

Item 3 (a) ii

Remarks of Mr. Amin Awad, Director of the UNHCR MENA Bureau and Regional Refugee Coordinator for the Iraq and Syria situations

68th Meeting of the Standing Committee

Geneva, 14 March 2017

Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Again this year has proven to be the most challenging yet in terms of addressing human displacement.

Across the region, we are witnessing **unprecedented violence and displacement**, political instability, sectarian strife, and an escalation of trafficking and smuggling. In this context, Syrians continue to be the **largest refugee population** in need of UNHCR's protection and assistance, caught in one of the most complex and pressing crises facing the world today.

But **alongside conflict** and the challenges related to forced displacement, we are also witnessing **impressive levels of solidarity and compassion**. A region that is home to **5% of the total world population is hosting 38% of the global displacement figure of 65 million IDPs and refugees**. It is a responsibility that is **stretching economies**, public and social services, civil and political structures, to the limits.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to **update you on UNHCR programs in the region. I will start with some operations that receive comparably less attention** from the media and the world.

In Yemen, the humanitarian situation is **dramatic**, with **2 million persons displaced** inside the country and **80%** of the population **in need of humanitarian assistance**. Food is the most pressing need, and if supply is not addressed, the impact of famine will be dire. 18.8 million people are in need and require life-saving assistance.

Following my mission to Yemen, seeing first-hand the humanitarian catastrophe that is unfolding, UNHCR has reviewed its Yemen operation and is focusing on a **six-point plan** which includes: **1)** responding to the protection needs of PoCs; **2)** providing life-saving assistance; **3)** collaborating with IOM on the voluntary evacuation of Somali refugees; **4)** continuing the protection of IDPs within the cluster coordination framework; **5)** initiating an assisted spontaneous return plan for Somalis from Yemen; and **6)** carrying out an enhanced information campaign on the risks of irregular movements to Yemen. Despite ongoing war in Yemen, in 2016 alone there were over **117,000 new arrivals** to a country at war with no future for strangers and newcomers. The **information campaign (Dangerous Crossings)** on the risks of crossing to and through Yemen is being rolled out, as part of a strategic response to addressing irregular movements by sea and onward movements.

The issues of assisted spontaneous return for Somalis from Yemen and of irregular movements to Yemen will be addressed through a **comprehensive regional initiative** and with the support of the High Commissioner's **Special Envoy** for the Somali refugee situation.

Since the beginning of 2017, a significant escalation in hostilities across Yemen resulted in a new surge of displacement of over **62,000** Yemenis, as of today.

Increasing security challenges continue, as an example, a missile hit 200 metres away from 2 UNHCR vehicles last week on 6 March. Despite the **dangerous operating environment**, UNHCR is actively responding to PoCs needs. **Essential assistance** has been provided in **hard-to-reach areas, and** in the past 6 months, **55 very high-risk missions** have taken place across Yemen, providing most needed NFIs and undertaking protection monitoring. UNHCR has **distributed Core Relief Items to over 780,000 IDPs.**

Yemen hosts over **279,000 refugees and asylum-seekers**, most of whom are Somali. Conditions for these refugees is deteriorating rapidly and the protection space shrinking. In light of this, UNHCR is working closely with IOM on **evacuations** and **assisted voluntary returns** of Somali refugees from Yemen.

We encourage the **international community to support** Yemen and we welcome the forthcoming **high-level pledging conference** here in Geneva on April 25, which we hope will bring much needed financing to be able to respond to the growing emergency situation in Yemen. But above all, we all yearn for a **sustainable political solution.**

Now, I turn to the situation in **North Africa**. In **Libya**, civilians continue to suffer as a result of conflict and insecurity. The direct humanitarian impact has been that hundreds of thousands of people across the country are suffering, with 1.3 million refugees, migrants and displaced Libyans in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. As the main transit and departure point for refugees and migrants in North Africa, more than 181,000 people arrived in Europe in 2016 alone, after harrowing boat journeys that began in Libya. During the same period, thousands of people were rescued and countless numbers lost their lives at sea.

Given the challenging political and security situation on the ground, it is clear that humanitarian needs in Libya far outpace current operational capacity and a significant scale-up by UNHCR is underway to respond to the situation. In close cooperation with IOM, UNHCR will substantially expand presence across the country, including at disembarkation points and detention centres where we will continue to deliver life-saving assistance, while advocating for alternatives to detention, including voluntary repatriation.

We will enhance capacity building initiatives for Libyan authorities, while drawing on the expertise and know-how of local actors as we expand our reach, including in the south of the country. At the same time, we will address the needs of displaced Libyans, recognizing that any comprehensive approach to dealing with the crisis demands that we also prioritize and support the needs of Libyan civilians. Finally, we will expand our mass information campaigns to neighboring countries to highlight the risks involved in taking the journey across the central Mediterranean and continue working with Member States to address the root causes of irregular migration in countries of origin. All efforts should focus on Libya to achieve peace, bringing stability to the region and beyond.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For forty-two years **Sahrawi refugees have been languishing in camps near Tindouf, Algeria**. Our Office has been taking vigorous measures to revitalize this programme and draw the world's attention to this important issue. Following the Secretary General's visit and call for funding we organized 3 donor missions to the camps and 2 donor conferences in Algiers and Geneva to mobilize resources. Moreover our strategy for the Sahrawi refugee programme has been

re-oriented to roll-out our Livelihoods Strategy (in particular activities focused on youth), the 'build back better' shelter programme and investments in vital water infrastructure. I repeat the Secretary General's call for contributions, as we only received 30% of 2016 requirements. Other agencies received less or none. This is **not acceptable**.

Despite the signing of a **Tri-Partite agreement, voluntary returns to Mali from Mauritania** did not materialise. Security deteriorated in Northern Mali and there was a fresh influx of more than 5,000 new arrivals to Mberra Camp in Mauritania taking the total population to almost 50,000 people. The Office mobilized resources to help these people, and our strategy is to invest in upgrading shelter for the whole Mberra Camp, and implement livelihoods activities and peaceful coexistence projects to ease the enormous burden on a fragile host community in this isolated, harsh desert environment. Regrettably there were dramatic breaks in WFP's food pipeline in 2016 and these exacerbated tensions in Mberra Camp and surrounding community. It is absolutely essential that donors provide the support needed to alleviate the misery of this camp where no alternatives exist.

In **Egypt** UNHCR is struggling with runaway inflation eroding the value of our aid to vulnerable refugees, and with tensions over poorer standards of assistance due to low levels of funding for non-Syrian refugees. Nevertheless, the Office has found creative ways of **investing in local capacities and infrastructure** to gain equal access to services such as health and education for all our persons of concern. Egypt more than any other operation in North Africa highlights the **absolute necessity of halting a persistent and damaging decline in funding**, and bolstering our investment in developing a strong protection space for the sub-region.

In Morocco, we expanded our outreach through local NGO partners to remote border areas to assist refugees and asylum seekers caught in mixed migratory flows. The Office also has innovative projects with the media and universities to raise public awareness and empower refugees in digital communication. In Tunisia, we witness **the strong engagement of civil society** in the process of adopting the new national asylum law and, as with Morocco, supporting the local integration of recognized refugees.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Almost half of the Syrian population has been **forced to abandon their homes**, including **6.3 million internally displaced** persons and **4.9 million registered Syrian refugees** in neighboring countries.

Inside Syria, we continue to use all possible means, working across conflict lines, to **maximize the delivery of assistance and protection** to populations in need, despite the fact that **safe and unhindered access is not always provided**. In 2016 inside Syria, UNHCR and partners assisted 4 million people with life-saving core relief items; 2 million with protection interventions; 91,000 persons with shelter and over 690,000 with health services. UNHCR's network of community centers provides multi-sectoral support to thousands of persons in need, including to SGBV survivors and children-at risk. While much has been achieved, the scale of suffering witnessed last year continues to surpass the humanitarian communities' capacity to respond. A political solution is urgently required.

The countries neighboring Syria – Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt - remain at the forefront of the Syrian refugee response, and continue to shoulder the greatest burden.

Host countries have developed national plans and responses which require international support. Whilst contending with the multi-faceted effects of the Syria conflict, host countries have maintained refugees' access to documentation and public services – including health and education – and are putting into place policies that allow refugees' to support themselves, through access to work permits and the labor market. Thanks to generous support from donor countries, **UNHCR and partners have continued to deliver protection and assistance to 4.9 million refugees in the region, from registration,** using innovative biometric systems; **shelter and infrastructure** improvements in camps and informal settlements; **livelihoods and vocational** training; **health, wash and education;** to protection referrals and legal support. **1.8 million Syrians and Iraqis received UNHCR cash assistance** – including winterization – in 2016, delivered through efficient cash transfer systems, and informed by state-of-the-art vulnerability targeting methods. **Millions of members of host communities** have been assisted by both governments and agencies, with the aim to **bolstering the resilience of communities and institutions that remain the first line of response for refugee.** These interventions have protected many refugees from the worst hardships. However, in the face of enormous economic pressures, more than half of the Syrian refugees remain below the poverty line, with a third estimated to be living in extreme poverty and **resorting to negative coping strategies** such as begging or exploitative labor.

The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, launched in Helsinki in January this year, brings together **more than 240 partners** in a coordinated, region-wide

response. Co-led by UNHCR and UNDP, the Plan aims to benefit a total of 9.1 million persons, including 4.7 million projected registered refugees and 4.4 million members of the local communities which host them.

Humanitarian and development silos are beginning to break down. In this regard, we **welcome the advances** made in terms of **multi-year financing mechanisms** and **structural support** to refugee hosting countries by the World Bank.

Looking ahead, we are **encouraged by the upcoming international conference in Brussels**. We hope that it will build on the achievements of London to **sustain much needed funding commitments and other forms of support to protection, education and livelihoods objectives**.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I speak, developments in Iraq are **fast evolving**. The conflict in Mosul has displaced 225,000 persons. With the Iraqi authorities and other partners, UNHCR has assisted over 260,000 persons – including existing vulnerable IDPs – with shelter, core relief items, and protection services in camps and in newly accessible areas in and around Mosul. Staff are working round the clock to expand IDP camps and ensure IDPs are safe and sheltered, as we expect tens of thousands to flee. Some 19,000 Iraqis have also fled to Al-Hassakeh governorate in north eastern Syria, where UNHCR is expanding camps to receive them.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First and foremost, protection remains at the core of UNHCR's operations.

Across the region, **access to safety and protection** continue to be key.

In **support of effective legislative and administrative frameworks** we continue to advise countries **developing national asylum legislation**, in particular **Morocco, Tunisia** and **Iraq**. In **Israel**, we continue to advocate for access to legal status and to promote solutions.

Faced with **the increasingly complex dynamics of mixed migration**, we pursue partnerships for a **comprehensive human rights-based approach to mobility** that takes account of the **specific needs of refugees by** preventing *refoulement*; **improving access** to territory and to asylum; **empowering refugees to make informed decisions**; and enhancing **access to solutions**.

Registration, documentation and the protection of the most vulnerable continue to be **at the center of our interventions**. Our capacity for individual **biometric registration programs is robust**. Moreover, within the framework of the 3RP, we continue to prioritize efforts to ensure that all refugee **marriages and births** are fully and officially documented.

Addressing child protection and strengthening efforts to reduce **sexual and gender based violence** remain central imperatives of UNHCR's protection strategy. Over 150 community centres in place across the region are an integral element of the response to critical protection needs.

Secondly, we will continue to pursue solutions in and beyond the region.

UNHCR is **fully committed** to **fostering self-reliance** and **considers this a fundamental building block** in support of efforts that pave the way for **refugees to return home in safety and dignity**.

We continue to encourage **responsibility-sharing** with countries hosting Syrian refugees through **resettlement opportunities** and **other pathways for admission** to third countries, including humanitarian visas, community-based private sponsorship, labour mobility schemes and family reunification. In addition to meeting pressing protection needs legal channels for safe relocation offer a counterbalance to irregular onward movements and negative coping survival mechanisms.

In 2016, we achieved the milestone of 96,000 resettlement submissions from the region. **But increased quotas are needed**, including for refugees currently hosted in countries in conflict, such as Libya, Syria and Yemen, as well as for Palestinian refugees in Iraq.

Last, partnerships have never been more relevant to addressing the unparalleled challenges we face.

Embracing the “**whole of society**” approach championed by the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, **UNHCR’s partnership strategy** in the region aims at building **comprehensive, inclusive, innovative** and **sustainable partnerships** to enhance protection and solutions.

Consultations took place with **more than 150 representatives from civil society** across the region with a view to **establishing a network of civil society actors**,

the **first of its kind** in the region. The objective of the network is to **strengthen advocacy on displacement** issues, build national non-governmental **response capacities**, and to amplify the voices of those at the forefront of responses at the local levels, including representatives from national NGOs, foundations, media, academia and private sector, as we scale up our engagement with each of these categories. Civil society advancement in the Middle East is needed to catch up with other regions of the world.

Thank you.