

**84<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Executive Committee  
of the High Commissioner's Programme**

**Opening Remarks by Ms. Gillian Triggs  
Assistant High Commissioner for Protection**

**28 June 2022**

Mr. Chair, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

Since last reporting to the Executive Committee on UNHCR's work, international protection needs have exponentially increased for people who have been forcibly displaced or who are stateless. While the world tries to recover from the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the last 18 months have brought further human misery with protracted and new conflicts and violence, compounded by rising poverty, discrimination and inequality, and the effects of global warming.

Since 2021, UNHCR has declared 42 new emergencies in 30 countries and the High Commissioner has reported that 100 million people are now displaced globally in countries such as Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Myanmar, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The war in Ukraine has added millions to the numbers displaced: about 8 million people within Ukraine, and over 5.2 million refugees present across Europe. Let us remember that 90 per cent of Ukrainian refugees are women and children who are especially vulnerable to trafficking and sexual and other forms of abuse.

Each year, the UN Refugee Agency reports increased forcible displacements. Each year the numbers continue to rise. The milestone of 100 million is incomprehensible. It is the plight of the individual that tells the human story.

A few weeks ago, with our colleagues, partners and volunteer groups, I visited the border of Poland and Ukraine.

There I saw a woman struggle across with 4 children, one of them a neighbour's child. She carried plastic bags with their belongings. Initial protection assistance was provided by UNHCR to make sure she could find safety.

I also met a grandmother whose children and grandchildren had moved on to other parts of Europe. She would not leave the border because her two sons were fighting in the war, and she said she felt guilty that she was safe while they faced danger. Separating family and creating unspeakable trauma is what war does to people.

Both women can now access cash assistance, medical help, psycho-social support, accommodation, and even employment through the blue dot service centres established jointly by UNICEF and UNHCR with the engagement of the host Government.

Mr Chair,

The unprecedented volume of people forcibly displaced is unsustainable and global collaboration is urgent and a top priority. The war in Ukraine has given contemporary validity to the key principles of the Refugee Convention: the right to seek asylum under international law and the prohibition on returns to persecution and danger.

Our lode star is the Global Compact on Refugees that guides a whole of society approach including civil society, local communities, the private sector, mayors and cities, scholars, the media and faith-based groups. The Compact calls for the equitable sharing of the burdens and responsibilities for all displaced and stateless people and is now complemented by the UN Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights and the Our Common Agenda and supports the Sustainable Development Goals.

A significant initiative within UNHCR this year has been to update our Global Strategic Directions and determine 8 focused areas of actions over the next 5 years. These are to safeguard international protection, strengthen accountability, prevent, and respond to, gender-based violence, expand resettlement and complementary pathways, mainstream development assistance, grow protection for those displaced internally, redouble efforts to end statelessness and mitigate the displacement impacts of climate change.

In short, we have the legal and policy tools for effective international protection. We now need the political will and financial support for concrete implementation.

Our new director of the Division of International protection, Elizabeth Tan, whom I warmly welcome, will shortly speak to introduce the Note on International Protection.

The Note sets out in detail the work of UNHCR and of our colleagues who have 'stayed and delivered' and it outlines the challenges involved and the strategies employed by governments, UNHCR and partners to realize access to rights.

To recognize successes the High Commissioner chose - very deliberately - to celebrate World Refugee Day in Cote d'Ivoire, where about 306,000 refugees have returned to safety, over 107,000 returns facilitated by UNHCR and our partners. A declaration of cessation of their legal status as refugees will take effect at the end of June this year.

While, overwhelmingly, Member States support the principles of refugee protection, many challenges and impediments remain. A few governments have declared that the international asylum system is unworkable, that returns of those not in need of international protection are close to impossible in practice, and that asylum seekers should always claim asylum in the country where they first find safety - the so called 'front line' States. Deterrence for some countries has become the priority. Such concerns have stimulated efforts to externalize their legal responsibility by transporting asylum seekers thousands of miles away to other, less well-resourced countries.

UNHCR has been clear. Externalization often shifts the burden rather than shares the responsibility for refugees, contrary to the Refugee Compact. Shifting the burden fails to meet international refugee law, both in its letter and spirit. Externalization is not the answer, as we have seen from other failed examples. Nonetheless, we take seriously concerns about the efficacy of the asylum system. UNHCR is working hard with governments, our partners and civil society to improve the speed, efficiency and fairness of asylum systems and to find durable solutions for refugees.

What then are these initiatives and solutions?

Voluntary repatriation is a solution but has become too rare. It is well documented that most refugees want to return home and it is encouraging that in 2021, some 429,000 refugees could return to their home countries, an increase of 71 per cent compared with 2020.

The rate of voluntary return however is very low, reflecting protracted conflicts, persecution of social groups, discrimination, crime, inequality, and lack of respect for the rule of law in refugees' home countries. Other deterrents to returns are destroyed infrastructure, the inability to recover land and property or to find employment, the failure to address the root causes of inequality, especially for women.

It is a sobering fact that if lasting peace were to be achieved in a few key conflicts, refugee figures could drop to around 10 million, where they stood two decades ago.

Resettlement is a solution that is reserved for those most in need. The impact of COVID-19 remains significant as all resettlement actors struggle to regain their previous capacity. However, with 39,266 refugees departing to 20 countries, 2021 has seen a 72 per cent increase in resettlement compared to 2020. UNHCR is optimistic that we will meet the quotas for 2022, that is: over 112,000 submissions, nearly 80,000 of them to the US.

This is progress and we hope to broaden the base for resettlement and increase places and departures in the future. Yet another challenge to resettlement remains, partly a reflection of COVID-19, that many countries have significant pipelines of submissions made by UNHCR, some refugees waiting over 5-7 years to depart, posing further protection risks.

There is heightened global support for complementary or regular pathways. Education and scholarships under the DAFI program are providing real options. Labour mobility is available under new or expanded programmes in France, Australia, Canada, and the UK where labour needs are rising. Belgium, Germany, and Italy also offer humanitarian admissions and visas, importantly in addition to traditional resettlement places. Other countries are exploring community

sponsorship opportunities and expanding family reunion. I recently attended the MIRPS Support Platform meeting in Ottawa to expand solution alternatives in the spirit of a collaborative, hemispheric approach towards migration and refugee protection in the Americas. However, the number of refugees who find a solution through resettlement or complementary pathways remains low.

To access solutions, refugees need access to rights. They must be able to make a claim to asylum and to have the full spectrum of legal and socio-economic rights to which they are entitled: education, freedom of movement, livelihoods, health care and accommodation.

In strengthening the resilience of and engagement with local host communities, inclusion and local integration can be further supported.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed the generosity and political will of host nations to ensure refugee children and youths are included in education programs. Most refugees were able to access health care and vaccinations, and some found livelihoods.

Asylum systems, or refugee status determination processes, have over the years become cumbersome and lengthy, in effect delaying or even denying protection. We suggest the adoption of fair and fast processes and stand ready to work with states to strengthen their systems and to clear substantial backlogs in asylum claims. The Asylum Capacity Support Group under the Refugee Compact is a useful initiative to boost asylum capacity.

In some situations, an alternative to individual refugee status determination is to recognise specific groups as refugees on prima facie basis. Most of the 109,900 newly recognized South Sudanese refugees were recognized by prima facie procedures in 2021 in Sudan (63,900), Uganda (30,600) and Kenya (9,000).

The examples of Colombia granting a 10-year visa with full rights and a pathway to citizenship, and implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive by the EU are other good examples of pragmatic and inclusive responses.

Regularization is key to long-term solutions, including access to the job market, which in turn promotes self-sufficiency and contributes to the host's post COVID-

19 socio-economic recovery. While on official travel this year, I saw efforts to find solutions for the Sri Lankan refugees who have been generously hosted by the state of Tamil Nadu in India for close to forty years.

Delivering solutions at the regional level is also the aim of the three support platforms, launched at the Global Refugee Forum in 2019 – a fourth support platform is planned for CAR.

In addition to a protection mandate for people forcibly displaced, UNHCR has a mandate to ensure that people who are stateless are granted the legal right to nationality. Today, at least 4.3 million people globally are estimated to be stateless or of undetermined nationality - doubtless a significant undercount in many countries. UNHCR's #Belong campaign to end statelessness by 2024 is ambitious. Some progress has been made over the last few years but much more remains to be done.

Indeed, an end to statelessness is now a strategic action priority for UNHCR and for the Global Community under the Our Common Agenda initiative. More than 50 States have nationality laws which do not allow women and men to acquire, change or retain their nationality on an equal basis and 25 States have nationality laws which do not allow women to confer nationality to their children on an equal basis with men.

For stateless people, enjoyment of the right to nationality is the only sustainable solution. Nationality and documentation provide a gateway to other treaty rights including equality and non-discrimination, the right to be registered at birth and socio-economic rights.

UNHCR continues its efforts to combat racism, discrimination, and persecution that all too often lead to violence against certain social groups. UNHCR calls upon governments to provide safe, legal access to people seeking asylum, regardless of their nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation or sexual orientation or gender identity.

While the rights of a refugee who has sought protection across national borders are well recognized, the protection needs of a staggering 60.1 million people internally displaced in 2022 are often less visible. The IDP population has increased

during nine of the last ten years, rising more than three-fold from 17.7 million in 2012, to the highest levels ever recorded.

As escalating conflict and humanitarian emergencies resulted in surging displacement, UNHCR strives to stay and deliver life-saving protection and assistance, while joining in advocacy and diplomacy to protect civilians and the displaced, especially in populated urban areas. Over half being women and girls. Over 12 per cent of IDPs live with a disability, both physical and mental, and over 6 per cent are older people at risk.

Solutions to internal displacement remain elusive, requiring better protection on the ground and all stakeholders, including states and humanitarian and development actors, to work together. More than 3.7 million IDPs returned to their villages and homes in 2021, with millions more included in national programming.

To support IDPs, UNHCR supports skills-building and grants for new businesses, the reconstruction of infrastructure in Colombia, the Philippines, and South Sudan, direct cash assistance in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Honduras, Iraq, Libya, the Sudan, Ukraine, and Yemen, and takes an area-based approach to assist the local community affected by a crisis.

UNHCR over the past years has sought solutions to displacement by working with International Finance Institutions and development actors. Many states hosting large numbers of displaced people are also the ones most affected by fragility, conflict, and climate change, especially at the local or community levels. Development finance needs urgently to reach these host communities. The war in Ukraine has led to high commodity prices and food insecurity in many low and middle-income host countries that now need development financing to ensure refugees have access to social safety nets, education, accommodation, and livelihoods.

We need bold, creative thinking to advance development financing. We hope that the High Commissioner's Dialogue, on 7-8 December this year, will stimulate fresh collective action to inform pledge cultivation in preparation for the next Global Refugee Forum in 2023.

In seeking solutions, we need to listen to the voices of those who are or have been forcibly displaced or stateless. Two weeks ago, we had the first global NGO in-person consultations since the pandemic. A recurrent theme was the need to include, in meaningful ways, refugee-led groups, especially women-led refugee organizations in the spirit of the call for “Nothing about us without us”.

We have heard this plea and recommit to ensuring that refugees and the communities that support them are more fully integrated in designing our work and that they can contribute directly to solutions.

In conclusion, to provide solutions, access to rights is fundamental. The Global Compact on Refugees provides practical, concrete strategies for sustainable solutions for those forcibly displaced or stateless. While we struggle to scale up solutions to the rising global needs, the principle of equitable sharing of responsibility remains the key aspiration that informs the work of UNHCR. We are grateful for the support we have had over recent months from our Member States.

Thank you.

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