

Remarks for the 87th Standing Committee meeting  
Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme  
Kelly T. Clements, Deputy High Commissioner  
14 June 2023

Madam Chair,  
Excellencies,

It is always a privilege to be here at the Standing Committee. As you know, the focus of the June Standing Committee is on protection – the heart of UNHCR's mandate. Before I turn to our Assistant High Commissioner for Protection and the Director of the Division of International Protection for an in-depth update on UNHCR's efforts to protect forcibly displaced and stateless persons, I would like to share a few brief overarching remarks to open this 87<sup>th</sup> session.

A month ago, I was standing on a river bank in the Darien jungle, near the border between Panama and Colombia. Every couple of minutes, a small pirogue about 20 meters long would arrive, carrying families, women, children making their way to the Lajas Blancas temporary transit center in Panama. They were in a daze, hot, soaked and exhausted. You could see it on their faces, many of them expressionless, bearing the scars of what they had just been through. You could hear it in the eerie quiet. The children too tired to cry. Families walking up the steep river bank in a silent procession.

Every person we spoke with described the trauma of their journey. Families spoke of relatives left behind in the jungle, too weak to keep walking. Of not knowing whether they would see the next morning. Of not knowing the dangers that lay ahead. Of loved ones who were robbed, sexually assaulted, or killed. Many people told us their choice was between death in their home country, or danger, through the jungle and into the unknown, on the road to safety.

A choice between death and danger. That is the choice that is available for refugees. For their own protection, refugees are forced to choose danger.

Like the families caught in the crossfire of a needless conflict in Sudan, forced to flee their homes and communities. Since mid April, close to two million Sudanese displaced already inside and outside Sudan. People who have had to choose danger to escape death. Almost a half million people have sought safety and protection in Egypt, Chad, South Sudan or Ethiopia. And UNHCR is grateful to those countries -- and others -- who continue to receive Sudanese refugees as we speak.

Madam Chair,  
Distinguished delegates,

There are today 110 million people around the world uprooted from their homes due to conflict, violence and persecution. An increase of over 19 million people just between 2021 and 2022 – the largest yearly increase ever recorded. In 2023 alone there has already been the earthquake in Turkiye and Syria, drought in Somalia, and now the conflict in Sudan. New displacement to add to Ukraine, Afghanistan, and long-standing crises in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Venezuela among many others. Conflict, climate, cost of living, all interrelated and compounding drivers of displacement. And occurring at a time of global financial fragility, when the economic outlook is uncertain at best.

In that context, we are grateful for the generous financial support you provide us to help meet escalating needs around the world. It enables UNHCR, with our partners (more than 1,100 of them), to respond quickly and efficiently, to provide life-saving protection and aid on the frontlines of displacement. Whether providing shelter to the families displaced by the floods in Pakistan, or receiving Burkinabe refugees in Northern Ghana, UNHCR is on the ground with host communities to respond.

As we speak, there are 22 active displacement emergencies, with a further 20 countries assessed as being at high risk of emergency. Our ability to deliver, including in new and innovative ways, is contingent on your support. The clearest example of that remains the Ukraine response, where we were able to implement new solutions, such as the finance and cash hubs. The cash hub allowed us to establish and scale up, in record time, our programme for cash assistance. We were also able to pilot the use of blockchain technology to provide digital currency payments quickly and safely for Ukrainian families – for which UNHCR won an award at the Paris Blockchain Week in April.

Your contributions have a real impact on the lives of refugees and others forced to flee. Your support is what enables UNHCR to protect.

But the reality is that fewer resources also have an impact on the lives of the people we serve – a deeply negative impact. As things currently stand, we project this year a dramatic funding shortfall compared to last year – possibly hundreds of millions of dollars. And it's already June. While Ukraine continues to receive generous support, most other crises remain critically underfunded. The impact of that funding crunch is felt in the reduction of cash assistance in Lebanon and in food ration cuts in Bangladesh. I was just in Cox's Bazaar last week and witnessed the desperation of 1 million people in the world's largest refugee camp. In the Central African Republic, already one of the most underfunded operations of the last few years, UNHCR's support to help manage the recent influx of Sudanese refugees has been hampered by our inability to budget beyond a few months at a time – thus disrupting our supply planning and the deployment of emergency response teams. In fact, without additional commitments, the progress made in refugee inclusion and self-reliance, in stabilizing populations movements could potentially be undone.

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In this context of limited resources, and of ever-growing humanitarian needs, we are committed to being as effective, efficient and transparent as possible. A major driver for the modernization of our structures and systems is the search for efficiency. UNHCR's transformation, and our flagship Business Transformation Programme – the BTP – is nearing an inflection point. In the next few weeks, we will launch our new cloud-based enterprise resource planning solution, Cloud ERP.

Cloud ERP will enable real-time, data-driven decision making, management and oversight of UNHCR's supply and financial processes. Drawing on our experience with COMPASS and Workday, final preparations for the Cloud ERP go-live are underway, including training of key users, final testing and data migration, information sessions for all regions, and planning for the period of hypercare and enhanced support that will immediately follow the launch.

All our remaining BTP systems, PROMS for partner management, Synergy for external engagement, and Link for systems integration and business intelligence, are scheduled to

become operational before the end of 2023. It is an exciting time for UNHCR as we near the finish line of a rigorous, years-long effort to bring all our systems fully into the digital age.

Digital technology can be a powerful engine of innovation, growth, and inclusion. But as we know too well, digital technology can also be harmful to institutions and to people – through misinformation, hate speech, or breaches of privacy. UNHCR was an early adopter of artificial intelligence, including for natural language processing and predictive analytics. And we are currently exploring, with OpenAI, a tailored and controlled application of ChatGPT to UNHCR use cases in the search of further efficiencies. But it is worth noting that all our efforts in piloting or deploying digital technology are undergirded by our commitment to use technology responsibly and ethically, and within the framework of data protection and privacy principles.

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As UNHCR continues to look forward, we are also reflecting, and assessing our transformation even as it unfolds. We rely on independent oversight to give us an unvarnished view of the transformation's progress to date, highlighting achievements and critically identifying risks and blind spots.

The Evaluation Office is carrying out a global evaluation of our decentralization and regionalization, to be completed in 2024. The Office of Internal Oversight Services, OIOS, is currently conducting an audit of the BTP. We are working closely with the UN Advisory Alliance to measure the impact gains of the BTP, in line with our commitment to you in this forum. Later this month, we will meet with the Independent Advisory and Oversight Committee whose engagement and insights we have relied on throughout the implementation of our transformation initiatives. And this year the Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network, or MOPAN, led by the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Switzerland, is conducting a comprehensive assessment of our effectiveness and efficiency, timely given the monumental change in the organization.

UNHCR aims not only to evolve and advance, and to share our successes and hopefully learn from our mistakes along the way, but to do so with as much transparency as possible. Yes, UNHCR takes measured risk, deliberately, in carrying out our mandate, grounded in our risk management strategy. Our teams continue to operate in many areas inside Sudan even now, often at great risk. We are a humanitarian, apolitical agency with a mandate to protect. Even in suboptimal environments. We must be able to operate in a variety of politically complex, dynamic and insecure contexts around the globe to protect, aid and find solutions to displacement.

But we are not cavalier in our approach, nor naïve to the risks our decisions entail, especially when faced with the imperative to respond despite a lack of resources. We understand the additional scrutiny our programmes are under when we do operate in these difficult environments. And our commitment will remain to provide as much information as possible in a continued spirit of transparency and collaboration.

We encourage this same culture of transparency within UNHCR as well. This cultural dimension of our transformation is perhaps the most challenging to achieve, as it relates to our own people, UNHCR's workforce, 20,000 strong and diverse. Changing behavior in a complex, multi-cultural organization is not an easy task, but one that we have embraced, and where our values – integrity, accountability, perseverance, and humility – have served

us well. If taking risks is part of UNHCR's DNA, so is being accountable. To the people we serve, to you, and to each other. We foster a culture where each one of us is encouraged to speak up to report misconduct, and in particular sexual misconduct.

We are proud to have launched, last month, NotOnlyMe, a new platform for survivors of sexual harassment, which we hope can be a safe space for survivors to record their experience. Through NotOnlyMe, survivors can also choose to be notified if the person who has sexually harassed them also harasses others. With this knowledge, we hope that survivors can feel empowered to take action and report misconduct – and early indications are that the platform is working as designed, with interest in the tool coming from across the UN system already. And soon we will launch the 2023-2025 strategy to prevent and respond to sexual misconduct. Through the UN Chief Executives Board, UNHCR is proud to continue to lead UN efforts.

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In closing, I would like to thank you again for the trust you have placed in UNHCR to lead. We need your trust and count on your support now more than ever if we are to be able to protect, together. Death or danger cannot be the only choices available to refugees. Beyond death and danger, there is hope. The hope that UNHCR can help nurture, from the jungle of the Darien, to Wadi Halfa on the shores of Lake Nubia in Sudan.

We thank you for your support.