

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

86th Meeting of the Standing Committee

Geneva, 7 March 2023

Your excellency Ambassador Kadra Hassan,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I come to you today with a heavy heart after the devastating earthquake that struck Türkiye and Syria last month. I would again like to express my sympathies to the people of Türkiye and Syria. A week after the earthquake, I visited affected areas inside Syria with our Deputy High Commissioner. It was shocking and tragic. Families, communities torn apart; collapsed buildings, joining in the rubble those already destroyed by the war. You have all seen similar images coming out of Türkiye and NW Syria, at an even greater scale

With the governments and communities, and thanks to your support, UNHCR has responded. Shelter has been a major priority. UNHCR has delivered over 3,300 tents and almost 38,000 CRIs in all parts of Syria. UNHCR is providing cash for minor repairs. But more substantial support is needed – rebuilding homes and services. We understand the political challenges here, especially regarding reconstruction inside Syria. Yet the earthquake took no notice of our lines in the sand. We need to find a way forward here – people affected by the earthquake need and deserve help to rebuild their lives, irrespective of where they live.

The earthquake has happened at a time when resources are already stretched. With a twenty percent budget cut in our major emergency operations, 2023 already had a rough start. The region continues to struggle with protracted conflicts in Syria, Libya, Yemen, an economic crisis with a multitude of consequences in Lebanon, and host states struggling to maintain financial resources, not least Jordan and Egypt. The international community has provided so much to this region, but more is needed. Without predictable support to host government and funding of aid programmes, combined with political solutions addressing the causes of displacement, displaced persons will struggle, descend further into poverty. And indeed, without solutions and support, we may well be sowing the seeds for instability in this region for years to come.

I reiterate my heartfelt appreciation to the governments and people of the region for exercising their ultimate generosity towards those displaced as we have all seen by the overwhelming donations and support to both Syria and Türkiye after the earthquake.

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

The Syria crisis has entered its twelfth year. The earthquake comes on top of some many other tragedies for Syrians.

Inside Syria, more than 15 million need assistance, this includes those living in the north-west who continue to benefit from the cross-border response. We are trying to focus more on building self-reliance and reducing protection risks through community-based networks, in parallel to early recovery projects within a humanitarian frame.

Over 5.5 million Syrian refugees continue to be generously hosted by neighbouring countries, amid worsening socioeconomic conditions, particularly in Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan. 90% of the Syrian refugee families are living in extreme poverty and in critical need of assistance to survive. Host communities are also struggling after the

shocks of COVID, Ukraine and the subsequent economic downturns. This situation is likely to get worse for all in the course of this year.

We continue to pursue solutions, but these are limited. Around 51,000 Syrian refugees opted to return home in 2022, a slight increase compared to previous years. But large-scale return to Syria seems unlikely in the near future. While Syrian refugees also have the highest resettlement needs globally, with over 770,000 Syrians in need of resettlement.

2023 will be a critical test of burden- and responsibility-sharing for the international community. Tens of Billions of USD have been provided by donors for the Syrian refugee response, through the 3RP, and much more through bilateral aid and by institutions such as the World Bank. We are concerned that funding might drop this year. Some critical programmes, such as cash assistance, have already been cut. In the absence of political progress on Syria; Host countries need to know they will be supported for medium to long term; Syrian refugees deserve a future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I move now to Yemen, where the political and security landscape remains complex and uncertain. In 2022, the number of internally displaced persons reached more than 4.3 million, 75 per cent of whom were women and children. Rising inflation, owing to currency devaluation, high costs of fuel and essential goods, and the ongoing blockade, has pushed more than 75% of the population below the poverty line. Yemen also hosts nearly 100 thousand refugees and asylum-seekers, facing risks of being arrested, detained and expelled from the country.

UNHCR continues to provide critical protection services including legal assistance and supporting the government in relation to civil status documentation and registration. Cash assistance remains a critical protection tool despite being also being reduced due to underfunding.

Turning to Iraq, in consultation with the government, the UN is transitioning from emergency response to a longer-term development approach. As of 2023, the clusters set up to address internal displacement have been deactivated and the Humanitarian Response Plan will be discontinued. There will be a gradual phase out of the humanitarian response for IDPs and an increased focus on durable solutions under the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. UNHCR will continue to maintain a strong focus on addressing the protection needs of the most vulnerable, while supporting the capacity of government services.

Lebanon's deep economic and financial crisis continues, with an ongoing and rapid deterioration of living conditions for both Lebanese people and refugees. Social tensions are on the rise.. Lebanon has done so much for refugees over the last decade, who represent over 20% of the total population. Imagine if your own country experienced this, what it would mean for national identity, for socio-economic stability. We need to listen to and address Lebanon's concerns in this regard. The current political stalemate on Syria is resulting in costs and risks to neighbouring host countries. The implications of millions of Syrians staying even longer outside of their country, combined with reduced funding, are extremely serious, both for the refugees, host countries, and stability in the region as a whole.

In North Africa, the security situation in Libya remains complex, with periodic hostilities between different armed groups, which have intensified as the roadmap for holding presidential elections remains undetermined. More IDPs have returned home in 2022; however, the number of refugees and asylum-seekers remains at over 40,000.

Despite the restrictive operating context, UNHCR continues to provide critical protection services through the Community Day Centre, while also ensuring life-saving assistance at detention centres and disembarkation points. Identifying more resettlement and complementary pathways remains a priority for vulnerable persons.

In Egypt, UNHCR will maintain vital services including refugee status determination and resettlement. We welcome the progress made by the Government of Egypt – for instance, by enabling the UNHCR and IOM Joint Platform on asylum and migration issues, and in further advancing the draft asylum law.

Moving on to Algeria, the long-standing refugee situation in Tindouf distils in a single operation many of the world's most significant challenges, in particular climate change and food and energy inflation. The cost of food for this population entirely dependent on humanitarian assistance has doubled in a year. UNHCR is leading the preparation of a Refugee Response Plan trying to grow the available resources through showcasing good practice and generating new ideas for support.

In **Morocco**, renewed crossing attempts into Melilla resulted in multiple deaths, injuries, and arrests. With over 18,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers, the Office will continue to ensure vital protection services, in collaboration with the Government. Rescue and interception at sea in **Tunisia** increased by 34 per cent in 2022 compared to 2021.

Ladies and Gentlemen, **I recognize how much has already been done, has already been provided by donors in this room. I have seen how your funding, your advocacy and your support has helped refugees and other forcibly displaced to be protected, to live their lives in dignity, with a future.**

But the MENA region is going through difficult times. There will be more challenges ahead. As set out in the GRF, we need a partnership between the international community and host countries; a commitment by host countries to maintain and expand protection space, with the confidence that they will be supported by donors; we need concrete steps made to address the causes of displacement in countries of origin, to reach political solutions. But now more than ever, the importance of reiterate the importance of increasing funding for humanitarian efforts in the region. Time is of the essence.

Thank you.