

Remarks of Mr. Francois Reybet-Degat, Deputy Director of the UNHCR MENA Bureau

74th Meeting of the Standing Committee

Geneva, 6 March 2019

Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an **honour for me to address this distinguished audience today** on behalf of the Bureau Director, Mr. Amin Awad, who asked me to convey his personal appreciation for the cooperation between UNHCR and Member States in the region.

Across the region, we continue to witness unprecedented levels of violence and displacement, political instability, sectarian strife, as well as trafficking and smuggling. **Towards the end of 2018, the region was home to almost 21 million people of concern to UNHCR**, including over 7.7 million refugees, 13 million IDPs and around 200,000 stateless persons.

But alongside conflict and displacement, we continued to witness impressive levels of solidarity and compassion.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Syria remains the largest humanitarian and displacement crisis in the world today. Some 6.2 million Syrians remain internally displaced and nearly 12 million people are in need of assistance inside Syria. UNHCR has continued to support the IDP inter-agency coordination framework, leading the sectors of protection, camp coordination and management, shelter and non-food items. We used all possible means 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. **UNHCR's network of nearly 100 community centres across the country has proven instrumental** in delivering multi-sectoral support to thousands of persons in need, including to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and children-at-risk.

In 2018 alone, UNHCR distributed **core relief items to over 2 million people inside Syria**, including as part of UNHCR's response to emergencies in Eastern Ghouta (Rural Damascus), Afrin (Aleppo Governorate), and south-west Syria. Our teams and partners on the ground continued to demonstrate **exceptional courage and dedication** to reach those in need. In addition, **more than 400,000 people were reached through cross-border operations from Turkey and Jordan** as authorized under United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2165 and 2191 (2014).

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As large-scale fighting concluded in the meantime in many parts of the country, an estimated 1.4 million internally displaced people and some 56,000 refugees returned in 2018 to their areas of origin. Syrians are returning to destroyed infrastructure, homes and services and have urgent needs. The right to **return is a fundamental human right, to be exercised individually by refugees**. In whichever part of the country they are living, we, as humanitarians, have a responsibility to help them, **together with the millions of other persons in need inside Syria**.

UNHCR is currently not facilitating returns to Syria. However, recognizing that some refugees are returning on their own, we are helping those who have already decided to return to do so in dignity. Our support includes counselling refugees, identifying separated children and helping refugees to reclaim or resolve civil documentation issues.

However, while the majority of refugees – 76% according to **our intention surveys** – want to return home one day, they have expressed concerns about what they will face in Syria on their return. 85% have said they do not intend to return in the next 12 months, citing these concerns as obstacles to their return. **Understanding and trying to address these concerns is the focus of our attention**. Refugees have highlighted insecurity in some areas, fears of conscription or punishment for having left the country, lacking the necessary documents to move around freely, as well as the destruction property, infrastructure and limited livelihoods and basic services.

Refugees are the best judge of when they can return in safety and dignity. We can help them by enabling them to make well-informed decisions. **UNHCR has also been working to remove obstacles to return inside Syria, together** with the Government of Syria and key stakeholders.

In addition, in collaboration with UN agencies and NGO partners, UNHCR has been engaged in **preparedness for possible future larger return movements**. Contingency plans are being developed to make sure we are ready collectively should refugees decide to return in larger numbers.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Refugee returns to Syria will take time. In the interim, **refugees and host countries need to be supported so that refugees can live in dignity**.

I must now stress the importance of our collective, sustained support to the **5.6 million Syrian refugees currently residing in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt**. This is **the largest refugee population under UNHCR's mandate**, accounting for nearly one-third of the global refugee population. The **generosity of neighbouring countries** and local communities in hosting those fleeing Syria is extraordinary, even as the needs increase.

This month, **we enter the ninth year of the Syrian conflict**. Despite all efforts, refugees are becoming more vulnerable as their displacement is prolonged. Many refugees are living on a knife-edge – **around 70% of them are living below the poverty line**.

As neighbouring countries therefore remain at the forefront of the Syria refugee response, financial aid and international solidarity to these countries must be sustained. We sincerely hope that the **third “Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region”** taking place next week 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.

Thanks to generous support from donor countries, **UNHCR and partners deliver protection and assistance to 5.6 million Syrian refugees, helping people to live in dignity**. Together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNHCR has been leading the **“Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan in response to the Syria crisis” (3RP)**, which is built around government-led national plans, with humanitarian and development programming, and a coalition of over 270 partners.

Looking forward, much more needs to be done to ensure predictable and sustained support to refugees, and host communities. The **3RP 2019-2020**, released in December 2018, remains the primary inter-agency mechanisms to coordinate and delivery this support, calling for \$5.5 billion for 2019 to assist over 9 million people, including 5.6 million refugees and, importantly, 3.9 million host community members.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I turn now to neighbouring **Iraq**, who in December 2018 celebrated one year since the end of major combat operations against extremist groups. However, **security risks and grave protection challenges remain**. The scale and severity of humanitarian needs remain enormous and rehabilitation has not taken place at the anticipated pace. Some 2.8 million people in Iraq are displaced inside the country, including some 1.8 million who have been displaced as a result of conflict and violence since 2014. There are also over 4 million IDPs who have returned and who face constrained access to basic services and a lack of security.

In 2018, as part of the broader humanitarian coordination, UNHCR led protection, shelter and NFI and CCCM clusters. UNHCR also delivered protection and assistance directly. **We assisted some 50,000 Iraqi IDPs and returnee families with core relief items**. UNHCR also provided shelter, basic household items and protection to over hundreds of thousands of IDPs in camps. During this critical period for Iraq, UNHCR remains engaged with the Iraqi authorities, as well as with humanitarian and development actors to **transition from humanitarian response for IDPs to including their needs in development plans**, and support a gradual absorption into the Iraqi social welfare system.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Yemen, the depth of human suffering has reached catastrophic levels. 2018 saw a **severe deterioration** in the conflict, compounding the protection crisis in which millions are struggling to survive. On a daily basis, Yemenis are forced to contend with multiple challenges, including armed conflict, displacement, the ever-present risk of famine and the outbreak of disease, including cholera and diphtheria.

In this regard, the **recent peace talks in Sweden** at the end of 2018 offer a glimmer of hope that this downward spiral can be slowed or reversed.

In the meantime, **some 22.2 million Yemenis – over three quarters of the country’s population – remain in need of humanitarian assistance**, with approximately 11.3 million having acute needs. In the last twelve months alone, more than 685,000 persons were displaced as a direct result of conflict, bringing the current total displacement to **3.3 million persons**. Within this IDP population, 89% have remained displaced for one year or more, with many facing secondary displacement in their attempts to return home, thus straining their ability – and that of their hosts – to effectively cope.

Against this grim backdrop, **I wish to reassure you that UNHCR remains fully engaged in Yemen**. In 2018, **UNHCR provided assistance to over 825,000 IDPs, returnees and communities**. Around 85% of UNHCR’s assistance followed the June 2018 escalation of fighting in Al Hudaydah. Close to 800,000 Yemenis and 130,000 refugees received cash assistance, which will remain a key element of UNHCR’s programme in Yemen in 2019.

Meanwhile, Yemen continues to be a **destination and transit country** for people traveling as part of mixed migration flows in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. There are **over 274,000 refugees and asylum seekers** in the country, mainly from Somalia, lured by smugglers to undertake the perilous journey in search of protection or better livelihood prospects. More than 4,400 asylum-seekers were registered with UNHCR in 2018 alone. UNHCR’s assisted spontaneous return programme helped some 2,600 Somalis return to Somalia in 2018.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to turn to **North Africa, where there are one million persons of concern to the Office** .

The situation in Libya remained extremely volatile. In August and September 2018, UNHCR provided emergency assistance to some 5,000 people who had been displaced in Tripoli as a result of violence in the capital. Despite ongoing restrictions, UNHCR was also able to **evacuate in 2018 over 2,800 refugees and asylum-seekers** from Libya to Italy, Niger and Romania. In the meantime, **thousands of refugees and migrants remain trapped in**

abhorrent detention conditions. UNHCR and its partners conducted over 1,400 visits to 35 detention centres in 2018, securing the release for the purpose of evacuation of more than 2,700 people. Since October 2018, we have **registered over 4,500 people in detentions centres.** Since the **opening of the Gathering and Departure Facility in December 2018, over 449 people have been accommodated in the centre,** with plans to **receive 91 unaccompanied and separated children,** who would otherwise remain in squalid detention centres. UNHCR also addressed the needs of Libyan civilians impacted by the conflict, including through **the implementation of 174 Quick Implementation Projects since 2018.**

In **Egypt,** where 243,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from 65 countries are registered with UNHCR, I welcome the progress made in 2018 to include refugee children in the national education system. Meanwhile in **Mauritania,** the Government began issuing national identity cards for over 57,000 Malian refugees in the Mbera camp, as a result of UNHCR's advocacy for the adoption of a national asylum law. In addition, UNHCR continued to provide life-saving assistance to vulnerable **Sahrawi refugees** in the five camps located near Tindouf, Algeria. Finally, in **Morocco,** UNHCR signed a memorandum of understanding with government authorities to support livelihood opportunities for refugees.

The **overall trend of reduced mixed movements** from the Middle East and North Africa has continued with a total of more than 140,000 people reaching Europe in 2018, compared to 172,000 people in 2017 and 363,000 in 2016. Tragically, nearly 2,300 people were reported missing or dead at sea. We are also witnessing a **significant shift in mixed movement patterns** away from the Central Mediterranean route towards the Western Mediterranean, with **Spain becoming the primary entry point** in the second half of 2018.

Movements by sea from Libya were substantially reduced as a result of enhanced capacity by the Libyan authorities to engage in search and rescue or interception at sea. **UNHCR has a number of measures in place** to respond to humanitarian needs at disembarkation points and in detention facilities. Reception and processing arrangements are also in place in **Tunisia** to identify people in need of international protection who have been rescued or intercepted at sea by Tunisian authorities.

The challenges of mixed migration and protection at sea cannot be resolved unless addressed comprehensively across the region. In this regard, I note that UNHCR and IOM

have proposed the establishment of a **Regional Disembarkation Mechanism** providing a sustainable approach to search, rescue and disembarkation based on cooperation and coordination among States.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Protection remains foremost among the strategic priorities of UNHCR's operations. Across the region, **access to safety and protection from refoulement continue to be key**, particularly in light of the protracted displacement nature compounded by new emergencies.

Birth registration is essential in this regard, and contributes to the **prevention of statelessness: the percentage of Syrian refugee children in the region without any form of identity document has been reduced** from about 35% in 2012 to 1.8% by the end of October 2018.

In **Qatar**, a law regulating asylum was adopted, which contained a number of provisions on respecting the rights of refugees. In the **United Arab Emirates**, the extension of an amnesty period allowed many persons of concern to UNHCR to obtain the relevant documentation and apply for an employment visa or – in the case of Syrians, Yemenis and Libyans – a one-year residency permit. Meanwhile, UNHCR remained fully engaged in **Israel**, where we have been pursuing the implementation of a Comprehensive Solutions Strategy for Sudanese and Eritrean persons of concern.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The **prevention, mitigation and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is top priority for UNHCR in the region**. Almost 130,000 survivors and people at risk of SGBV, including boys and men, benefited from multi-sectoral services.

Furthermore, to support operations in **implementing UNHCR's zero tolerance policy towards sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEA/SH)**, a compliance review was carried out including visits to Jordan, Egypt, Iraq and Turkey.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We continue to encourage **greater responsibility-sharing** through **resettlement opportunities** and **other legal pathways for admission** to third countries. Some 37,500 refugees from the region, including more than 28,000 Syrians and almost 2,800 Iraqis, were **submitted for resettlement in 2018**, representing **only 6.5% of the region's overall resettlement needs for the year** (approximately 580,000 refugees).

In line with the commitments set out in the Global Compact on Refugees, **UNHCR encouraged new resettlement programmes and the expansion of existing ones** as a means of burden- and responsibility-sharing with host countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The challenges we face 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.

I would be amiss if I did not also highlight the role of **civil society, academia, faith-based actors, and the private sector** – who were the subject of heightened engagement in 2018, with participation in policy discussions in the field and at Headquarters.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the world continues to face polarization and conflict, **the region is arguably witnessing some of the most complex and devastating conflicts in contemporary history**. The international community is being **challenged to an unprecedented degree**. The humanitarian needs continue to grow; the generosity of host communities is being tested to its limit; the harshness of conflicts continues to take its toll on populations; and displaced persons are in continuous plight. But we cannot fail them now. We hope that in the face of conflict- and displacement- related human suffering on such a scale, **global solidarity and compassion will prevail**.

Thank you.