



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

Special Human Dimension Event

"Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees"

Vienna, 6 July 2015

Keynote Address by Volker Türk Assistant High Commissioner for Protection

Chairperson,
Distinguished Delegates,

At the outset, let me thank the Norwegian Chair of the Human Dimension Committee, Ambassador Kvile, and the Serbian Chair of the OSCE, Ambassador Žugić, for convening this important event today. I am pleased that you have dedicated a special event to refugees and internally displaced persons. This is very timely indeed given the sheer magnitude, scope, and complexity of current displacement and statelessness challenges around the world.

UNHCR and the OSCE have a common interest in addressing these issues. We greatly appreciate the support which OSCE participating States and Institutions continue to give to refugees and IDPs, most notably to the resolution of protracted displacement situations. The number of existing OSCE Commitments relating to Migration, Statelessness, Refugees, and Internal Displacement is impressive.

These commitments are critical, as we are contending with a multiplication of concurrent emergencies around the world. This state of affairs is reflected in the figures. The number of people displaced by conflict has reached levels unseen since the end of the Second World War. Two weeks ago, UNHCR issued the *Global Trends* report for 2014.¹ More than 59.5 million people are forcibly displaced, of whom nearly 20 million are refugees, and over half are children. More people fled last year than at any other time on record. Their numbers are growing and accelerating on every continent. Last year alone, 42,500 people became refugees, asylum-seekers, or internally displaced persons every single day – which is a four-fold increase from just four years ago.

UNHCR has never had to address so much human misery in its 64-year history. Since the drawing up of the United Nations Charter 70 years ago, States have crafted a range of international treaties to establish in binding law the principles of human rights protection, good neighborliness, and settlement of conflicts. With alarming regularity, however, these principles are disregarded or flouted with impunity or in the name of national sovereignty. Increasing numbers of people are trapped in “semi-permanent” crises or protracted situations. The Syrian refugee situation is poised to become the largest protracted refugee situation of the decade. As populations continue to increase; as people flock to large, unplanned, and underdeveloped cities; and as the climate

¹ UNHCR *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2014*, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/556725e69.html>

continues to deteriorate, the threat of multiple-displacement, mega-emergencies is ever more real, as is the continued rise in the number of “protracted” situations.

When we look at last year’s statistics in the OSCE area, we see a similar trend: the numbers have risen from 5.2 million displaced persons in June 2014 to more than 7.2 million by the end of 2014. This includes more than 3.5 million refugees, 895,000 asylum-seekers, 2 million IDPs, and 634,000 stateless persons. Looking at these numbers and considering this year’s 40th anniversary of the OSCE Helsinki Final Act, this is an opportune moment to revitalize, update, and strengthen OSCE commitments concerning “Refugees, Displaced Persons, Returnees, and Stateless Persons”.

In my statement today, I will review some key concerns in the OSCE area related to international protection and the human rights and fundamental freedoms of refugees, IDPs, and stateless persons.

First, I will focus on refugees. Refugee situations around the globe continue to have consequences for the OSCE region. The Syrian refugee situation is one of the most prominent. Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt continue to receive the vast majority of Syrian refugees, together hosting nearly 3.9 million. They have provided them protection, often at great cost to their own economies and infrastructures. Nearly one-fourth of the population in Lebanon are now refugees, and Turkey hosts more refugees than any other country in the world today. Few refugee influxes have had such a profound impact on their host countries, with significant demographic, economic, and social consequences.

As the numbers and pressures continue to grow, we are seeing more Syrian refugees trying to find protection and solutions further afield, moving onwards to Europe and elsewhere, often at considerable risk to their lives. As of June, 105,000 refugees and migrants had crossed the Mediterranean Sea to Europe in 2015 alone, and 1,850 persons drowned while trying to do so. In the wake of increased arrivals from Syria, as well as from Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, and Somalia, some OSCE countries have resorted to stricter land border control measures. Unfortunately, these measures have too often translated into no access to international protection, extensive use of detention at the border, and “push-backs”, and may have contributed to re-directing the movements along other routes.

This dramatic situation affects countries in different ways, and requires a collective and far-reaching response based on principles of humanity, access to asylum and protection, solidarity and responsibility-sharing, and respect for human rights. UNHCR recently launched the Special Mediterranean Initiative² – a plan for an enhanced operational response. We have also raised awareness on concrete actions that destination States can take in partnership with countries of origin and transit. By way of example, we have encouraged more legal avenues so that refugees can reach safety in Europe, through expanded opportunities for resettlement, humanitarian admission, humanitarian visas, private sponsorships, family reunification, student scholarships, and labour mobility. We hope you will renew your commitments in this regard.

*Second, let me turn to the protection concerns of IDPs in the region, in particular the situation in Ukraine.*³ There are now more than 1.3 million Ukrainians who have been displaced internally and some 900,000 across its borders. The Government has adopted a series of regulations, among others, restricting the freedom of movement of people, transportation of basic goods, and access to social

² <http://www.unhcr.org/557ad7e49.html>

³ www.unhcr.org/ua/externalupdate.

services, including pensions, which have resulted in increasing humanitarian needs and exacerbated displacement. It is necessary to ensure that these measures do not have an adverse impact on the civilian population.

Once the security situation allows – and this is where there could be a particular role for the OSCE and its Special Monitoring Mission [SMM] – it will be essential to create conditions for durable solutions, including voluntary return. This will require the establishment of monitoring mechanisms to ensure safety and dignity throughout the return process. It will be important to involve IDPs and returnees in reconciliation and peace-building, particularly through participation in political processes, public life, and elections upon return.

Since the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine, UNHCR has closely collaborated with the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission. As a first step, an Operational Agreement between both organizations was signed, which facilitates coordination on the ground, and regular information-sharing, and capacity-building activities on IDP issues. A good example of collaboration is the joint OSCE-UNHCR “Protection Checklist addressing displacement and protection of displaced populations and affected communities along the conflict cycle”, which was distributed to the Monitoring Officers and used for training in different locations in Ukraine.⁴

The “Protection Checklist” has also been useful in other situations. It was, for instance, used in the *Displaced Persons Simulation Exercise* on a potential influx situation of Afghan refugees, jointly run by the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre and UNHCR for field staff in Central Asia in May. It will also be rolled out with OSCE staff in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, including the Caucasus.

Third, I would like to focus our attention on another group at risk of displacement – stateless persons. Statelessness is not always well understood, and in many countries its scope is ignored. Statelessness occurs because of discrimination against certain groups, redrawing of borders, and gaps in nationality laws. Stateless people often live in precarious situations on the margins of society and may be subject to discrimination. They frequently lack identity documentation critical for accessing basic services. They may not be allowed to go to school, see a doctor, get a job, open a bank account, buy a house, or even get married.

The OSCE and UNHCR have jointly raised awareness and assisted governments to prevent and reduce statelessness, in particular in Central Asia. We have also cooperated to enhance access to civil registration and documentation for the Roma and Sinti in the Western Balkans. Fortunately, in the course of 2014, the number of stateless people fell considerably in some countries, including the Russian Federation, Turkmenistan, and Latvia. In only six months, the total number of stateless persons in the OSCE area decreased by 17 per cent from some 770,000 to 630,000.⁵ Yet, much remains to be done. At the end of 2014, coinciding with the 60th anniversary of the *1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons*, UNHCR launched a worldwide *#IBELONG Campaign* to end statelessness within the next 10 years.⁶ Let me reiterate UNHCR’s appreciation to the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Ms Astrid Thors, for having joined the Open Letter to End Statelessness. I also invite OSCE participating States to renew their commitments to the protection of stateless persons.

Fourth, this brings me to the question of how we address root causes of displacement. Ending statelessness is one way that we can meaningfully address a root cause. When people have safety and opportunity

⁴ See <http://www.refworld.org/docid/530b060d4.html>

⁵ See *UNHCR Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2014, Annex*, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/556725e69.html>

⁶ <http://ibelong.unhcr.org/en/home.do>

at home, they are not compelled by desperation and destitution to move onward on what are often dangerous journeys over land or by sea. It is time to revisit discussions that we had in the 1980s and 90s in seeking solutions to the causes of displacement, particularly through strengthened human rights mechanisms, the rule of law, conflict resolution and peace-building, education, employment and the right to work, women's empowerment, rights-based approaches to development, and community-based approaches to protection. This is the theme UNHCR has chosen for the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection in December 2015. By embedding our protection discussion within the context of the larger question of root causes, we can find ways to bridge protection and solutions with creativity and thoughtful consideration.

We have already made headway in this direction in Eastern Europe where UNHCR has been closely working with the Special Representatives of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office and other OSCE structures involved in regional conflict settlement processes. This provides a good foundation for cooperative efforts to find solutions for protracted situations in the region. UNHCR will also continue cooperating with the OSCE in the framework of established mechanisms such as the Geneva International Discussions, the Minsk Group, and the "5+2" format. We will further explore the option of conducting joint needs assessment missions, where possible.

I would like to conclude with some further thoughts on the subject of collaboration. For refugees, IDPs, and stateless persons, I have already mentioned some examples of how UNHCR and the OSCE have worked together. In light of the growing numbers of displaced persons already in the region and at its doorstep, it is critical that we step up our collective efforts to ensure we can rise to the challenge. Some of the groundwork for this has been established with the broadened scope of cooperation between our organizations in the renewed Memorandum of Understanding between the OSCE/ODIHR and UNHCR, signed in March of this year. This MoU has not only extended the timeframe for our collaboration, but also expanded the fields of cooperation between ODIHR's human dimension work and international protection matters.

Another good example of cooperation is the framework of the Sarajevo Process. The OSCE and UNHCR were among the key initiators of the Process in the early 2000s, together with the four Partner Countries [Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia] and the EU. The Sarajevo Process significantly contributed to reconciliation and stability in the Western Balkans. Its most concrete offspring was the Regional Housing Programme [RHP],⁷ a multi-donor initiative aimed at ensuring durable housing solutions for 27,000 families [74,000 individuals] displaced as the result of conflicts in the first half of 1990s in the Western Balkans. With more than 6,600 housing solutions in the pipeline, and with the first 197 families receiving housing assistance, there is ground for optimism. The OSCE and UNHCR will continue monitoring the Programme over the coming years, to make sure that it is fulfilling its main objective – that the most vulnerable refugees, returnees, and IDPs across the region achieve durable solutions.

Looking ahead, I would like to recall the recommendations that emerged from the 2011 "Special Thematic Event on Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees", most of which are still relevant today. These include, for example, raising awareness of displacement and statelessness as well as acceding to and implementing the relevant international conventions. In a world where politics can overshadow humanitarian considerations, we need to remain committed to a pragmatic, depoliticized, and humanitarian approach to displacement, based upon fundamental principles of international law.

⁷ <http://www.regionalhousingprogramme.org/>

Chairperson,
Distinguished Delegates,

The OSCE is instrumental in fostering peace, preventing crisis, and promoting human rights, which are central to the search for durable solutions. The OSCE, with its comprehensive security mandate, and as the largest regional security organization, offers a welcome platform for a comprehensive dialogue in this regard. As the challenges and humanitarian needs linked to forced displacement are only likely to grow in the future, our collaboration in the months and years to come is crucial.

Thank you.