

**Statement by the head of the delegation of the Republic of Azerbaijan,
H.E. Mr. Vusal Huseynov, Chief of the State Migration Service of the Republic of
Azerbaijan at the 71st Session of the Executive Committee of the UNHCR**

Mr. Chair!

Distinguished High Commissioner!

Ladies and gentlemen!

It is a great honor for me to deliver a statement today on behalf of the Republic of Azerbaijan and availing myself of this opportunity I would like to express sincere appreciation to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as the role and activity of the organization became increasingly crucial in supporting refugees and host societies to overcome consequences of the coronavirus pandemic during these challenging times.

Mr. Chair,

Firstly, I am obliged to draw your attention to the recent incidents that are taking place around the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region of the Republic of Azerbaijan. In the background of the fight against the pandemic by the international community Azerbaijan has been continuously facing Armenia's traditional acts of aggression. As a result of the recent attacks by Armenia's armed forces to the residential areas 25 Azerbaijani civilians, including 3 minors were killed. In addition densely populated cities of Azerbaijan out of occupied territories have been continuously exposed to heavy artillery shelling by Armenia which could lead to dramatic environmental, infrastructure and humanitarian disasters. Azerbaijan has taken counter-offensive measures in order to ensure safety of its people and to restore its internationally recognized borders. Today one of the key goals of the ongoing self-defense operations is also to restore the rights of refugees and IDPs to return their homelands by ending the forced displacement. This issue is of utmost significance in terms of resolution of existing humanitarian crisis in the region for many years. Given the scope of the mandate of UNHCR which also focuses on protracted refugee situations we consider this session as one of the respective platforms to draw attention of the international community to this matter.

As it is known, today over 1 million refugees and IDPS in Azerbaijan are still suffering from such aggression policy and destructive position of Armenia which are the root causes of this protracted refugee situation. The long-standing policy of illegal resettlement of armenians, as well as asylum seekers in the Nagorno-Karabakh, including recent involvement of mercenaries from the third countries to use against Azerbaijan are a clear abuse of the key principles of international protection system and aims to alter demographic situation across Azerbaijan's occupied territories which is a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law. As one of the closest partners of our Government in tackling this humanitarian catastrophe UNHCR already has a deep understanding of the situation and we expect relevant steps to be taken within the competences of the organization.

Mr. Chair,

Despite all the limitations related with pandemic, social assistance projects related to vulnerable groups, as well as national asylum procedure have not been stopped in Azerbaijan and those who were denied refugee status prior to COVID-19 were not required to leave the country and were not forcibly placed in detention centers. These activities are implemented in close collaboration with civil society institutions and other stakeholders owing to flexible coordination mechanisms.

Moreover, our country is sparing no effort in order to ensure implementation of pledges made during the Global Refugee Forum and High-Level Segment on Statelessness. Two of the three pledges made by the Government of Azerbaijan during the Forum to include refugees, as well as persons under the protection of UNHCR into the medical insurance system and to facilitate legal employment and access to labour market for refugees have been fully implemented. Related with the implementation of the third pledge, granting scholarship for higher education to refugee students is planned this year.

In addition to the abovementioned, for the purpose of providing proper conditions for refugees to enjoy their rights established under international law, Azerbaijan has started to issue travel documents for refugees since January 2020. Furthermore, starting from July 1st of this year in accordance with the arrangement between the Government of Azerbaijan and the UNHCR, all asylum applications are reviewed only by the Government thanks to the improved national asylum procedure.

It should be noted that our measures were not limited to improving protection mechanism of refugees' rights. Concrete steps are taken towards naturalization of stateless persons who also belong to the vulnerable category of persons. In this regard, necessary measures such as country-wide public awareness campaigns, on-spot documentation through mobile service have been taken to detect and engage stateless persons registered in the country to the process of naturalization. Since the last session, around 20% of the stateless persons already have been admitted to the citizenship of the Republic of Azerbaijan by the Presidential decrees and considerable number of applications of the same kind is under consideration. Moreover, in order to increase efforts to identify the stateless persons, a Working Group on statelessness, represented by the relevant government agencies, Ombudsperson and UNHCR Representation in Azerbaijan has been established under the leadership of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Chair,

To conclude, once again I would like to note that the recent escalations in Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan prove the need for appropriate response by the international community, a response that will end the ongoing occupation by Armenia and bring peace to our region. We do hope that during our next meetings we will be able to discuss the return procedure of people suffered to their homelands and by that all together we will manage to reduce the number of globally displaced persons by hundreds of thousands.

Thank you for attention.