

*As delivered*

**69th session of the Executive Committee  
of the High Commissioner's Programme**

**Filippo Grandi,  
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

**Closing Remarks  
Geneva, 5 October 2018**

Madam Chairperson,

Before going any further, I wish to join all those who have extended their condolences to the Government of Indonesia on the tragedy that has affected their country. Our thoughts are with the families of those killed or missing, and whose homes and livelihoods have been destroyed.

I know that everybody here wishes to join me in thanking you for having steered our discussions so skillfully this week. Your thoughtful support has also proven invaluable to me throughout the year. Thank you, Madam Chair. And thank you, Juan Carlos Moreno Gutierrez for your excellent work.

I congratulate Ambassador Delmi of Algeria on his election as the new Chairperson of the Executive Committee, as well as Vice Chairperson Ambassador Muylle of Belgium, our new Vice-Chairperson Ambassador Farani Azevêdo of Brazil, and our new Rapporteur, Farhat Ayesha of Pakistan. I know that they will continue the long tradition of a strong and active ExCom Bureau, and I look forward to working with all of you throughout what will be, significantly, the 70th session of the Executive Committee.

The moment has also come to express our heartfelt appreciation for the important contribution of Johan Cels, who has served as Secretary of this Committee for the last six years with dedication, patience and skill. Johan will soon move to Myanmar as the UNHCR Representative there. Please join me in warmly thanking him for his great work!

I am also pleased to announce today that the new ExCom Secretary will be Ellen Hansen. She is well known to all of you through her important work on the global compact on refugees, as part of Volker's team, and brings strong experience and ability to her new post as leader of a very skillful Secretariat. The transition will occur in the next few weeks, and I invite you to congratulate her with me.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Foreign Minister Messahel of Algeria reminded me of what one of my great compatriots and political thinkers, Antonio Gramsci, used to refer to: the pessimism of the intellect, and the optimism of the will.

This quote seems to define our debates this week – both sobering and inspiring. We have many reasons to be concerned – but as many, I would like to say, to stay hopeful.

I have responded to all 135 interventions in the general debate, so I won't go into details again. Let me however reflect further on two key considerations that have featured prominently in our exchanges.

First: UNHCR is about people, not politics.

Refugee issues, by nature, have always been related to politics – however, more and more frequently, it seems as if politics are taking over refugee issues. Refugees are increasingly at the centre of domestic political agendas, of complex bilateral relations between states, of regional and international dynamics around major crises.

This is not good.

Our discussions this week have underscored the importance of shaking off the politics, and bringing attention back to what matters – dignity, rights, shared humanity. Volker said it well - in today's deeply divided world, refugees are often the catalysts of a “dehumanization” trend whose sole purpose are immediate political gains. What could be more short-sighted? And what could be more dangerous for the core values that knit all our societies together?

We should rather remember – and remind politicians and opinion-makers – that refugees, if given the opportunity, can also be catalysts of humanity, solidarity, of a sense of shared purpose in society – in other words, of all that binds us together and makes us stronger in facing global challenges.

Your interventions this week have provided many positive examples of that humanity and that solidarity in action. Countries in regions affected by new, or deepening, crises have kept their borders open to people fleeing, and granted them access to protection and support, despite many challenges. Their civil societies – individuals and NGOs – have been first responders, often saving lives in desperate circumstances.

Many of you described new legislation, policy changes and practical measures aimed at providing greater stability and protection to refugees. Many spoke of innovative, courageous ways to ensure greater social and economic inclusion of refugees. We heard about regional initiatives and solidarity mechanisms responding to acute protection risks, new refugee outflows and complex mixed movements. Resettlement, too, remains an important solution, and the focus of new approaches and partnerships.

Thank you – sincere thanks - for all of this. I hope that our exchanges have inspired and encouraged you.

Next year's anniversaries - of the OAU Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention on internal displacement - will help further galvanise work in Africa in particular, of which we heard so many examples and where additional resources are badly needed.

In the context of solutions, too, it is important to shake off the politics. We discussed a number of crises and long-standing situations that are evolving in new directions. In some, large numbers of internally displaced are already returning home, and prospects for voluntary repatriation of refugees are either emerging or under discussion.

More than two thirds of refugees come from just five countries. Significant positive developments in just one of them could open up the possibility of solutions for millions of people, and have a significant impact on global displacement dynamics.

Of course, political developments shape the space in which solutions can emerge. Political agreements can pave the way to greater stability. And refugee participation in political processes - peace negotiations, and elections - can help restore connections with their countries.

But refugee return cannot be driven by politics. What matters are the perceptions and aspirations of refugees themselves. What matters is their judgment. Return is a right, to be exercised when they are ready. It must be safe, dignified and above all, voluntary. This is not about abstract standards. It is about practical prerequisites for sustainable reintegration. It is about rebuilding stable societies. And to mention a concept that many of you have referred to – it is about preventing further conflict.

Refugee decisions are shaped by many considerations - security, legal, administrative, psychological and material. Listening to refugees, and working with states to address their concerns, will remain a core aspect of UNHCR's work. And when refugees decide that it is time to return home, we will be there to accompany and support them in the exercise of that right.

Second: the global compact.

I am glad that the compact was very much at the centre of all your interventions. It means that it matters, as it should.

Of course, the compact reflects a very diverse range of interests and aspirations, and inevitably, there are compromises. But please focus on the fact that in its scope, and in its practical, concrete orientation, it has the potential to be truly transformative.

In fact, that transformation has already begun - as we have seen through the existing applications of the Comprehensive Refugee Response model, and in the broader changes that are under way.

Over the last few years we have seen a reframing of how the world looks at, and responds to refugee crises. Lord Boateng of the Africa Enterprise Challenge Fund summed it up at one of this week's side events: 'Refugees are in a fragile situation, but they are not in themselves fragile - they are resilient, and can be partners in their own future.'

Reinforcing that resilience, and that of the communities hosting refugees, while solutions are actively pursued, is the driving logic behind the compact. As we have repeatedly said, humanitarian action is, and will remain, vital. But recognising and engaging with what displacement means for the sustainable development of the affected communities and countries are equally critical.

The compact, then, can a game-changer – I appeal to you to make it, together, a game-changer.

First, as a framework to channel resources - both technical and financial. And please let me repeat what I said on Monday: under the CRRF and other instruments we have already mobilized US\$ 6.5 billion in additional resources. This is almost double the amount of current annual voluntary contributions to UNHCR.

Second, as a framework for protection, inclusion, and support to host communities – an area of which we have spoken for decades, so far with limited results.

And third, as a framework for solutions, including – as President Museveni of Uganda always says – building the capacity of refugees to contribute to the reconstruction of their countries of origin when they return.

But if we are to truly realise its potential, we will have to think differently, and engage

much more broadly, than we have done until now. We need to equip ourselves to speak the language of development entities, of business, of local administration, of civil society entities, and to find ways to converge around common aims, even from different perspectives.

We have already seen powerful examples of action by a range of actors across society, and the compact puts forward important new mechanisms that will help leverage these still further. This year's Protection Dialogue in December will present an important opportunity to engage with cities as key catalysts of protection and inclusion.

And of course, let's all work to make next year's Global Refugee Forum a decisive moment of commitment as we embark on this important journey together.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I hope that we will look back on this year as a turning point.

A moment when the voices of solidarity and welcome started to find their place and even shape – positively - political discourse.

A moment when practical people came together to chart a course towards a better, fairer, more equitable response to refugee crises.

A moment when the principle of international responsibility-sharing was no longer just an aspiration, but a set of actions.

The work is just beginning. I believe that we can make this happen.

Thank you.