

Remarks by the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations,

Mr. Raouf Mazou

Standing Committee of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (80th meeting)

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Geneva, 23 March 2021

Madam Chair,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished Delegates,

Dear Colleagues,

A year ago, when we met at the 77th session of the Standing Committee, the World Health Organization was on the verge of declaring **COVID-19** a pandemic.

How much has changed in that one year – over 2.5 million lives lost, the worst global recession in decades, an incalculable level of human suffering. Refugees, asylum-seekers, the stateless and the internally displaced have not been spared the shocks and the trauma. Thanks in large part to preventative measures, we have not seen any major outbreak of the virus in refugee camps or settlements – something we regarded as one of the greatest threats. Yet the impact of COVID-19 has been devastating in terms of job losses, disruption to schooling, growing food insecurity and more besides.

Before the pandemic, there was already a clear gap in employment opportunities and working conditions between refugees and host populations. COVID-19 has made this worse. Since refugees so often face the same conditions and challenges as the poorest members of society, including working in the informal sector, a loss of income coupled with limited access to social protection has drastically increased their vulnerability. The closure of schools in many countries has also disproportionately affected Persons of Concern, who often do not have the resources to access remote learning. Furthermore, as schools reopen it is feared that a high percentage of girls may not return to the classroom.

In short, the needs are immense. This is why, late last year, we launched a supplementary appeal for our 2021 COVID response focused on the exceptional socioeconomic impact of the pandemic, as millions of forcibly displaced and stateless people fall into a state of extreme hardship. The response has thus far been limited but we do hope to receive the required support.

This being said, support for refugees, IDPs and the stateless remains strong. The most eloquent evidence for this is the way in which many countries have included these vulnerable people in their healthcare responses to the pandemic, as well as in their social protection mechanisms and vaccination campaigns. Of the 157 countries that have developed a vaccination strategy, 154 have included refugees and other Persons of Concern in their plans. In addition, we know that 20 countries have already begun vaccinating refugees and other PoCs. We are grateful to those countries and communities for taking these steps.

Madam Chair,

By mid-2020, the total number of forcibly displaced had passed 80 million. Given the number of ongoing **emergencies** – 9 declared by UNHCR at present, affecting 22 countries – as well as protracted situations, this figure is unfortunately expected to keep rising. The Regional Bureau Directors will present developments in their respective regions but here are some of the main trends around the world:

- (1) The Americas region now hosts 20 percent of all persons of concern to UNHCR.
- (2) Prospects for solutions in Myanmar and Afghanistan, which are the countries of origin for over 80% of refugees in Asia, are being weakened by current political developments.
- (3) In West and Central Africa, the situation in the Sahel continues to deteriorate, while there is little progress to be seen in the Lake Chad Basin area and prospects for refugee returns to the Central African Republic have recently receded.
- (4) The East and Horn of Africa is a source of both hope and concern. Hope, because of the improving situation in Sudan and South Sudan; and concern, following developments in Tigray. Somalis are still among the top ten refugee populations in the world.
- (5) In the Great Lakes region, the Burundi repatriation, despite challenges, is among the few ongoing return operations.
- (6) The internal displacement crisis in northern Mozambique represents a significant destabilization risk in Southern Africa.
- (7) In the MENA region we have reached ten years of displacement for Syrians – who constitute the largest refugee population in the world – while Yemen remains the largest humanitarian crisis globally.

- (8) In Europe, overcrowded reception centers exacerbated COVID risks, and intensified efforts were needed to protect people of concern from the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic.

Madam Chair,

Allow me to say a few words on the **Regionalization process**, the **Regional support platforms including development partnerships**, the phenomenon of **internal displacement**, and **climate action**.

The challenges posed by COVID-19 have reinforced the importance of having **regional leadership** structures close to our operations and to the people we serve. The regionalization and decentralization process that we embarked upon a little over a year ago, with the relocation of 6 Regional Bureaux – the 7th, the regional Bureau for Europe, having remained in Geneva – has been key to our response and our ability to stay and deliver. It has also resulted in much better and more informed support to Country Offices, increased access to local pooled funding mechanisms for Persons of Concern, improved decision-making when we formulate context-driven strategies and response plans, and swift access to resources to address emergencies.

This approach is grounded in the **Global Compact on Refugees** and in the leadership of regional actors in supporting conflict resolution and finding solutions to refugee situations. The three **Support Platforms** that were launched at the Global Refugee Forum – for the MIRPS in Central America, the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, and for the Nairobi Process facilitated by IGAD in the East and Horn of Africa – have gained significant momentum. Other arrangements are also showing good progress, such as the Sudan-South Sudan Solutions Initiative – derived from the Nairobi Process – launched in the margins of the 2020 EXCOM to address protracted displacement in the two countries. The Central African Republic, a quarter of whose population are either in exile or internally displaced, may also soon benefit from the establishment of a Regional support platform.

A crucial component of these Regional Platforms, and of the Global Compact more generally, is the enhanced role of development actors as we collectively search for solutions. In addition to traditional multilateral partners such as UNDP, as well as bilateral actors, I must also underline the important role played by multilateral financial institutions such as the World Bank. The Director of the Division for Resilience and Solutions will speak more about these vital partnerships and the impact they are having around the world.

In the same spirit of finding long-term solutions to protracted refugee situations and addressing the risks to food security and supplies, we are working with our World Food Programme colleagues to ensure that more refugees are able to fully or largely meet their own food needs. We are initially focusing on countries where (1) we encounter the political will and an enabling regulatory environment in which to

effect change; (2) we see stakeholder interest in supporting development-oriented interventions that will benefit both refugees and host communities; (3) we have adequate implementation capacity; and (4) suitable financial commitment prospects exist.

Madam Chair,

The number of **internally displaced people** continues to rise, having reached 45.9 million globally.

In line with our Step-Up commitment, we are strengthening our IDP engagement so that we can be as decisive, systematic and dependable as we are in our response to refugees. We now have ongoing programming in 33 countries, ranging from emergency responses to solutions, a trend that will continue to grow as needs arise. Moving forward, we will focus on bolstering both our operational delivery and the coordination aspects of our IDP response.

This includes a renewed emphasis on meeting our Inter Agency Standing Committee accountabilities in Camp Coordination and Camp Management, as well as Shelter coordination in conflict areas, in synergy with our protection leadership. More effective area-based programming and a better use of data will also be priorities.

Partnerships will remain the focus of our work, including with Governments, other UN entities, civil society, development and peace stakeholders, and internally displaced persons themselves.

Last week I was in Mozambique, along with my colleague Gillian Triggs, the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection. We pledged our support to that country's Government which, in addition to facing devastating cyclones and the consequences of the COVID pandemic, has seen the number of internally displaced persons go from 70,000 to 700,000 in a single year. The need to ensure that those IDPs receive proper support is an essential component of the Government's response to a brutal terror campaign being waged by armed groups. This requires both short-term humanitarian and long-term development support. At the moment, both are severely lacking. The speed at which the number of IDPs has risen over the past 12 months is an indication that the existing window of opportunity may not last forever.

Madam Chair,

Finally, a word on our **climate action** work.

The dramatic changes to the world's climate and to our environment are all having a direct effect on displacement – this is a link that is already well established, and unfortunately the evidence is mounting. One in three refugees under UNHCR's mandate and one in three IDPs live in countries that are highly vulnerable to climate risks. Millions more are displaced each year by climate shocks, sometimes across

borders. What's more, 90% of refugees living in rural settlements have very limited access to reliable, clean and sustainable energy.

UNHCR's climate action strategy rests on three pillars: Law and Policy, "Greening" our Operations, and "Greening" their delivery.

When it comes to Greening our Operations, the focus is on supporting country and field operations to plan settlements in an environmentally friendly and risk-aware manner – for example, to use solar power for WASH facilities, to improve access to sustainable energy, to consider the environmental impact of cash-based interventions, and to increase environmental protection.

We have allocated some 10 million USD to a number of key operations in Africa and Asia to move to a more systematic use of clean and sustainable energy, in order to benefit both refugees and host communities. These activities focus on access to clean cooking stoves, provision of solar panels to power health centers, schools and community centers, as well as solar-powered water pumping installations.

We are also developing new finance mechanisms to scale up our climate action work. One example is the Flow Fund, which invests in clean energy to power community infrastructure, especially boreholes that refugees and host communities depend on for their water. But UNHCR cannot address all these needs alone, and collaboration with a wide range of partners, as demonstrated in the *Clean Energy Challenge*, is crucial.

Allow me to conclude by thanking you again for your long-standing support; for your continued engagement in operationalizing the Global Compact on Refugees and implementing the pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum; and, crucially, for your commitment to our persons of concern and the search for durable solutions.

Thank you.