

*Check against delivery*

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Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

One year ago, I stood in front of this distinguished committee to provide an update on UNHCR programs in the Middle East and North Africa and to highlight the dire humanitarian needs in the region. And still, every year proves to be the most challenging yet. The ever-worsening situation and severity of violence in and around Syria and Iraq have shaken the stability and security of the region, and the capacity of refugee hosting countries and the international community to cope and respond to the deteriorating humanitarian situation. In this increasingly complex environment, UNHCR's capacity to respond could further be curtailed by a potentially significant funding shortfall because of major exchange rate fluctuations.

What was unthinkable one year ago, as far as Syria and Iraq situation is concerned, is the reality we face today. With no political solution in sight, 12.2 million persons are in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, including 7.6 million internally displaced persons. In Syria, UNHCR continued to support the IDP inter-agency coordination framework and the implementation of the strategic response plan, leading the sectors of protection, camp coordination and management, shelter and relief items. We used all possible means, working across conflict lines, to maximise delivery of assistance and protection inside Syria, despite the fact that safe and unhindered access to populations in need of assistance is not always provided. In 2014 alone, we distributed core relief items to 4.5 million people in Syria, including to over 1.1 million vulnerable IDPs in more than 100 hard-to-reach areas and across-borders. I want to pay a special tribute to the humanitarian workers inside Syria, who work under the most demanding conditions, sometimes under increasing mortar and rocket attacks and tremendous pressure to deliver.

In addition, more than 200,000 people were reached via cross-border operations from Turkey and Jordan as authorized under the United Nations Security Council Resolutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Four years into the crisis, Syrians have become the largest refugee population under UNHCR's mandate, with some 3.8 million in the region alone, and many more arriving to Europe through unchartered routes. Last year, more than 130,000 Syrians requested asylum in Europe, showing that the impact of this crisis knows no geographical boundaries.

The generosity of neighbouring countries and local communities in hosting those fleeing Syria continues to be extraordinary even as the needs continue to increase. Despite all efforts, refugees are becoming more vulnerable as their displacement is prolonged. In Jordan, two out of three refugees are living below the absolute poverty line. In Lebanon, well over half of Syrian refugees are living in insecure dwellings. Throughout the region, refugees have resorted to a range of negative coping strategies to survive, including, child labour and begging.

Today is the time to step forth once more, and it is with a firm voice that I say that we have reached a point where neighbouring countries are completely overstretched, host communities are affected across the region beyond what they can bear, and the levels of suffering have reached a limit. No country can absorb the consequences of this crisis without severe economic and social impact on their markets, infrastructures, and communities. Greater financial aid and international solidarity is needed to help ease the burden on neighbouring states in supporting refugees. It is now that we must all come together and show the people of Syria that we continue to stand beside them no matter how hard it gets. We hope that the upcoming Kuwait III International Pledging Conference for the Syria crisis will strengthen even further the unparalleled support and generosity that donors and the international community at large have shown so far to this region and its people.

The prolonged nature of this crisis required a paradigm shift in approach, which led to the 2015-2016 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) launched in Berlin on 18 December 2014 as well as in host countries in the region. The 3RP's regional strategy builds on the national response plans of the five main refugee hosting countries and brings together host governments and almost 200 humanitarian and development partners. It is a unique and unprecedented inclusive coordination initiative which aims to scale up resilience and stabilization-based development to complement humanitarian assistance. The 3RP provides

the opportunity for development donors to contribute to the resilience and development of countries in a way that is most suited to the crisis. I firmly believe that the 3RP has opened a new chapter in the response to this crisis, with humanitarians and development actors working hand in hand to support refugees and host communities.

In 2014, through the coordination of the Regional Refugee Response for Syrian refugees, the scale and quality of the protection and assistance response continued to benefit the growing population of concern. UNHCR strengthened biometric registration, enhanced its child protection activities including access to birth registration and SGBV prevention and response programmes, and worked closely with the authorities and partners to improve access of refugee children to national education systems. Following generous pledges for resettlement and humanitarian admissions, UNHCR has exceeded initial targets and identified and submitted 27,701 of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees for resettlement since 2013. We built a growing body of evidence to inform programming and enhanced targeting to reach the most destitute. We strengthened cash assistance to provide refugees the freedom to prioritize and make their own choices and to reinvest into local economies. UNHCR has stepped forward in its response and will continue to do so for as long as the crisis persists.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, the combined effect of the Syria and Iraq crises have generated possibly the most terrifying spill-overs of internal conflicts into neighbouring countries in recent history. There are over 220,000 Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries, more than half registered in 2014 alone. Turkey and Jordan have witnessed an increase of Iraqi arrivals of nearly 400 per cent. It is projected that by December 2015, the total number of Iraqi refugees seeking protection will exceed 330,000 people.

Inside Iraq, the number of new IDPs in 2014 reached over 2.25 million, with almost 800,000 in the Kurdistan region. Close to one million persons remain displaced in central Iraq as a result of earlier violence.

Following the declaration of the system-wide level-3 emergency, UNHCR immediately scaled up its response and launched a massive logistics operation to bring in relief supplies by

air, land and sea. The largest single aid distribution organized by UNHCR in more than a decade targeting half a million IDPs.

We also scaled up our emergency shelter and winterization efforts; providing the Kurdistan Regional Government with expertise in shelter and site planning; implementing country-wide cash assistance programmes and conducting protection monitoring. More than 4 million litres of kerosene were provided across Iraq along with winterization kits to protection IDPs from the harsh winter. In 2015, UNHCR will continue to strive to ensure access to protection and assistance for displaced persons and particularly for the most vulnerable and those with specific needs.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to now update this distinguished committee on UNHCR's operations in Yemen and Libya. In both countries, the support of national partners has been crucial. Their courage and determination are demonstrated daily.

In Yemen, the situation remains extremely volatile with renewed violence, increasing vulnerabilities and growing humanitarian challenges. Inside Yemen, some 335,000 people remain displaced and 15.9 million people are in need of some kind of humanitarian assistance. Despite the current situation prevailing in the country, I wish to assure that UNHCR remains fully engaged in Yemen and continues to provide life-saving assistance and critical protection support for IDPs and over 250,000 refugees in line with the "stay and deliver approach". The country still maintains an open door policy for refugees and asylum-seekers, including Somali and Syrian refugees, granting access to a range of public services. Yemeni border authorities continue to refer persons in need of international protection to the UNHCR registration centres where they receive basic assistance and protection. Thanks to this good coordination mechanism, UNHCR is able to identify asylum seekers at an early stage with over 54,000 new arrivals passing through UNHCR reception centres in 2014.

In Libya, conflict has reached a new turning point with a significant deterioration of the security situation and more than 400,000 persons are displaced inside the country. UNHCR leads protection-related activities and coordinates the Libya protection working group now operating temporarily from Tunisia to support national colleagues working inside Libya and

respond to humanitarian and protection needs. UNHCR-run hotlines receive increased number of calls from refugees and asylum-seekers over the deteriorating situation in the country. In addition to the growing insecurity, access to services and essential commodities have been severely curtailed, impacting on the lives of those concerned.

Despite the restricted access, we have provided humanitarian assistance to IDPs through cross-border convoys when possible, and to refugees through the continued work with national and international partners. Access and visits to a number of detention centres are also maintained. Humanitarian access, freedom of movement for IDPs and access to safety for persons fleeing Libya continue to be key objectives underpinning advocacy and operational responses. Similarly, regional contingency plans are under review in response to the situation in Libya. I would like to highlight in particular the comprehensive emergency preparedness efforts in Tunisia, where the government has played an active role in developing the inter-agency contingency plan with an overall urban approach.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last December's High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection at Sea provided a unique opportunity to discuss the challenges of ensuring protection in situations of mixed migration, with a focus on protection at sea.

North Africa is particularly affected by mixed migratory movements, including of persons in transit to Europe. In 2014, there were over 200,000 arrivals by sea to Europe through the Mediterranean. Of these, more than 60,000 were Syrian nationals, 34,000 were Eritreans, 10,200 Afghans and 5,000 being Palestinians. Some 3,400 individuals were reported to have perished in boat accidents while attempting to cross the Mediterranean. An upward trend of arrivals by sea has already been observed in 2015 with 3,528 new arrivals in January 2015 and a reported toll of 373 persons dead or missing at sea in February 2015.

Yemen also remains a major destination and transit country for people travelling as part of mixed migration flows in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. In 2014, more than 91,000 persons arrived by sea in Yemen, marking a significant increase compared to figures in 2013. Among those, many were reportedly victims of human trafficking. 246 persons were reported to have drowned or missing off the Yemen coast when their overcrowded and unseaworthy

boats capsized before reaching safety at shore. This represented a substantial increase to earlier trends with 179 people reported dead or missing from 2011 to 2013. UNHCR and IOM are supporting the follow up to the 2013 Sana'a Declaration.

The challenges of ensuring protection in mixed migration situations, including at sea, can only be addressed as part of comprehensive regional responses based on the principles of the rule of law, international solidarity and responsibility sharing. In North Africa, UNHCR works on building capacity and strengthening partnerships with relevant actors such as concerned Governments, IOM, and civil society. In Tunisia, UNHCR is implementing a project on rescue at sea which entails the finalisation of standard operating procedures on protection and assistance post disembarkation in partnership with the authorities and partners. In Libya, to the extent that the security situation allows, we are engaged in an “on call” alert system with the Libyan Coast Guard and support arrangements for the provision of material and medical assistance to persons rescued at sea and detained in immigration detention centres. In Egypt and Morocco, efforts are focused on strengthening institutional protection mechanisms, building capacity and developing mechanisms for the identification and referral of asylum seekers and refugees at the border. Throughout the region, a main objective is to build upon measures that empower refugees to take informed decisions about their lives through raising awareness and providing information relevant to their situation, including on the risks of moving irregularly by land or sea.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Protection remains foremost among the priorities of UNHCR's operations in the Middle East and North Africa. Across the region, access to safety and protection from refoulement continue to be key.

In 2014, great progress was made to strengthen the protection environment in the region. In Turkey, the new law on foreigners and international protection and the temporary protection regulation for Syrians are milestones in refugee protection in a moment when Turkey has become the biggest refugee-hosting country in the world. Several countries in North Africa are also working towards establishing national asylum legislations. Morocco is in the process of adopting a national legislation on asylum and migration. Tunisia and Mauritania have also made significant progress in the adoption of a legal framework for asylum.

In Mauritania, authorities completed the biometric registration of all the registered refugees settled in Mbera camp as part of a nationwide registration process. Based on its result and following extensive consultations and coordination with the Government, partners and refugee communities, the first phase of a de-activation exercise for Mbera camp was completed in January 2015. Work is ongoing on the implementation of the second phase which is planned for completion in June.

In Algeria, the protracted nature of the situation of Sahrawi refugees living in the camps near Tindouf is taking a toll on refugees, particularly the younger generations. As the financial support dwindles, we renew our call on the international community to remain engaged in this humanitarian situation where refugees have been displaced and living in the remote desert for 40 years in increasingly precarious conditions. International support is urgently needed.

UNHCR remains fully engaged in Israel, where we continue to advocate for asylum-seekers to be treated in line with international refugee and human rights standards.

Efforts are underway in the region to implement UNHCR's Global Action Plan to End Statelessness. In this regard, UNHCR is working with governments to increase birth registration and providing technical assistance to States in preventing and reducing statelessness.

The protection of the most vulnerable refugee groups continues to be a priority for UNHCR in the region. The conference on protecting refugee children and adolescents in the Middle East and North Africa held in the United Arab Emirates, underscored the importance of child protection and raised awareness of the specific risks that children face as a result of forced displacement. We are looking forward to continue to work with governments and partners to strengthen child protection mechanisms. The same way, we are fully committed in preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence by promoting gender equality, supporting national protection systems and community-based interventions, improving data collection and analysis, and strengthening advocacy. In the MENA region, resettlement is also used as one of the vital tools to address protection needs for refugee including survivors of trafficking and SGBV, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex individuals.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The challenges we face today demand a coordinated and comprehensive response and therefore, partnership is key across the region. In this regard, in the Gulf, we value the partnership with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries which has resulted in substantial support for the Syria situation and other humanitarian operations around the globe. In addition, we are closely cooperating with the private sector in the GCC region to establish a long-term partnership in support of the refugee operations in the region. These efforts culminated last week in the launch of a partnership platform that will enable more efficient, effective and direct engagement from the private sector.

Cooperation with the League of Arab States advanced significantly and is expected to deepen in 2015. UNHCR will provide technical assistance to the LAS Secretariat in drafting an Arab Regional Strategy on Protecting Refugee Children and on Sexual and Gender based Violence. Efforts with the LAS Secretariat are ongoing to ensure the adoption of the Arab Convention on Regulating Refugee Status in the Arab World.

In November, the joint UNHCR-Organization of Islamic Cooperation Committee met to discuss matters of mutual concern and advance in the joint cooperation between the two institutions with particular recommendations on the protection of displaced persons in the Muslim world. The annual high level meetings between UNHCR and UNRWA took place in January 2015 providing an opportunity to increase cooperation in areas of mutual concern.

Civil society continued to be a crucial partner for UNHCR in the region. In 2015, we will work towards establishing a “MENA Civil Society for Displacement Network” to provide a platform for civil society associations and NGOs in the region to strengthen their individual voices and actions towards the protection and assistance of displaced persons through aligned messaging, joint advocacy, training and development, and stronger coordination on the ground.

UNHCR has also taken a very active part in supporting the preparation of the World Humanitarian Summit through membership in the MENA Regional Steering Group under the overall coordination and leadership of OCHA.



Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to conclude by looking forward towards achieving durable solutions. UNHCR remains fully committed to finding durable solutions for persons of concern in the region, by exploring innovative approaches and fostering self-reliance, while standing ready for supporting efforts that would allow refugees to one day return home in safety and dignity.

In addition, UNHCR will continue to encourage responsibility-sharing with countries hosting Syrian refugees through resettlement opportunities or other forms of admissions. Flexible visa policies, expanded family reunification, academic scholarships and private sponsorship schemes should also be pursued. I wish to thank all countries who have pledged resettlement spaces for refugees in the region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The international community is being challenged to an unprecedented degree in the Middle East and North Africa. The humanitarian needs continue to grow; the generosity of host communities has reached its limit; the harshness of conflict has taken a toll on the population; and displaced persons are in continuous plight. But we cannot fail them now, we simply cannot fail them.

As the Director for the Middle East and North Africa, but most importantly, as a human being, I stand here today fully committed to support the people in need of protection in the Middle East and North Africa, and I trust that the international community as a whole, now more than ever, is behind them as well.

Thank you.