

**71<sup>st</sup> Session of the Executive Committee of the  
High Commissioner's Programme  
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## **PHILIPPINE STATEMENT**

**H.E. EVAN P. GARCIA**

**Permanent Representative of the Philippine Mission to the United Nations  
and other International Organizations**

Thank you Mr. Chair.

High Commissioner, Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

We wish to firstly thank the High Commissioner for his comprehensive articulation of the challenges that face us in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and how now, more than ever, all stakeholders must work together to mount an effective response.

The Philippines recognizes the grave impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on millions of vulnerable people across the world, especially those under the UNHCR's mandate. We express deep concern that, even as numbers of the displaced continue to rise globally, their situation of suffering and hardship is further exacerbated by the social and economic consequences of measures taken to stem the pandemic's spread. We also note with concern that many

initiatives towards the achievement of durable solutions have been adversely affected by this public health crisis.

Nevertheless, we fully agree with the High Commissioner's stand that the international community must remain seized of the available opportunities to alleviate the plight of the displaced. We laud the UNHCR, along with the host of other humanitarian workers and frontliners, for their selfless sacrifice and service, despite operating in increasingly difficult environments. We commend the UNHCR for its innovative approaches and initiatives, which have indeed been shining examples of adaptability and flexibility in the humanitarian sphere.

We likewise express solidarity with refugee-hosting countries, many of whom face daunting internal challenges of their own. As our President, His Excellency Rodrigo Roa Duterte, emphasized in the General Debate of the 75<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly, helping those displaced by conflict, persecution and political instability is a shared responsibility of all countries. We therefore uphold the centrality of equity and burden-sharing in addressing the challenges of forced displacement. In doing so, we find it imperative not to lose sight of sustained and effective action to resolve the root causes of displacement, while also pursuing collective efforts to ensure that the UNHCR remains fully equipped and resourced to carry out its mandate.

Mr. Chair,

Even as we have implemented a historic national response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Philippines has remained committed to its obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. We have strived to ensure that the appropriate humanitarian assistance and protection continue to be extended to refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons and other persons of concern (POCs).

As the main implementing agency, our Department of Justice, through its Refugees and Stateless Persons Protection Unit, has continuously provided the necessary services to POCs on a remote basis – from the processing of applications to the issuance of protection documents. It has also taken the lead in ensuring that the needs of POCs are taken into account in the development and implementation of health and socio-economic responses to the pandemic, both at the national and local levels.

Effective coordination among the relevant government units allowed for our authorities to accurately locate POCs for targeted assistance, as well to consider them for interventions aimed at helping the most vulnerable people cope with community quarantine restrictions, including cash assistance, emergency employment, health services and psychosocial support, among others. The situation of POCs was also considered in our immigration policies,

allowing for recognized refugees to continue availing of Special Return and Exit Clearance Certificates despite the temporary restrictions being implemented.

While indeed some level of restriction to movement was a necessary element of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Philippines has nevertheless prioritized the facilitation of the work of humanitarian actors, including the UNHCR, ensuring their unimpeded access to communities in need. We profess our deep gratitude to the UNHCR for their role in supporting the Philippine government in the context of our pandemic response, particularly through its aid distribution, awareness-raising activities, and quick-impact projects for POCs throughout the country.

Mr. Chair,

We ended 2019 on a high note, having successfully conducted the High Level Segment of Statelessness in October and the first-ever Global Refugee Forum in December. While it is undeniable that the COVID-19 pandemic will have an impact on how stakeholders will fulfil the pledges and commitments made during those landmark events, we believe that we must remain ambitious in our plans and embrace this “new normal” as the path leading to our shared goals.

On the part of the Philippines, it continues to refine, improve and mainstream the work of such mechanisms as the Inter-Agency Agreement on the Protection

of Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Stateless Persons, and the National Action Plan to End Statelessness, both launched in 2017.

Towards these ends, we have strived towards the inclusion of POCs in the continued updating of our national development plans, as well as further institutionalizing protection mechanisms in the work of relevant government agencies. We have also undertaken to harness the power of improved data and information management as critical tools in program development and implementation.

We have invested in sensitizing and capacitating the various institutions and personnel involved in the direct delivery of services to POCs – among them immigration, social welfare, technical education and training, labor and employment, and professional regulatory agencies. .

Equally important is the maintenance of our solid partnership with the UNHCR, especially on the ground where it matters most. Apart from the excellent cooperation on information management, allow me to cite some examples of positive outcomes from our work with the UNHCR from the past year – the facilitation of the “Cities with Refugees” campaign, the birth registration project which benefited some 400 people of Sama Bajau descent, and our country’s participation in the Surge Capacity Project on Statelessness.

Allow me as well to highlight the attention given to the involvement of civil society actors and the affected peoples and communities themselves in guiding our plans and actions.

Mr. Chair,

Let me conclude by highlighting once again that we find ourselves in an unprecedented crisis and while it would seem natural for us to be more inward-looking in these uncertain times, we must come to recognize that the complexities of the challenges before us demand strengthened international solidarity and cooperation.

We recall once again President Duterte's words at the General Assembly, that while each of us may have their own strategies in fighting the pandemic, what the world needs now are coordinated plans and efforts to pursue a common purpose. Let this call add to the multitude of global voices advocating for unity and collective action, as we forge ahead with hope and determination.

Thank you.