

7 October 2020

Chairperson's summary of the general debate

Distinguished delegates,

I wish to thank you for your very substantive contributions to the general debate over these past few days. And of course, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, for the first time in the history of the Executive Committee, we have had to limit in-person attendance and so our format was a bit special to ensure adequate distancing and we have been forced to adapt and embrace virtual participation. It is, nonetheless, clear that your support – for the world's refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons – has not wavered and remains as strong as ever. More than 130 delegates have taken the floor, with an estimated 200 participants attending physically and more than 30 speaking remotely. Around the world, hundreds more who would have attended in person were able to follow the proceedings online.

This year, we had the pleasure of hearing from the Executive Director of UNICEF Ms. Henrietta Fore, our keynote speaker. She highlighted the importance of collaboration and expressed hope for the future. Joining forces and working shoulder-to-shoulder, UNHCR and UNICEF have committed to providing a “fairer deal” for millions of forcibly displaced children and young people around the world. Ms. Fore highlighted the new UNHCR-UNICEF Blueprint for Joint Action, a roadmap to help countries live up to their pledge under the sustainable development goals to “leave no one behind”.

In his opening remarks, the High Commissioner provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by UNHCR today. We were reminded that, despite the limitations imposed on UNHCR's work, the pandemic has not stopped wars. Conflict, violence, human rights violations and political crises have pushed the number of forcibly displaced people up to almost 80 million – double the figure of 10 years ago. The High Commissioner encouraged us to consider the situation of persons of concern through the prism of the pandemic – looking at the challenges but also the opportunities ahead, so that, together, we can better prepare for the future.

[COVID-19 and emergency response]

Distinguished delegates,

During the general debate, you highlighted that this year marks many meaningful milestones. This includes the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations and the seventieth anniversary of UNHCR.

While recognizing these important anniversaries, our discussion over the past few days was dominated by the threat posed by the pandemic.

You expressed concern, and rightly so, about the effect that COVID-19 has had on persons of concern to UNHCR. The virus has exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities, particularly in low- and middle-income countries that host more than 85 per cent of the world's refugees. As one delegation put it: "While the virus does not discriminate between countries or people, its effects do".

When it came to the question of how to respond to the challenge of protecting and assisting refugees during the pandemic, the answer was clear: it requires a global response anchored in international solidarity. In this respect, you underscored that the commitment to leave "no one behind" also applies to global efforts to overcome the COVID-19 crisis. You commended UNHCR for quickly adapting its response in the face of unprecedented challenges and for consistently advocating the inclusion of refugees in national health responses. That several UNHCR staff members had lost their lives due to the disease, having been committed to helping those in need, was recognized as testament to the extraordinary challenges facing the humanitarian community in 2020.

The efforts led by UNHCR, coupled with effective national responses, were seen as key in having maintained a relatively low number of COVID-19 infections among refugee communities globally. Measures to reinforce water, sanitation and hygiene systems and services; support governments with infection prevention and health care responses; and bolster cash assistance, shelter and core relief items; were highlighted as vitally important in response to the pandemic. Emerging as a key consideration was that equitable access to diagnostics, medicines, vaccines and medical equipment for all people in need, including persons of concern to UNHCR, must be ensured. In the words of one delegation, "the health of every person is linked to the health of the most vulnerable".

[Protection]

Distinguished delegates,

We heard your apprehension about how the pandemic has challenged the norms of international protection. It was, nonetheless, emphasized that the right to seek asylum and the fundamental principle of non-refoulement also apply during a global health emergency. You stressed that measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 must remain temporary, proportional and balanced, and in accordance with international law. Protecting the rights of refugees is not an option, but a legal obligation. In this respect, many of you looked forward to this year's High Commissioner's dialogue on protection challenges, which will serve as a valuable forum to discuss the protection risks arising from the pandemic.

COVID-19 has magnified and exacerbated other issues, such as racism and xenophobia. One delegation stressed that we should resist attempts to instrumentalize refugees for political objectives. It was noted that the pandemic had not prevented refugees and migrants from embarking on dangerous journeys on land and by sea, and you emphasized the need to tackle the root causes of these movements and to combat human trafficking.

Many delegations expressed concern about the global learning crisis, which threatens to widen inequalities even further, particularly in humanitarian situations. You warned that interruptions in education will have severe long-term implications for refugees, the internally displaced and stateless persons, with girls and persons with disabilities among the most vulnerable.

You also expressed alarm over the increase in reported cases of sexual and gender-based violence, which has particularly affected women and girls. As girls are especially at risk of being forced into marriage and dropping out of school, we were called upon to redouble our efforts to ensure their protection.

We were also encouraged to listen to women's voices, and I would therefore like to quote this year's winner of the Nansen Refugee Award, Ms. Mayerlín Vergara Pérez, who has helped hundreds of young survivors of sexual violence rebuild their lives. And she says: "It is possible for survivors of sexual violence to change their lives and undertake life projects that are positive for them, for their families and for society. It is possible."

[Internal displacement and statelessness]

Distinguished delegates,

The current record number of internally displaced persons worldwide was a cause for concern. In this respect, you underscored the High-level Panel on Internal Displacement as a unique opportunity to galvanize international support to find solutions for situations of internal displacement. Although responding to internal displacement was noted as being the responsibility of States, you were of the view that this multidimensional issue requires as much global attention and collective action as that of refugees.

UNHCR was commended for drawing attention to climate change as a new driving force of internal displacement. Some delegations pointed out that climate-change factors have contributed to the growing number of people who are internally displaced.

Many delegations highlighted impressive examples of their work to reduce statelessness. However, as there were still 4.2 million stateless persons globally at the end of 2019, you called upon States to scale up their efforts to achieve the eradication of statelessness by 2024.

[Funding and support for host countries]

You stressed the need to reinforce the capacity of host countries, which – despite the additional burden of the pandemic weighing on their economies – continue to show extraordinary solidarity towards the forcibly displaced. Concern was also expressed about the actions taken by some States which hampered the humanitarian efforts of host countries.

You cautioned against insufficient attention to addressing protracted situations and this tendency being associated with a false sense of normalcy. While many of you echoed the notion of “leaving nobody behind”, as per the sustainable development goals, there was also an appeal to ensure that there are “no crises left behind”. The level of funding for operations in Africa was particularly highlighted as not being proportionate to the number of persons of concern in the region. In this respect, you commended UNHCR’s efforts to raise the profile of the world’s most underfunded crises.

With respect to the significant funding gap, you shared UNHCR's concern and regretted that most of the contributions stem from only a limited number of donors. In this regard, UNHCR was encouraged to continue to broaden its donor base, including with non-traditional donors. Donor countries were also strongly encouraged to increase their core funding, prioritize unearmarked funding and enter into multi-year agreements. This would enable UNHCR to use resources efficiently and remain effective in unpredicted situations. One delegation underscored that the pandemic has proven how crucial flexible funding is, as it allowed UNHCR to swiftly adapt to unforeseen events.

You were pleased with the various cooperation initiatives that UNHCR has undertaken with United Nations partners, development actors, the private sector and international financial institutions, including the World Bank, and strongly encouraged UNHCR to continue to pursue a collaborative approach in all areas of its work. It was seen as an effective way to respond to protracted refugee situations and address the root causes of forced displacement. At the same time, development financing instruments need to be designed and implemented in ways that do not worsen the existing high-debt burdens of refugee hosting countries and erode the true essence of the principle of equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing.

[Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Refugee Forum]

Distinguished delegates,

As the High Commissioner mentioned, the last time we were together in this room was to celebrate the Global Refugee Forum. It was a historic step, which brought together a wider group of stakeholders dedicated to the refugee cause and which led to important commitments to support those in need and their host countries. Almost one year on, you have encouraged UNHCR to maintain the momentum

and continue to forge new partnerships, involve refugees and mobilize joint efforts towards burden- and responsibility-sharing. It was noted that, of the more than 300 pledges made during the Forum, 70 per cent were already in implementation and 22 per cent were in the planning stage. Over the past few days, we have heard how the urgent needs arising from the pandemic have demonstrated the value of the Global Compact on Refugees.

[Solutions]

Distinguished delegates,

You pointed out that refugees can be a resource for their host countries if they are given the chance to create a better future for themselves and their families. You also emphasized that refugees need greater international support in order to create the conditions conducive to voluntary repatriation, and foster increased opportunities for local integration, resettlement and complementary pathways.

Some delegations highlighted that voluntary repatriation remains the preferred durable solution for refugees. In this respect, UNHCR was commended for its commitment to ensuring that returns are safe, dignified and durable. Many of you were nonetheless concerned about the 46 per cent decline in voluntary repatriation in 2019.

You also conveyed regret over the continued gap between resettlement places and global resettlement needs. In response, many delegations reiterated their commitment towards implementation of UNHCR's three-year strategy on resettlement and complementary pathways, while noting that the pandemic has hindered the implementation of regular resettlement programmes in 2020. There was broad recognition that resettlement remains a vital protection tool and an important expression of solidarity. In this context, more countries were called upon to offer resettlement places for refugees.

[Organizational reform and staff security]

Distinguished delegates,

In terms of the management of the organization, you urged UNHCR to continue to ensure strong oversight and transparency, including in relation to its crucial work to prevent and respond to misconduct.

There were strong expressions of support for UNHCR's reform initiatives, including budget reform, and regionalization and decentralization. At the same time, you articulated that moving the regional bureaux closer to persons of concern must be complemented by regular and direct dialogue with the diplomatic missions in Geneva.

Regionalization and working more closely with national responders were seen as having greatly contributed to the swift and efficient response to COVID-19, and you urged UNHCR to continue to strengthen these partnerships. Through a different lens, you raised one positive aspect of the pandemic – that the challenges imposed by restrictions on the movement of personnel and access to persons of concern have provided a unique opportunity to innovate and use digitalization to ensure sustained protection and assistance. UNHCR was also encouraged to ensure the meaningful participation of refugee communities and to work with refugee-led organizations, not only as implementing partners, but also in the design and implementation of UNHCR’s programmes.

You underlined the importance of securing access to affected communities and called on all States to ensure sufficient humanitarian space for aid workers. In the context of the pandemic, UNHCR’s commitment to “stay and deliver” was highly commended, and you saluted the perseverance of staff during this global crisis. At the same time, you voiced that safeguarding the health and welfare of personnel must be a key priority. Attacks on humanitarian workers were strongly condemned, and all actors were implored to fully respect their obligations under international humanitarian law.

Finally, UNHCR’s efforts to increase diversity and inclusion in the workforce were welcomed, with appreciation that the organization is close to reaching gender parity for its international workforce. At the same time, some delegations noted that more needed to be done to increase the regional diversity of staff. UNHCR was encouraged to continue its efforts to foster an enabling environment to increase diversity and inclusion.

END

Distinguished delegates,

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on the socio-economic and mental wellbeing of refugees, the displaced and stateless persons. In the words of the High Commissioner, “it has added vulnerability to vulnerabilities – a crisis on top of multiple other layers of crisis”.

This Committee referred to the voice of UNHCR as principled and as a “guiding light”. The strong message from the High Commissioner to include refugees and displaced persons in every aspect of the response to the pandemic was hailed as both commendable and pragmatic.

Let us not forget that ensuring the safety of persons of concern to UNHCR goes above and beyond health issues. The Global Compact on Refugees provides us with a clear roadmap on how to confront the broad array of challenges brought on by the pandemic, which can only be achieved through multilateralism, solidarity and – above all – strengthened international burden- and responsibility-sharing.

I would like to conclude by sharing one message that we have heard more than any other over these past few days, and this is that, “**no one is safe, until everyone is safe**”.