

Remarks of Mr. Ayman Gharaibeh, Director of the UNHCR MENA Bureau

83th Meeting of the Standing Committee

Geneva, 8 March 2022

Your excellency Ambassador Baddoura,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be with you today, albeit in the shadow of the unfolding tragedy in Europe. Reflecting on the effects of the crises in the Middle East; it is sad to see yet another region and its people suffer because of a major conflict.

In 2022, we should expect that Middle East and North Africa region will continue to host among the largest numbers of displaced populations globally, around 16 million persons. Where they could, refugee host countries in the region have shown resolve and solidarity in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. I wish to express my thanks to the governments and people of the region for providing refugees and other displaced access to critical health care services and national vaccine programmes.

At the same time, the region continues to experience challenges that pre-date the pandemic, including conflicts, economic instability, and displacement crises that overflow and overlap.

I would like to highlight some of the critical concerns in MENA:

The Syria crisis remains the largest displacement situation in the world. In the neighbouring countries hosting 5.7 million Syrians, the pandemic has aggravated economic downturns and social distress. This has affected all, yet it has been particularly devastating for the poorest, the least able to cope, including refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). UNHCR and partners have stepped-up; supporting national response plans, host governments, host communities and persons of concern alike.

Through the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, UNHCR and UNDP coordinate the work of more than 270 partners in support of national efforts in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, connecting the humanitarian response with longer-term national strategies for inclusive growth and sustainable development. The 3RP remains underfunded at 46 percent of the USD 5.6 billion total appeal for 2021- the lowest % since 2015. The upcoming 6th Brussels Conference on Supporting the future of Syria and the Region will be an important barometer of the international community's commitment to the region, and I call on all donors to stay the course and not waver.

Our position on the return of Syrians continues to be guided by the concerns and intentions of refugees, and by international protection standards. The UNHCR Refugee Intention Survey conducted in March 2021 showed that only 2.4 percent of refugees planned to return within the following 12 months. Much fewer in fact returned – some 35,000 in 2021. Refugees have a clear and consistent list of issues that need to be addressed before they return, including guarantees for security and respect of their rights; changes to military conscription rules as well as improved access to livelihoods and services back in Syria. We remain committed to pursuing durable solutions for Syria's refugees, including voluntary, safe and dignified return. In the meantime it is crucial that the international community continue to support refugees, host communities and host governments in the region with predictable, multi-year funding,

and that host governments continue to enable refugees to live in dignity and reach their potential through access to services, documentation and legal work.

Over 610,000 Syrians with resettlement needs have been identified in 2022, representing the highest number of potential resettlement cases globally. Resettlement and complementary pathway are life-changing, and in some cases life-saving solutions. They remain the most tangible demonstration of responsibility-sharing by the international community. We need more resettlement countries to step forward and increase places.

Inside Syria, as part of the inter-agency response, we continue to deliver and coordinate multisectoral assistance, including core relief items and shelter, and community-based protection, inside Syria, cross-border and cross line. Together with other agencies we are exploring ways to strengthen the impact of our work, including through innovative area-based programmes.

While each of the countries hosting Syrians deserve attention, I will highlight **Lebanon**, where both Lebanese and refugees are deeply affected by the compounded crises facing the country. Again, the most vulnerable are often those least able to cope: more than 90 percent of refugees now live in extreme poverty. UNHCR noted an increase in sea departures from Lebanon towards Cyprus and some other destinations in the Mediterranean in 2021; nearly double the 2020 attempts; which is alarming. New funding and support to programmes and appeals that focus on the growing needs of Lebanese are very important. These complement the main coordination and appeal mechanism in Lebanon for the Syria crisis – the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, which as the 3RP country chapter remains a unique nexus instrument, co-managed by the government and international community to address both the humanitarian and resilience needs in the country. While continuing to address life-saving needs, the

LCRP also allows us to invest in the capacities and futures of both Lebanese and Syrians, while supporting government national systems and services.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Yemen remains among the worst humanitarian crisis globally. It is a protection crisis where principles of International Humanitarian Law and protection of civilians have been repeatedly ignored. The recent escalations within the country and the growing regional dimension of the conflict are of concern. In 2022, UNHCR will expand our presence, responding to both new and protracted displacement. We will offer legal assistance, civil status documentation support and targeted protection services for children and survivors of gender-based violence. Cash assistance remains a key protection tool. UNHCR provides assistance to 102 thousand refugees and asylum-seekers in Yemen, for whom durable solutions including resettlement and voluntary return are increasingly limited. We look forward to the upcoming Yemen pledging conference next week hosted by Switzerland and Sweden to reinvigorate more support for this dire situation.

Turning to Iraq, our strategy continues to promote the systematic inclusion of persons of concern in social protection schemes and safety nets. We aim to achieve this by strengthening access to national services and employment opportunities, identifying comprehensive protection and solutions strategies and promoting the sustainability of return through small-scale infrastructure projects. Some 1.2 million IDPs and 4.9 million returnees lack civil documentation, have limited access to basic services, live with damaged property and critical infrastructure, and have few livelihood opportunities in areas of return.

In North Africa, in 2021, some 15,800 newly arrived refugees and asylum-seekers were registered by UNHCR across North Africa, with the largest groups being from Mali, Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic. Some 32,400 refugees and migrants en route to Europe were disembarked in Libya following rescue at sea. This was more than double the number in 2020. We continue to work with governments, civil society and refugee communities to advise on travel risks, enhance responses to “search, rescue and disembarkation” in the region; and are assisting those in need of international protection.

In Egypt, we continue to align our response with the ‘one refugee’ approach, prioritizing interventions based on identified protection needs and vulnerabilities rather than nationality. UNHCR managed to clear the backlog of cases with expired documentation due to COVID-19 in **Egypt**. In **Tunisia as well as in Morocco** we witnessed a rise in both arrivals and onward movements with the number of refugees and asylum-seekers increasing. UNHCR carries out key refugee protection activities in **Algeria**, including through national capacity-building, to respond to urban refugee needs. We are also working alongside WFP on the Joint Assessment Mission to improve our programme design to address the needs of vulnerable Sahrawi refugees in the five camps located near Tindouf.

In Libya, open conflict largely subsided in 2021. However, despite peace efforts led by Libya and facilitated by the United Nations, the situation remained uncertain following the postponement of presidential elections originally scheduled for December 2021. Although we faced considerable operational difficulties last year; we are working with Libya to resolve outstanding challenges and work with them to deliver on our mandate.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to underline my **appreciation to all donor countries for their commitment and support.** I reiterate again my gratitude to the **generous host countries in MENA** for their protection and support of persons of concern to UNHCR and their constructive engagement and indeed partnership with UNHCR.

Thank you.