or return to their homes. Inclusion of course means access to health services, to education and livelihoods, and an opportunity for the displaced to contribute meaningfully in their host communities.

Threats to the global asylum regime

Madam Chair,

Despite almost universal acceptance of norms protecting refugees, in practice there are repeated violations, undermining the global asylum regime.

Border closures and limited access to asylum, pushbacks on land and sea, reduced search-and-rescue capacities and denial of disembarkation for asylum seekers rescued at sea, have been justified by States as necessary responses to national security and to the pandemic; this despite practical options to manage infection risks and security risks with digital and remote processing, quarantine and others.

And this at a time where there was a 45 per cent decrease in new asylum applications over the past year – the single biggest drop in over 20 years, reflecting the huge impact of the pandemic on peoples’ ability to seek international protection.

UNHCR recognizes that the credibility of the asylum regime is threatened by the inability of many nations to return those who are determined by due process not to be in need of international protection. This point has been raised repeatedly in frontline countries where returns are proving difficult if not impossible. The blockages upon effective and timely returns undermine the credibility of the asylum system and we will work with governments to identify and reform the processes.

Yet one of the greatest threats to the asylum system is that, while at least 86% of displaced people are hosted by poor and developing countries, some well-resourced nations seek to deny access to asylum by outsourcing their responsibilities to countries with much more limited resources. Rather than shouldering their responsibility for refugees, these examples of externalization shift the burden to those least able to bear it.

The High Commissioner has been entirely clear. UNHCR rejects efforts by States to avoid their responsibilities to provide protection. Externalization in its various forms and in the absences of safeguards simply shifts asylum responsibilities elsewhere and evades international obligations.

Externalization violates international law and undermines the global protection regime. Past experience shows that externalization can lead to indefinite ‘ware-

housing' of asylum-seekers in isolated places where they are 'out of sight and out of mind', exposing them to severe danger and chain refoulement.

Madam Chair,

I have painted a grim picture.

Good practices

But it is also true that many nations have risen to the challenges posed by COVID-19, conflict and climate change with exemplary best practices:

- Two-thirds of European countries, for example, found ways to manage their borders while at the same time enabling access to asylum-seekers using digital technologies for remote interviews and document submissions, adopting flexible visa policies;
- Colombia is granting a ten-year temporary protection status to displaced Venezuelans, an extraordinary act of leadership to the principles of the Refugee Convention;
- Chad – one of Africa's largest refugee host countries – has recently adopted an asylum law which recognizes refugee rights to work, to access health care, education and justice; and
- Nepal, Jordan and Rwanda are among other nations that have ensured refugees are included in COVID-19 vaccine plans.

In short, many countries have found pragmatic solutions to ensure that their asylum systems are fully or partially operational while taking measures also to safeguard public health. Most have ensured that refugees, displaced people and stateless people, are included in national health services, education for children and social safety nets. While it is true distribution of vaccines to developing countries has been disappointingly slow, the vaccines are now being rolled out to refugees where available.

Of the 126 countries with a refugee population of more than 500 people, UNHCR has confirmed that 98% have either explicitly included refugees in their vaccination plans or provided assurance that they will do so. This is also the case for asylum-seekers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown, as almost no other crisis could, the importance of collective, concrete measures to protect the most vulnerable.

The Convention's principles affirmed through the Global Compact on Refugees

At a time of new and protracted displacement and record number of people forcibly displaced, the Convention and its core principles have never been more relevant.

The Global Compact on Refugees, affirmed in December 2018 by the United Nations General Assembly, has helped renew the commitments to protection principles and international cooperation and give practical effect to the Convention in two important ways. First, 181 nations agreed to share equitably the burden and responsibilities for refugees, displaced people and those who are stateless and, secondly, and also very importantly, the wider international community is now engaged in giving practical effect to the principles of Convention: civil society and NGOs, the private sector and philanthropists, local mayors and faith-based groups, parliamentarians and scholars, and crucially, of course, the voices of refugees and displaced people themselves.

As a non-binding commitment, this is a new approach. Written in plain English – it makes a compelling read – the Compact converts vision and aspirations into practical solutions for today and the future. Critically, the pledges made to implement the Compact at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019 will be assessed by evidence and data in the form of the Global Compact Indicator Report. This December we will hold the High-Level Officials Meeting in Geneva to take stock of progress in implementing the pledges, and to plan for the next Global Refugee Forum in 2023.

Madam Chair,

Community Based Protection and protection and solutions for forcibly displaced LGBTIQ+ people

We have learned many lessons in responding to the pandemic. One is the vital role played by forcibly displaced people and local communities, cities, local government

and mayors and faith-based groups that I have mentioned. They are often the first and we think the best-placed responders to protection needs.

People are at the centre of UNHCR's protection work and communication with communities is a strategic priority. We will shortly provide the [2020 Report on accountability to communities for Age, Gender and Diversity](#) which provides examples of best practices.

One notable impact of the pandemic has been the shocking rise in gender-based violence, and mounting evidence of forced marriages, child labour and adolescent pregnancies, reversing gains made in gender equality and the rights of women and girls, reflecting rising poverty and of course school closures for over a billion children. We are especially concerned that thousands of girls will not return to school, setting back advances in their education over recent years.

I am very proud that UNHCR colleagues and partners have also 'stayed and delivered', adapting protection services either on the ground through community collaboration or with virtual and digital technologies.

LGBTIQ+ people continue to be vulnerable to criminalization and violence, especially those displaced who may be denied access to their rights and to services. UNHCR and the UN Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity initiated a global roundtable over the last three weeks in June during which about 600 participants explored protection and solutions for forcibly displaced people of different sexual orientations and gender identity. A report on these outcomes with a comprehensive list of recommendations will be made available shortly.

Statelessness

COVID-19 has of course had disproportionate impacts on all marginalized and vulnerable groups, none more so than on those who are stateless or without documentation making it difficult to access health care and social services. Some countries have suspended civil registration services and birth registration leading to lower birth registration rates, inevitably, and to substantial backlogs and increasing rather than diminishing the risk of statelessness.

UNHCR has committed to its ambitious “#IBelong” campaign to end statelessness by 2024. Recent evaluations of efforts to address statelessness, one by the USA and the other by UNHCR, are unanimous in calling for increased financial and staff resources and mainstreaming this campaign in all of our activities. It is a strategic priority for us to step up our efforts over the next three and a half years remaining of the campaign.

Climate change

Another priority for the future, maybe the number one priority when the fog of COVID-19 lifts, as the High Commissioner has said, will be the challenges of climate change. We will need to respond to the growing numbers of people displaced by climate change and natural disasters. Climate change as we know is a risk multiplier that exacerbates inequalities and creates community tensions that all too often lead to violence, conflict and persecution. Many will flee across national borders and seek protection in other countries. The Sahel region, including Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali, is facing one of the fastest growing displacement crises. Violence interacting with climate change and natural disasters, leading to floods and droughts, have forced more than 2.7 million people to flee across the region and their distress is compounded by COVID-19.

The UN Human Rights Committee has recently recognized in the Teitiota case that a valid claim for refugee protection may exist where, for example, the adverse effects of climate change interact with armed conflict and violence or when a State can no longer protect its citizens from these impacts.

Madam Chair,

Conclusions

So may I conclude by reiterating that adherence by nations to the principles of the Refugee Convention is an established global norm – not the exception. And we at UNHCR are so grateful for the support we have received from the Executive Group and the Standing Committee itself.

The Convention as legal basis for the global protection system and the Global Compact on Refugees complementing it, has proved in practice to be both

adaptable to protect those forcibly displaced from conflict, violence and persecution, the impacts of climate and from global health emergencies.

UNHCR stands ready with all its partners to support States in addressing these challenges.

The challenges of the international community are to ensure that it shares equitably their responsibilities for people who have been displaced or are stateless and to focus on the benefits and riches that they can bring to host communities if given the chance. Sport is one area, among many others, where refugees make a contribution that we all enjoy. And it is in this spirit that we wish every success to the refugee athletes competing in the Olympic Games and Para-Olympic games in Japan in just a few days.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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