

**Statement by the Director of the Bureau for Europe, Pascale Moreau**

**74th meeting of the Standing Committee of the Executive Committee**

**6 March 2019, Palais des Nations, UNOG**

***[Check against delivery]***

Thank you Mr/Madame Chair.

Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have shared with you a written update, ahead of this meeting which I trust was helpful and informative. I will only try to complement with some short reflections on what lays ahead of us.

The European continent continues to experience a wide variety of situations and allow me to first look at some encouraging developments that we have witnessed in the past year:

As you all know, one fundamental milestone was the adoption of the **Global Compact on Refugees** and let me salute Europe's overwhelming support. We appreciated the engagement of many states throughout the preparations and we are now equally pleased to see many already fully committed to the preparations of the ministerial level Global Refugee Forum that will take place next December.

The Forum will be a key benchmark in the implementation of the Compact. Beyond the reaffirmation of key principles and the support for solidarity, it will be the opportune time for us to translate commitments into action with concrete pledges and contributions towards its objectives, share good practices, explore ways in which responsibility-sharing can be increased and take stock of the progress made by the end of this year.

In many countries in Europe, an overwhelming number of **cities and local governments have demonstrated full commitment to the successful integration of refugees** and they deserve the continued support of states and central authorities. The 2018 High Commissioner Protection Dialogue showcased the incredible dynamism of cities and local organisations throughout Europe, seeking to make values of tolerance and inclusion a reality.

Refugees across Europe are given a chance to rebuild their lives, to thrive in communities and to contribute to the societies they are hosted in. In this context, it is also essential to continue initiatives that strengthen participatory and community based approaches, in particular with regards to the meaningful participation by refugees and host communities in discussions that concern them.

Despite the too often, negative and toxic rhetoric used in the public debate, it is heart-warming to see that many European citizens, civil society organisations and local organisations make solidarity and openness a reality in today's Europe. Allow me here to pay tribute to the work of non-governmental organisations in Europe along with the work of European NGOs worldwide. NGOs and fellow UN organisations like UNICEF and IOM continue to be essential partners for UNHCR in Europe and beyond.

European states have also demonstrated solidarity through their willingness to receive refugees through **resettlement and complementary pathways**.

European resettlement has increasingly become an essential component of the global resettlement programme. This includes the most recent call for at least 50,000 places in 2018-2019, as well as efforts to pilot private/community-based sponsorship programmes in EU Member States.

Resettlement needs, however, are at an all-time high, with opportunities declining. Europe and EU-led efforts are critical to address the shortage of resettlement options, including through its

commitment and active support to the 3-year strategy on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways, envisaged as part of the GCR.

Positive developments were also noted, with some countries opening new service centres in key countries where refugees live, in order to assist refugees' family members with their applications for **family reunification**. The desire to be reunited with relatives remains a significant driver of irregular movement to and within Europe and at the same time a key contributing factor for successful integration, which therefore warrants more focused attention to overcome the numerous legal and administrative barriers confronting refugees.

The positive use of **humanitarian visas** by some European countries (notably for Syrians) continued in 2018 including through programmes established jointly between faith-based organizations and some States.

New countries have also joined the group of resettlement countries, while others have increased significantly their resettlement quotas. Building on the initiatives of a number of European States that have resettled and that are implementing pathways of admission, UNHCR encourages States to enhance such efforts to realise increased opportunities for refugees to enter Europe through safe and legal means.

Despite these positive developments and demonstrations of solidarity, we are still faced with **significant challenges in Europe** and our continued joint efforts are needed.

Solidarity and support for refugees outside Europe, should not be at the expense of direct access to asylum in Europe and should not amount to shifting responsibilities. For Europe to continue playing its role in responding to the global refugees needs, **access to asylum in Europe must be preserved**.

UNHCR has been recording instances of "push-backs" at many borders in the region and is calling on States to stop apprehending and returning thousands of people to neighbouring countries without allowing them to seek asylum or assessing individually whether they have international protection or other humanitarian needs, thus exposing them to a range of risks including *refoulement*.

In order to maintain **well-functioning asylum systems with efficient and fair procedures** in Europe, people fleeing conflict, violence and persecution need to be quickly identified through simplified and accelerated procedures so that they can receive asylum and support. Equally, those who do not have international protection needs also have to be rapidly identified and channelled into return proceedings that respect their human rights.

UNHCR continues to be fully engaged with partners to support the reinforcement and development of asylum systems throughout the continent to ensure quality decisions in the context of mixed migratory movements that also take into account legitimate national security concerns.

The Quality Initiative in Eastern Europe that started in 2013 is a good example of such cooperation and its positive impact over time. UNHCR is also ready to continue supporting the Turkish authorities who have now taken full charge of the registration and refugee status determination process. In an effort to improve access to information for asylum-seekers and refugees, UNHCR launched its help.unhcr.org website in six additional countries in Europe and will continue to further roll out this information tool.

Little progress was made in the finalisation of the reform of the **Common European Asylum system** and until an agreement is found on this, we advocate for a better use of the existing frameworks with focus on protection sensitive solutions and solidarity, away from restrictive policies at EU's external borders.

**Reception conditions need further improvement** in a number of states and efforts especially need to be stepped up **to protect children** – in particular when unaccompanied – and to provide adequate support for survivors of **sexual and gender-based violence**.

In line with UNHCR's strategy of May 2018 (on addressing sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment), we have renewed efforts in all operations to **prevent and respond to sexual misconduct**. Let me reiterate here, the commitment of the organisation and of all of our operations in Europe to the **fight against sexual exploitation and abuse** of the people we serve, as well as sexual harassment in the workplace.

We have seen progress in the **Western Balkans** region with ongoing efforts to improve the asylum and reception system. There is a lot at stake in the region and onward movements continue to present a challenge and expose refugees and migrants to dangerous situations along the route. UNHCR will continue work on building asylum systems and lay the foundation for integration, in close coordination with all stakeholders, guided by the GCR and drawing on solidarity and comprehensive responses.

Despite efforts to develop and offer pragmatic solutions to the **situation in the Mediterranean**, we continue to observe *ad hoc*, boat by boat approaches to each new search and rescue situation. Together with IOM, UNHCR tabled a proposal last June on the margin of the European Council which laid out a concerted and predictable approach through the establishment of a regional mechanism that would allow for the swift disembarkation and processing of rescued persons - this based on a commitment to international solidarity and to intra-EU coordination.

Although agreement on such a concerted approach remains to be reached, I would like to salute the contribution of some States who demonstrated solidarity and contributed to saving lives and resolving deadlocked solutions, delivering on fundamental humanitarian principles. UNHCR remains ready to engage and support further discussions in this regard.

Some **situations remain unresolved with persisting and protracted internally displaced populations**. In a number of locations, the situation is volatile and tense and living conditions are very challenging for people living near the contact lines. Despite difficult working environments, UNHCR and partners continue to provide support to vulnerable IDP populations pending the conclusion of durable political solutions.

In terms of **statelessness**, there have been positive developments regarding accession to the Statelessness Conventions as well as amendments of nationality legislations in several countries in the region. In preparation for the High-Level Segment of the #IBelong Campaign in October 2019, a first regional conference was organised in Minsk and a number of joint mapping studies were released as a baseline set of data on statelessness. UNICEF and UNHCR also developed a joint advocacy brief that was recently released calling for enhanced action by States to end childhood statelessness.

Together with UN sister agencies, UNHCR is organising a side event under the "leave no one behind principle" with a focus on statelessness on the margins of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March.

Lastly, in this challenging context and at a time of electoral campaigning in many countries, notably within the European Union, allow me express the hope that political public debates and discussions, will reflect values of tolerance, humanity and respect when addressing refugee and migration issues.

I would like to thank you for all your support and commitment, and for your attention.

Thank you Mr/Madame Chair