



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

Regional Conference on Asylum and Migration from the Horn of Africa to Yemen
Sana'a, Republic of Yemen
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Statement by Volker Türk
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Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, dear colleagues,

On behalf of the High Commissioner, I would like to thank the Government of Yemen for hosting this important Conference. As the only State in the region party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the Government of Yemen has, over the years, demonstrated a deep commitment and exemplary generosity by granting *prima facie* recognition to Somali refugees. Moreover, in 2008, demonstrating leadership in relation to mixed flows, Yemen hosted the first Regional Conference on “*Refugee Protection and International Migration in the Gulf of Aden*”.

Recent boat tragedies off the Italian island of Lampedusa and the western coast of Myanmar have come to embody the grave risks that desperate refugees and migrants take when embarking on perilous sea journeys. This region is, of course, also very familiar with complex cross-border movements, including loss of life at sea, which is the reason we are all here today. In Yemen alone, UNHCR has recorded more than 62,000 sea arrivals so far this year. We remain concerned about the very high numbers of people who are risking their lives by making this perilous journey from the Horn of Africa. Yemen has seen six successive years of high numbers of arrivals by sea. Last year, a record 107,532 people made the treacherous journey across the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. And although this year's numbers are, so far, lower than in 2012, the Gulf of Aden remains one of the world's most travelled sea itineraries for migrants and refugees, as well as one of several deadly sea routes across the globe.

These movements, and the deadly boat disasters that ensue, drive home the urgent need for increased international action to avert such incidents, to protect and assist people in need, and to support countries like Yemen in shouldering the burden. Recurring disasters, year after year, propel us to reflect on the thousands of refugees and migrants desperate to escape violence, drought and poverty in the Horn of Africa. Men, women and children consistently put their lives in the hands of human smugglers and cross the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in overcrowded, ramshackle boats. Many, having been beaten or abused, arrive on Yemen's shores - traumatized and ill. Others, tragically, do not survive the journey but their exact numbers will never be known.

A great deal of progress has been made both at national level, and also by way of regional cooperation. Conferences held in Yemen in 2008, Djibouti in 2011 and, most recently, in Nairobi are testament to this. Governments have also shown commitment to reducing such movements, for example, by sensitizing populations to the risks and dangers associated with irregular migration.

National and international partners continue to work with governments to improve the conditions for refugees and migrants at transit, reception and response centres throughout the region. Work is also being done to build the capacities of local and government officials to patrol, monitor and respond to such movements. In some cases, national and regional mixed migration taskforces have been established in order to facilitate the sharing of information and coordination of activities.

It is encouraging to see so many stakeholders represented here today, including governments from the Horn of Africa and Gulf States, members of the UN family, IOM, regional institutions, donors, NGOs and others. This is recognition of the need for regional cooperation in this area. We believe that this Conference is indeed a valuable opportunity to build upon progress already made and to bolster cooperation to tackle mixed flows.

Against this background, let me highlight six key areas:

First, continued commitment to working in partnership to establish regional mechanisms for saving lives.

Whilst there has been a decline of reported migrant and refugee deaths in the Horn of Africa and Yemen over the last two years, it will nonetheless be important, in our view, to develop a standard operating procedure for rescue-at-sea situations, increased regional coordination, as well as the capacity building of coast guards and other actors. In this respect, a comprehensive, regional rescue-at-sea protocol could, for example, establish joint search and rescue services, provide for deployments of experts, and serve as a positive example of regional response mechanisms for other parts of the world.

It is important to recognize the excellent work done by coast guards, fishermen and NGOs such as the Danish Refugee Council, INTERSOS and a variety of local organizations. It is encouraging to see a number of actors across Yemen patrolling the vast coastline. I would like, in particular, to acknowledge Nansen Award winning NGO – Society for Humanitarian Solidarity [SHS] – for their invaluable work, patrolling about a third of Yemen’s coastline around the clock, picking up survivors, providing emergency care, and burying those who die en route.

Second, commitment to differentiated processes and procedures, depending on the reasons behind departure or vulnerabilities developed en route, while ensuring specific protection safeguards for asylum-seekers and refugees.

Within mixed migratory movements there is a variety of people on the move. By way of example, some seek and require international refugee protection, while others have no refugee background but have fallen prey to smugglers and traffickers. We need a strong commitment to action in supporting such arrivals through broader protection-sensitive initiatives at all levels of society and across the region: from government to civil society and to local communities themselves. This means ensuring that asylum-seekers and refugees have safe access to territories and that coastal States are actively supported in dealing with boat arrivals. Instituting practical protection safeguards will protect refugees against *refoulement*, and further risks, including continued exposure to criminal groups.

It is encouraging indeed that a number of reception centres have been established across the region in recent years, aimed at receiving, accommodating, monitoring, assisting and referring migrants and refugees. In order to maintain this momentum, continued funding and practical support are needed, especially for training and staffing.

In addition to protection-sensitive entry systems, we would hope that all States in the region would work with us on national frameworks for refugee protection. Provision of temporary protection, in cases of particular movements, might also be a useful way to address this phenomenon. The availability of information on access to protection for asylum-seekers and refugees and ensuring that effective refugee procedures are in place, will work to prevent protection risks. I would also take this

opportunity to advocate for finding alternatives to detention, and UNHCR stands ready to assist governments in devising such programmes.

Third, particular commitment to the protection of children on the move.

In relation to protection safeguards, I would like to highlight in particular the importance of child protection. Reports consistently stress that women and children are at heightened risk of gender-based violence, trafficking, abduction and abuse. UNHCR is especially concerned about the protection of unaccompanied and separated children [UASC] and persons with specific needs, who are reportedly accosted immediately upon arrival by smugglers and traffickers.

A vast number of children go missing. This highlights further the need for both an immediate response and a longer-term strategy; presenting a range of opportunities for regional cooperation and community involvement. UNHCR works closely with UNICEF in all matters of child protection and benefits from close collaboration with both international and national NGOs. Increased cooperation is further essential to the ability to identify those at risk of onward smuggling/trafficking, and to trace missing children across the region. Strengthened information systems which complement a regional strategy will, for example, greatly improve actors' capacities to identify profiles of those at risk.

Fourth, increased cooperation in halting the exploitation and abuse that are part and parcel of movements by sea and land throughout the region, and beyond.

The phenomenon of smuggling and trafficking in this region is well known. We support the delivery of training to law enforcement officials and the judiciary as part of a broader commitment to capacity building, so as to ensure that smugglers and traffickers do not operate with impunity. One such training was conducted here in Sana'a earlier this month.

Despite this and other impressive efforts, a more comprehensive approach is needed regionally. It is in this context that I make a plea to consider accession to and implementation of the Palermo Protocols. We are concerned by the low number of prosecutions for smuggling and trafficking crimes. Increased regulation in this area will help to ensure the protection of and assistance to victims of smuggling and trafficking and their families.

Fifth, closer cooperation in addressing root causes.

It is important to increase the collection of valuable data and analysis to understand better the broader development and other concerns prompting movements in countries of origin. Understanding why people are moving impacts greatly on what we can do to prevent and respond to these root causes. The Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat and its various country chapters are already key actors in data collection, profiling, communication and information-sharing. This Conference presents an opportunity for all stakeholders to commit to supporting the development of such institutions and collectively drive these processes further.

Reasons behind movements are a complex combination of interlinked issues that require a creative and flexible response. For example, a lack of livelihood opportunities and economic insecurity are often cited as a "push factor" for both initial and secondary/onward movements of refugees and migrants alike. Regional commitment and cooperation to boost economic opportunities in areas of origin are as important as increasing regular migration channels, thereby reducing the incentives associated with human smuggling.

Whilst looking more broadly at the underlying causes of mixed migration, it is equally important to look at return. Our partnership with IOM has been crucial to our engagement on mixed migration. We will, for example, continue to support their Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programme [AVRR] as an important solution for stranded migrants – those who are not found to be refugees, but

still need support in the process of returning home. Differentiated responses, such as this programme, also contribute to decongesting refugee protection systems.

Sixth, commitment to support local communities.

Whilst the focus of this Conference is on enhancing practical cooperation amongst governments, regional bodies, UN agencies, IOM, and NGOs, the participation of local communities must not be overlooked. They help to alleviate the devastating effects of smuggling and trafficking from and within the region. There are examples of coastal communities playing key roles in monitoring and reporting of new arrivals and even in the initial assistance and response stages. Sensitizing communities to the rights of refugees and migrants, and providing support to these communities by way of livelihood or other targeted programmes would, we believe, enhance local receptiveness towards migrants and refugees. This would further contribute to a more favourable protection environment. To ensure that such support is maximized, assistance needs to be enhanced: both through the provision of support through development programmes, education and training, and by engaging responsible local leadership.

In conclusion, let me say that the failure to prevent deaths at sea must be seen as a collective humanitarian failure. This Conference, its outcome and follow-up present a valuable opportunity to move forward together with a joint vision, both regionally and globally, to prevent such a failure from reoccurring.

Thank you.