

Statement to the 71st session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme

Introductory Remarks by Kelly T. Clements, Deputy High Commissioner

Assembly Hall, Palais des Nations

8 October 2020

Mr. Chairperson,  
High Commissioner,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates

As the High Commissioner mentioned in his opening statement, we are living a uniquely challenging year, not least because I am delivering this statement to the Executive Committee from my basement. COVID-19 is a crisis that has compounded existing emergencies, and has disrupted systems and structures that were already in the midst of change.

When we met as a Standing Committee in the middle of March, there were only 100,000 COVID-19 cases worldwide, none confirmed amongst either our workforce or persons of concern. At the time, we discussed the outcomes of the Global Refugee Forum held three months earlier, the establishment of all seven new regional Bureaux, and introduced several senior colleagues, including the new Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, Raouf Mazou. At the time, we also launched what then felt like a significant appeal, for USD \$33 million, to support initial COVID-19 prevention and response, while outlining many of our key priorities in 2020, including investments in multi-year planning, business transformation and integrity.

When we reconvened for Standing Committee at the beginning of July, the number of COVID-19 cases worldwide had jumped to around 12 million and the pandemic had hit our operations. In response we had prioritised life-saving support, ramped up cash assistance, increased shelter capacity, and redoubled efforts to ensure that the rights of forcibly displaced were protected. We had also begun to map out potential long-term implications of COVID-19, including the socio-economic and public health impacts, as well as its effect on how we work and support our teams, with a view to building that analysis immediately into our planning.

When we last met, just three weeks ago, the total number of infections worldwide had reached almost 30 million, including close to 20,000 persons of concern and 280 members of our workforce. Those numbers have continued to increase since then, and sadly five colleagues have lost their lives to the virus over the course of the last six months. We continue to grieve their loss.

The impact of the pandemic on our workforce has led to an unprecedented exercise in administrative agility. In responding to COVID-19, we have not only invested considerable time in business continuity, back to office guidelines and internal communication, but have adapted on the fly policies on leave, rest and recuperation and teleworking.

We have also worked tirelessly with inter-agency partners to reinforce medical support for personnel, focused on high-risk locations where primary care is limited, buoyed by local and global cost sharing arrangements. Meanwhile, we have poured considerable energy into Medical Evacuation, or medevac - a shorthand many of us now use on a near daily basis - with regional UN hubs operational in Ghana, Costa Rica and Kenya. We thank those member states for their solidarity.

But while we have continued to fight the global fire that is COVID-19, we have also carried on with the job of transforming the organisation, including our operations around the world who protect and aid refugees and displaced persons, and our corporate commitment to greater agility, efficiency and integrity. In that

context, I would like to dedicate my remarks today to a brief update of some of those efforts which have continued largely unabated, and in some ways accelerated, this year.

Excellencies,

The first is regarding systems and processes, both how we plan and prioritise our programs, and how we support the functioning of our operations. As the High Commissioner noted in his opening, delegating authority to the field, including the seven new regional bureaux, was a first step taken at the beginning of the year to consolidate our new decentralised business model.

Our initial plan for this year included a series of deep dive sessions with each new Regional Bureau, aimed at advancing and adjusting our common understanding of how field operations, bureaux and headquarters will work together in exercising their respective functions in this new setup. While I was fortunate to attend a regional consultation in Panama in early February, the pandemic pushed the rest of our engagements online, fast-tracking in a sense to a new way of working.

No longer could we convene in an old hangar with our flip charts, as we did in Panama. But even virtually, having these consultations against the backdrop of a global emergency made tangible some of the benefits of a regionalised UNHCR, especially having key functions and decisionmakers closer to the ground as the pandemic hit countries at different times and in disparate ways.

To support decentralisation, we delegated key authorities to Bureau Directors, Representatives and Heads of Sub-Office, and drawing upon some of these rapid lessons learned throughout the year, issued an updated Resource Allocation Framework this summer. To streamline the headquarters dimension of this process, we also transformed the Budget Committee into a Resource Planning and Management Board, bringing operational and financial decision making more closely together. A second update of the Resource Allocation Framework will follow early next year, taking on board changes emanating from the new results-based management system and multi-year planning and budgeting process, including some small changes to our financial rules which were discussed at Standing Committee. We thank Member States for the helpful discussions and support, including in refining the language put forward for decision.

This new approach to planning is at the core of how we aim to maximise the results we deliver for the people we serve, and is the spine of the new Division of Strategic Planning and Results. Central to that approach is the notion that results are achieved collectively, not only by UNHCR. The pandemic has further demonstrated that partnerships are absolutely essential, as the High Commissioner mentioned, to our ability to deliver to those most in need, especially local partners who, in a public health crisis where community acceptance is paramount, provide invaluable knowledge, access and trust with populations of concern. Of the funding received via the UNHCR COVID-19 appeal, over half went to local responders.

This is one piece of a broader multi-year partnerships strategy aimed at simplification, harmonization, localisation and improved risk management. We have embedded partnership management in the external relations pillars of the new regional bureaux, and taken steps to include more flexible partnership agreements, including allowing for reallocation of funds that partners were unable to implement due to COVID-19. We have advocated for less paperwork related to partnership agreements for the coming year, so that submissions for 2021 do not duplicate what was already in 2020 documents, while expanding the UN partnership portal to include UNFPA, WFP and UNICEF, with several more UN agencies joining shortly.

The feedback received so far indicates that we are on the right track. In a survey conducted in the lead-up to last week's Global NGO Consultations, 61% of participants commented positively about increased budget flexibility, while 77% of respondents indicated that partnership relationships improved over the past year.

Excellencies,

One of the immediate questions raised at the onset of the pandemic was how to assess the impact on efficiency. This was of concern not only at our headquarters locations, where we moved to widespread teleworking almost overnight, but also in the field where movement and access to persons of concern could be unpredictable, even once we were able to get supplies of personal protective equipment to the field. Business continuity planning became hugely important, and in order to track implementation and global trends, Headquarters established a global dashboard to track teleworking arrangements, travel and absences in real time.

To give you a snapshot, as of 28 September, we still have teleworking arrangements in 118 countries, with 10,481 staff teleworking at least a few days a week against 5,743 working in the office with very few on mission as travel is substantially curtailed. Critical tasks are assigned among divisions using a stoplight system to track progress and urgency. As of now, we have no tasks in the red, 16 in yellow - for example related to cash flow, supply payments and outstanding assignments, and 257 in green - all of this managed through a dashboard. This is one example of how we are increasingly looking to use data and evidence-based analysis not only in our operations and protection work, but to support the management of enabling functions as well.

In this area, our interagency relationships have also taken priority. A little over two years ago, the High Commissioner and the Executive Director of the World Food Programme, were asked by the Secretary General to lead the Business Innovations Group, or the BIG, with a mandate to deliver on several proposals envisioned to maximise programmatic gains through more efficient and effective back-office operations. As presented at the last two Standing Committees, the BIG concluded its two-year project in June, delivering a revised Business Operations Strategy to support back office coordination and model for Common Back Offices to enable country-level consolidation, establishing a network for Global Shared Service Centres, and developing a consolidation package for Common Premises. However, the experience of the BIG also raised several important lessons on how the UN can best approach reform, and how we as UNHCR would like to advance our own business transformation.

Throughout the project we identified several critical success factors, including the independence of a project team that advanced the work on behalf of the system at large, and analysis and learnings, which enabled the project team to harvest available data and pursue deliverables where a credible business case could be found. The BIG also demonstrated that in order to capture real efficiency gains, upfront investment is required. There is simply no way around it, no magic bullet, and ambitious efforts in the future should explore joint capital or seed funding at the outset.

Finally, our analysis did reveal quite clearly that the greatest area of untapped savings is at the global level, where the scope for further centralisation within and among UN entities is immense. This was especially clear through the Project Team's deep dive into global fleet and mobility, which has inspired UNHCR and WFP to pursue a joint global partnership. Our conclusion, however, is that more transformative projects also require innovative approaches, including leveraging technology and private sector capacity, and slowly scaling up initiatives through pilots and bilateral partnership. It is a long-term engagement.

Excellencies,

The third is regarding integrity and culture. Like with many of the work streams outlined above, this is not a new corporate priority. You are all undoubtedly familiar with efforts to reinforce integrity, accountability and oversight through our three lines of defence model. And like with the regionalisation itself, COVID-19 has stress-tested and revalidated the benefits of this investment. Adaptations in how we ensure business continuity, manage programme delivery, and engage with persons of concern have required similar agility in oversight, integrity and risk management.

Within the organisation, the pandemic has put a strain on many of our over 17,000 dedicated colleagues around the world and brought into focus the importance of connecting integrity to our work to set and

frame values, and ensure that conflict within the workforce is managed. I would note that today is International Ombuds Day, and certainly we believe that mediation and informal conflict resolution have a central role to play in this regard.

For that reason, we are reviewing how to embed within UNHCR a culture of positivity and proactivity, one that models and rewards good workforce behaviour. We expect that this will further tighten the relationship between managers and personnel, so that colleagues no longer feel defined by the need to comply with rules, procedures and policies but rather inspired to act with integrity and deliver results to achieve our common goal. We also recognise that the pandemic does not affect everybody equally, and we are committed to enhancing our understanding of how people management intersects with gender and diversity, especially in times of COVID.

We remain deeply committed to pushing the UN system forward in this area. The High Commissioner reaffirmed this earlier in reference to his role as Interagency Standing Committee Principals' Champion on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment, and we are also pursuing similar objectives in our leadership of the Chief Executives Board Task Force on Sexual Harassment.

In its first three years, this inter-agency task force focused on establishing relevant policies, ensuring accountability, enhancing personnel awareness and increasing trust in the UN. Several baseline tools were developed, including a Model Policy on Sexual Harassment, a guide for managements to prevent and respond to sexual harassment in the workplace, and a Code of Conduct for UN events.

But we have also learned a lot over the past few years about what it is going to take to ensure the United Nations is truly a workplace where harassment is never tolerated, abusers are held accountable, victims receive the support they need, and personnel feel safe to speak up and report. So, we want to take this a step further, to put survivors at the centre of our efforts and explore where sexual harassment and its root causes intersect with culture and leadership. Given the reckoning around race and inclusion, and the impact of COVID-19 on the future of work itself, this broader discussion and ensuing action could not be more timely.

Excellencies,

We certainly have a lot of work to do. While my remarks have focused principally on UNHCR's efforts to enable and support its programmes and its workforce, I trust that through the High Commissioner's remarks, and the interventions of many of you during the General Debate, the reality is clear that the needs continue to rise. As a result, so does our budget.

UNHCR planning for 2021 was managed through a lighter process compared to previous years, allowing our new Regional Bureaux and operations to focus on identifying major trends and priorities for 2021. As you will note under Agenda Item 6 on the Revised Programme Budget for 2020-2021, by the end of 2020, the total population of concern is expected to reach 93.3 million, an 8% increase compared to 2019. We project a further jump of 3.8 million in 2021. Five countries – Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar – continue to account for roughly two-thirds of all refugee movements worldwide.

The current budget for 2020 is \$9,131.3 billion, including two supplementary budgets totalling \$463.7 million, one to finance activities to protect persons of concern from the impact of the pandemic, and the other to better equip us to handle the deteriorating crisis in the Sahel. With respect to the COVID-19 emergency, the Programme Budget proposal for 2020 reflects a \$404 million supplementary budget in support of activities to protect refugees, IDPs and other persons of concern from the impact of the pandemic.

As needs continue to rise, the proposed budget for 2021 is \$8,615.8 billion, the same level that the Executive Committee approved in 2019 for 2021, as we have planned for reallocations within the same level of appropriated resources.

From the budgetary perspective, a key point remains open - at a time when we are witnessing the highest levels of global displacement on record, needs remain unfunded. While on average, from 2010 through 2019, the final budget increased at an annual rate of 12 per cent, funds available and expenditure rose at a rate of 10 per cent. As a result, in 2019, the funding gap between needs and funds available remained stable at 44 per cent.

Many of the points I have outlined in my remarks address challenges and gaps that we collectively – we as management and you as our member states - have identified in how we work. That funding shortfall forces us to make difficult choices that have concrete implications for the people whose needs we cannot meet.

We are likewise confident, and appreciate the positive feedback many delegations provided on this in the general debate, that we have made considerable progress in transforming how we work and we believe the best is yet to come, especially in how we plan and deliver results. We hope you continue to support us to the fullest extent possible.

Thank you.