

Draft Speech for Mr. Mark Bowden, DSRSG/RC/HC for Afghanistan

High Level Segment on the Afghan Refugee Situation

UNHCR Meeting of the Executive Committee

6 October 2015

Geneva

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for the kind invitation to speak here today, and to speak about one of the world's best known – and yet simultaneously surprisingly neglected – refugee situations in the world. Particularly in light of recent developments, I would like to express my appreciation to the High Commissioner for making this very important topic the theme of this year's High Level Segment.

As you are well aware, the recent expansion of fighting in the North and Northeast of Afghanistan has once again demonstrated the complex situation that marks Afghanistan: the renewed, and strengthened resurgence of the Taliban and territorial gains made, the emergence of Daesh/ISIS in parts of the country and the overall expansion of fighting into peaceful parts of the country

all indicate that establishing peace in Afghanistan will take considerable efforts and requires continued support.

Despite the positive steps taken towards establishing a peace dialogue with various stakeholders in the continued fighting, conflict and violence in 2015 have demanded the largest number of civilian casualties since 2009 when UNAMA began systematically documenting civilian casualties. Similarly, the largest number of Afghans was displaced in 2015 as a result of the ongoing conflict. One million Afghans remain internally displaced, with a dire situation in Kunduz since 28 September leading to the fresh displacement of several thousand families from the city to other parts of the North and Northeast, and more than 2000 families presently displaced from Achin district in Nangarhar province following hostilities between Government forces and non-state armed groups during recent months.

At the same time, thousands of young Afghans are attempting to undertake the long and often extremely dangerous journey to Europe in desperate search of a better life. Too many young Afghans are giving up hope and are actively seeking better opportunities and brighter futures elsewhere.

In addition, 2.5 million Afghan refugees remain in neighbouring countries of asylum –over three decades following the initial outflow of refugees.

These three developments contribute to one of the most complex displacement situations in the world. And yet, one of the major concerns that the international community has been focusing on – spurred on by the National Unity Government's clear resolve and determination to end the Afghan displacement situation – is the need to find durable solutions for Afghan refugees. If we are to reverse the trend of population movement we also need to make greater efforts to establish more effective and attractive durable solutions for refugees.

Despite previous assertions to the contrary, neither 2014 nor 2015 have presented truly opportune moments for return, as the intensification of the fighting around Kunduz this year demonstrated. In large parts fighting has, however, remained localized, allowing for people to find shelter in other parts of the country. This should strengthen our determination to work together and provide reassurance to those who want to come back that return remains feasible.

A differentiated view is necessary when considering the issue of return and reintegration in Afghanistan. The new administration's resolve and political will to address the displacement situation certainly contributes towards the end goal of the creation of conditions for sustainable return. Building on this momentum, I would like to encourage the international community to

recognize this as a valuable opportunity for the development of forward-looking policies and strategies.

Supporting the Government's resolve to find practical and lasting solutions for the displaced, as expressed in the reform agenda, I believe that the international community can make a very positive contribution in addressing protection-oriented, as well as practical aspects of planning for return. The UN in Afghanistan is fully committed to supporting the Government in this regard.

Return to Afghanistan is inevitable. 1.5 million Afghans are registered as refugees in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, while almost 1 million are registered in the Islamic Republic of Iran; in addition, a similar number of undocumented Afghans are believed to reside in these countries. To help rebuild lives and prevent secondary displacement upon return to Afghanistan, solutions have to comprehensively address returnees' needs. As proposed by the Government's new Comprehensive Voluntary Repatriation and Reintegration Strategy, durable solutions will have to address short-term, mid-term and long-term aspects of return and (re-)integration.

Considering the overall high levels of poverty in Afghanistan, it is absolutely crucial that support for returnees is closely aligned with national development frameworks and services provided by local authorities. While the Government's strategy presents a policy framework for the integration of

returnees into national priority and other service-delivery and assistance programmes, the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), discussed at today's event, presents a framework for the implementation of assistance projects to help communities respond to returnees' needs. Building on the inter-agency approach outlined in the SSAR, the United Nations are working towards a joint planning and programming approach with clear targets and benchmarks and division of labour to achieve durable solutions in Afghanistan.

Spearheading this initiative, UNHCR, IOM, UNDP and UN-Habitat have committed their expertise and resources towards developing a targeted and integrated response. While UNHCR provides initial cash and shelter assistance to cover immediate needs, IOM provides referral services for undocumented returnees and facilitates their social integration.

Recognising the background and skills of the population that returns, existing UNDP activities supporting job creation and vocational training can be leveraged and scaled up to include returnees so they can contribute more effectively and economically to the growth and stability of the country. In a bid to promote the structured reintegration of IDPs and returnees into communities, UNDP also works towards strengthening the planning capacity of sub-national governance structures.

With an increasing number of returnees settling in urban and peri-urban areas, UN-Habitat gives strategic guidance and assistance to the Government in devising an overarching urban development strategy and provides access to housing and community infrastructure in urban and peri-urban areas.

To achieve truly sustainable reintegration, returnees' development and reintegration needs have to be met. These include the provision of equitable access to urban and rural development schemes, access to basic and social services in rural and urban areas and access to gainful employment. Much like the development goals for Afghanistan emphasize, ensuring that women and youth are treated as priority population groups with specific needs and vulnerabilities which have to be taken into consideration, is key.

At this stage, I would like to reiterate the United Nations' commitment to respecting returnees' choices regarding their location of return – be it rural or urban. The UN will continue to support the National Unity Government's efforts to swiftly enable access to land, livelihoods and services, irrespective of province or district of origin.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Afghanistan remains an exceptional case. Despite the sustained support that the international community has demonstrated these past thirteen years, it is crucial that Afghanistan is not abandoned at this critical juncture. As we are witnessing today, if we do not address the issue of return and reintegration effectively, the implications will be far-reaching and will affect all of us.

Thank you.

