

SERBIA

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STATEMENT

by

Mr. Veljko Odalović, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia at the 70th session of the Executive Committee of UN High Commissioner for Refugees
Geneva, 8 October 2019

Mr. Chairman,
Mr. High Commissioner,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset, on behalf of the Republic of Serbia I would like to thank the High Commissioner, Mr. Grandi for his statement and assessment of the current situation with regard to forced displacement and statelessness at the global level. The Republic of Serbia has aligned itself with the statement of the EU as well as with the statement of the Group of Friends of the #IBelong Campaign, but please allow me to add a couple of points in my national capacity.

The challenges of providing protection to refugees and displaced persons continue to engage the attention of states and international organizations. The figures such as 20.4 million refugees and 41.3 million internally displaced persons in the world are truly reasons to be concerned about. The resolution of this complex problem will be the test of our responsibility and commitment to the values of human rights and solidarity. The adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees is an important indication of our quest for a more efficient response to the current challenges.

We welcome the UNHCR efforts to achieve progress in combating statelessness, including through #IBelong campaign to which Serbia has already made its concrete contribution. Since 2011, through the changes of its legal framework, Serbia has considerably reduced the number of stateless persons, mostly those belonging to Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian populations including IDPs from Kosovo and Metohija. The Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government, Ombudsman and UNHCR Office in Belgrade, signed for the period 2012-2016, envisaged many common activities, trainings and procedures which helped to improve coordination among the competent authorities. As a result, the number of persons having no identity documents has been significantly reduced, as it was recognized in the UNHCR survey *Persons at Risk of Statelessness in Serbia – Progress Report 2010 – 2015*.

Serbia will continue to contribute to the implementation of the UNHCR *Global Action Plan to End Statelessness: 2014 – 2024*. Serbia will continue to fulfil its obligations under relevant international instruments. In that respect, the new Memorandum of Understanding concluded by the same Parties on 3 October and the expressed readiness of the competent authorities to consider the introduction of procedures to identify statelessness are encouraging.

I believe that these activities will contribute to the fulfilment of our ultimate goal: to end statelessness and prevent new cases. I take this opportunity to thank the UNHCR and other international partners for their assistance and cooperation in combatting statelessness and express the hope that our future cooperation will be as successful.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Republic of Serbia upholds the efforts made by the international community in addressing forced displacement as a global humanitarian problem. Serbia's contribution to providing assistance to all refugees and displaced persons in its territory, including refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, internally displaced persons from Kosovo and Metohija as well as refugees and asylum seekers from the latest migration wave since 2015, reflects a continued commitment to the consistent protection and provision of assistance to all forcibly displaced persons.

I wish to reiterate that Serbia has taken a humane and responsible approach to the challenge of global migration crisis, in line with international standards, relying on its own resources but also on the significant cooperation with UN bodies and agencies and other relevant international governmental and non-governmental organizations. Since 2015, refugees and migrants from different regions of the world reside in Serbia. Following the massive migration wave, their numbers dropped and it is estimated that there are around 3,800 these people currently residing in Serbia, and 3,050 of them are placed in reception centres. Very few of them have applied for asylum as Western European countries are their final destinations. Serbia has made every possible effort to provide assistance to every refugee or migrant in transit, in particular to the children.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would also like to point out, this time again, a significant project that is being implemented by the Republic of Serbia in partnership with the UNHCR. It is the Regional Housing Program, jointly implemented by four countries: Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro along with the European Commission, UNHCR, the OSCE and the Council of Europe Development Bank - and I would like to take this opportunity to thank

them once again, as well as the donors who have jointly contributed to the success of the Program.

The example of the Regional Housing Program shows that a solution can be found if there is a will to do so. This is a very important message because in addition to the refugees from the former SFRY, there are also 200,000 IDPs from Kosovo and Metohija, who, even 20 years later, have not seen conditions for their sustainable return created. Unfortunately, only a handful of people have realized their right to return to the place of origin, protection of property, non-discrimination and enjoying of political, economic and social rights in Kosovo and Metohija. Tens of thousands of IDPs must be given a choice between return to the place of origin, integration into the place of their internal displacement, or settlement in some other place where the necessary conditions for the fulfillment of their guaranteed human rights are provided. Experience and certain tools and models used in the Regional Housing Program, could be considered for application IDPs, too.

Taking into consideration economic and other realities in the region it is clear that, contrary to the immense efforts of certain actors, reaching sustainable solution for the IDPs is not possible without additional assistance of the international community. Therefore, in accordance with the *Plan of Action for Advancing Prevention, Protection and Solution for Internally Displaced People 2018-2020*, we would welcome additional engagement of the UNHCR in finding the just and sustainable solution for the IDPs in the region.

Allow me to conclude by thanking the High Commissioner Grandi and the UNHCR for their commitment and tireless work to tackle the current global refugee and migrant crisis, but also by commending their commitment and perseverance in addressing the issue of protracted displacement. UNHCR and other international partners may continue to count on Serbia's co-operation in achieving this goal.

I thank you for your attention.