

High Commissioner's Closing Remarks
71st Session of the UNHCR Executive Committee

9 October, 2020

Mr Chairman,
Distinguished delegates,
Colleagues and friends,

I always start my closing remarks at ExCom by thanking the outgoing Chair.

This year this expression of gratitude assumes a very particular significance and I am especially grateful to Ambassador Pecsteen not only - as I said on Monday - for taking up his role so early in his tenure as Permanent Representative, but also for skilfully handling this unusual and hybrid format, and for doing it from home!

Thank you very much Marc, and please convey also my gratitude to your predecessor Geert Muylle, and apologies to have to deliver these remarks from home myself where - as you know - I am confined.

I would also like to warmly congratulate Ambassador Maria Nazareth Farani Azevedo of Brazil, my dear friend Lele, on her election as the new Chairperson of the Executive Committee, as well as the First Vice Chairperson Ambassador Salim Baddoura of Lebanon, the Second Vice Chair, Ambassador Kadra Ahmed Hassan of Djibouti, and our new Rapporteur, Gregor Schotten of Germany. All of them represent countries hosting many refugees and with big stakes in the issues we have discussed this week. I am confident that you will navigate ExCom 2021 with as much skill and grace as the outgoing bureau to which I am grateful for its excellent work in very uncertain times. And I am sure you will join me in hoping that we will be able to return to an in-person – full in-person - format next year.

I would also like to thank those colleagues whose skills, flexibility and persistence allowed us to hold this meeting, despite the pandemic - a situation made even more complicated by my falling ill.

My thanks to the staff at the Palais: the security team, the conference services, the interpreters. I would like to especially thank all the I.T. staff not only here in the Palais and at UNHCR, but also of all those of Member States who facilitated remote participation which enriched our discussions in the past few days.

And very very special thanks to our Secretary, Ellen Hansen, and to her team, always undeterred by difficulties (and there were many!), always navigating these meetings with calm and reassuring professionalism.

Allow me also, Mr Chairman, to thank those delegations who have wished me and my colleagues a speedy recovery, I continue to do well as you can see, with mild symptoms. But more importantly those who joined me in mourning the tragic loss of UNHCR and many other humanitarian colleagues to the coronavirus. This is indeed an appropriate time to pay tribute to their lives and work.

Mr Chairman,

On the eve of our meeting, an episode of brutal violence – akin to those which I described in my opening statement – took place in Burkina Faso. A group of 46 displaced people were attacked by an armed group. The men were separated; 25 were executed and one left for dead.

And while we debated, every day, people around the world were killed; children displaced; basic human rights violated.

The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has continued, though we hope that current mediation efforts will prevail.

We heard how these crises affect the mental health of the displaced.

We discussed how the gains we have made in refugee education over the past years are also at risk from pandemic related poverty. That is why it was apt that Henrietta Fore was here to highlight our shared commitment to children and youth and remind us that we cannot rob children of their futures by neglecting their urgent and important needs today, especially education.

We heard that the economic consequences of the pandemic – which so many of you also referred to – continue to deepen. We heard at Tuesday's side event with the World Food Programme how food insecurity is spreading and how it negatively affects the displaced in ways that go well beyond nutrition.

I take this opportunity to congratulate the World Food Programme for receiving just a few minutes ago the Nobel Peace Prize, hoping that this will draw more attention and more resources to the issue of food security of the most vulnerable.

I thank those delegations who shared my deep concerns for the devastating effects of the crisis on women and girls. However, we must not simply lament their plight, but act with haste to lessen it, to protect them, and to ensure they can exercise all their rights.

Similarly, we must heed the urgent call of the Prime Minister of Fiji, amongst others, and take action to counter the climate emergency.

And although I speak to you from the perspective of the people of concern to my organization, these are much bigger issues. You must all have seen in the media recent statistics showing that the poor are getting poorer, and the rich richer. The pandemic is showing how profoundly damaging for all is our tolerance of outrageous inequalities in wealth and power, our inability to prevent and stop conflict, and our neglect of even the most basic measures to reduce the catastrophic effects of climate change.

Mr Chairman,

Despite the many challenges before us, I leave here buoyed by the support for refugees, IDPs, stateless people, and for UNHCR. Nearly every delegation referred encouragingly to the Global Compact on Refugees or the pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum. Many have either delivered or are in the midst of delivering on their pledges. I appeal to all to accelerate implementation because the stateless, the refugees the displaced, and their hosts, cannot wait.

The European Union Pact on Migration and Asylum was spoken of frequently and I encourage EU Member States to use this as an opportunity to agree on, and further the burden and responsibility sharing within and by the European Union. If successful, this will be of great global value and example.

We heard many examples of how countries have taken steps to enable access to asylum and refuge, while safeguarding - to the greatest extent possible - their nations from the spread of the coronavirus. These statements clearly demonstrate to those countries that still have restrictions on access to asylum – and particularly those countries with resources – that there is no excuse. Technology, as we also heard from a number of states, can help. I reiterate our availability to support states in finding solutions to protect people from persecution and from the virus.

There was agreement on the importance of the inclusion of refugees and displaced in health responses, including and especially when a vaccine becomes available. I agree with the many host countries that called for greater humanitarian resources. I must reiterate my plea that donors stay the course not only for the rest of 2020 but critically in 2021 and beyond. I echo the call of the United States of America, and appeal to other donors to do more and for new donor partners to join our efforts.

Yet burden and responsibility sharing is not only about humanitarian funding. We have seen development actors and international financial institutions step up in unprecedented ways with levels of financial support that dwarf humanitarian budgets. We heard - with much appreciation - from the World Bank Group of its COVID support programmes in 111 countries and its commitment to include refugees and host communities in the Bank's COVID response, amongst other large-scale inclusive programmes.

Burden and responsibility sharing also cannot be, as the Secretary-General said at the Forum, limited to some countries receiving refugees and others paying. I was therefore heartened by a number of countries' announcements – in line with their GRF pledges – of increases to resettlement and complementary pathways which provide a vital lifeline to refugees and are a clear demonstration of support to major host countries.

And yet this is not, nor can it be, a replacement to states' international legal obligations to allow claims of asylum on their territory. I reiterate UNHCR's and my personal firm opposition to the externalisation proposals of some politicians, which are not only contrary to the law, but offer no practical solutions to the problems that force people to flee, and run contrary to the call for greater responsibility sharing.

To this end, I also encourage states to heed the call of the Forum co-convenors and shift the emphasis from trying to manage displacement to instead investing in prevention and resolution of conflicts.

We also must focus on solutions for refugees and the displaced. Yesterday's meeting with the foreign ministers of Sudan and South Sudan, alongside the IGAD Executive Secretary and the EU Commissioner for International Partnerships, underscored that solutions can work, and that they are possible. I hope that the revitalised Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees will also help bring that situation into more focus.

Many states underlined that the refugees' preferred solution is to return home and I agree. This is everybody's preferred solution. Clearly, the decision to return must be voluntary, and returns must be exercised safely and in dignity, with a situation at home that enables this to be durable. If these elements are not in place, repatriation simply will fail.

I appreciate States, especially in Africa, that highlighted the importance of pursuing voluntary repatriation within the context and framework of a UNHCR supported tripartite agreement. This is a very good option - please consider UNHCR not as a blind guardian of absolute principles bent on blocking pursuit of repatriation and other solutions, but as a partner keen to find solutions with States concerned, and to help pursue them in the most just, sustainable and effective manner.

And in addition to this, I appeal to all to depoliticise refugees and forced displacement. Refugees are, by their very nature, already the victim of political failure and thus must not be used, manipulated, or leveraged further to settle scores between states.

The call for solutions was also heard loud and clear throughout these last few days as regards the plight of internally displaced people and the stateless. In coordination with our partners, we will continue leading the protection response for IDPs and engaging with the High Level Panel to unlock solutions, just as we will double our efforts to support States in implementing the significant number of pledges made to end statelessness in line with the objectives of the iBelong Campaign. I am grateful for the words of support and commitment expressed in this regard.

Mr Chairman,

UNHCR's response to the coronavirus pandemic around the world demonstrates that our organization might have turned 70 but it remains nimble, flexible, and innovative in responding to even the gravest of crises. Our management reforms, planning and budgeting, and oversight functions continue to be modernised as you called for, and ensure the smooth functioning of our organisation.

I appreciate those who recognized our upcoming milestone anniversary and wish to inform you that we will celebrate the General Assembly's adoption of the Statute on 14 December, and will commemorate this next year with a special edition of the "State of the World's Refugees".

Ahead of that, many of you will also participate in the annual High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges. In the spirit of the Compact, and that of greater refugee engagement, the Deputy High Commissioner and I will open the Dialogue on 21st October, alongside a number of refugees around the world who have played an important role in the coronavirus response in their host countries. The Dialogue's four virtual sessions will culminate in a closing session on 9 December.

Mr Chairman,

On our opening day, Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney acknowledged the grave impact the coronavirus has had on all of our countries and on the global economy. But, he said, "this cannot be used as an excuse not [to] be generous."

I could not agree more and appreciate the countless demonstrations of solidarity we have seen over the course of these past months between refugees and their hosts; from many governments; and from the public at large.

It is only through this sense of togetherness that we will get through this crisis and emerge - hopefully more humble - but certainly stronger.

Thank you.