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Summary record of the 732nd meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Wednesday, 7 October 2020, at 9 a.m.

Chair: Mr. Pecsteen de Buytsverve(Belgium)

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The meeting was called to order at 9.20 a.m.

General debate (*continued*)

1. **Mr. Garcia** (Philippines) said that the Government of the Philippines had strived to ensure that the appropriate humanitarian assistance and protection continued to be extended to refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons and other persons of concern during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The Refugees and Stateless Persons Protection Unit of the Department of Justice was providing services and documentation to persons of concern on a remote basis and was attempting to ensure that their needs were considered in national and local-level responses to the pandemic.

2. Although the Government's response to the pandemic had included some restrictions on the freedom of movement, it had taken steps to ensure that humanitarian actors continued to have unimpeded access to communities in need. The Government was continuing to streamline the provision of services under the Inter-Agency Agreement on the Protection of Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Stateless Persons and the National Action Plan to End Statelessness. It had also taken steps to include persons of concern in national development plans and to institutionalize protection mechanisms in relevant government agencies. Efforts had been made to train staff responsible for delivering services to persons of concern, including those working in the areas of immigration, social welfare, education and employment.

3. The Government had maintained its solid partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), especially on the ground where it mattered most. In cooperation with UNHCR, the Government had facilitated the "Cities #WithRefugees" initiative, which highlighted the role played by cities in accommodating refugees, taken steps to promote birth registration among the Sama-Bajau community and ensured the country's participation in the Protection Surge Capacity Project.

4. **Mr. Valero** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela), speaking via video link, said that the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela had been exemplary in its willingness to receive refugees, who had entered the country in their thousands over the years. Since the establishment of the National Refugees Commission in 2001, over 9,000 applications for refugee status had been approved.

5. In the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the number of deaths from coronavirus disease (COVID-19) per 100,000 persons was among the lowest in the world. The country had carried out more tests for COVID-19 per million inhabitants than any other country in the region, despite the fact that its economy had been seriously undermined by the criminal coercive measures imposed on it by the United States Government. More than 120,000 people had returned to Venezuela in recent months, fleeing the stigmatization, xenophobia and lack of protection that they had faced in many countries in the region. In that regard, the Government was obligated to denounce the murder of three Venezuelan citizens by armed individuals in the municipality of Aguachica, Colombia, on 4 September 2020. According to figures issued by the Institute of Forensic Medicine of Colombia, more than 258 Venezuelan nationals had been killed in that country in 2018 while 601 had been killed in 2019 and 156 had been killed up to May 2020.

6. The Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela wished to draw attention to the hypocrisy of those members of the Executive Committee who expressed concern about the situation in the country while supporting imperialist sanctions that brought death and suffering to the Venezuelan people. In the midst of a global pandemic, the Governments of the region were refusing to establish a dialogue with the Venezuelan authorities about how best to manage the situation. That lack of cooperation increased the risk of the disease being spread by Venezuelan nationals who returned to the country by informal channels. In view of the scarcity of epidemiological protocols established in Brazil and Colombia, President Maduro had ordered the extension of the quarantine line along the borders with those countries in order to prevent the disease from spreading. The Government called on all countries hosting Venezuelan nationals to allow those nationals to return to their home country in a safe and regular manner if they wished to do so.

7. Many Venezuelan nationals had left their country following the imposition of criminal unilateral coercive measures by the United States Government. The bank accounts of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in the United States of America and Europe had been frozen, more than \$30 billion of its funds had been seized and its main oil refinery in the United States had been expropriated, all of which restricted the Venezuelan people's access to food, medicine and fuel. Since the implementation of those criminal measures, the country had lost 99 per cent of its foreign exchange earnings. In order to counteract the negative socioeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, President Maduro had taken a number of measures to protect workers' jobs and incomes, support small and medium-sized enterprises and provide food boxes to more than 7 million families.

8. **Mr. Alwasil** (Saudi Arabia) said that Saudi Arabia was one of the largest donors to UNHCR in the world. As the current chair of the Group of 20, Saudi Arabia was leading a global alliance tasked with tackling the COVID-19 pandemic and improving capacities for dealing with it and any future pandemics that might emerge.

9. At the start of the current pandemic, Saudi Arabia had announced that it would donate \$5 million to international campaigns to stem the spread of the disease and address its humanitarian and economic consequences. Through the King Salman Foundation, it had provided various forms of assistance to a number of countries affected by the crisis. The Government had cooperated with UNHCR and the Afghan Government to facilitate the return of Afghan refugees to their home country. In September 2020, UNHCR and the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre had signed an agreement with a budget of \$20 million to support internally displaced persons in Yemen, bringing the total contribution made by Saudi Arabia to UNHCR to \$31 million in 2020 and \$304 million over the past 10 years. Saudi Arabia had provided over \$296 million to support Syrian refugees living in Greece, Lebanon and Turkey. Free health care was provided to Rohingya refugees in Saudi Arabia and over \$359 million had been donated in support of the Palestinian people.

10. **Mr. Wannamethee** (Thailand) said that, during the first Global Refugee Forum, held in December 2019, the Thai Government had taken a number of pledges to address the situation of the 80,000 or so displaced persons from Myanmar who were currently residing in Thailand. The Government had established a bilateral mechanism with the Government of Myanmar through which over 1,000 persons had been safely and voluntarily returned to their home country. Earlier in 2020, with the support of UNHCR, representatives from agencies based in Myanmar had visited three temporary shelters in Tak Province with a view to encouraging displaced persons to join the repatriation programme. Vocational training had been provided to displaced persons in order to enhance their ability to earn a living on their return to Myanmar.

11. In order to address the immediate health concerns of refugees, the relevant agencies had coordinated efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in temporary shelters. Provincial public health agencies had played a key role in carrying out regular screening, raising awareness of prevention methods and establishing separate quarantine quarters and standard operating procedures. To date, there had been no reported cases of COVID-19 within the shelters.

12. On 22 June 2020, regulations governing a national screening mechanism for Thailand had entered into force. The regulations addressed the needs of vulnerable persons in urban areas and established that no protected person could be repatriated without his or her consent. The regulations also stipulated that protected persons must be provided with the necessary social services, including education and health care.

13. In January 2019, the Government had signed a memorandum of understanding with a number of non-governmental organizations working in support of refugees and migrants on alternatives to detention for migrant children with a view to removing children and their mothers from detention centres. In 2019, the Immigration Bureau had completed the construction of its mother and child admission centres, where mothers and their children could stay until they were transferred to the dedicated shelters run by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security.

14. One of the Government's priorities was to register all stateless persons in order to facilitate their access to health services, employment and nationality, where applicable. On 7

December 2016, a cabinet resolution on nationalization pathways for stateless persons born in Thailand had been adopted, leading to an increase in the number of stateless persons qualified to apply for Thai nationality. As of August 2020, 39,162 stateless persons had been granted Thai nationality.

15. In order to contribute to the search for durable solutions for displaced persons from Rakhine State, the Government was supporting the implementation of three priority projects involving the provision of biometric machines at reception and transit centres, the supply of agricultural equipment and the renovation of fish and shrimp ponds in Rakhine State.

16. **Ms. Tarishi** (United Republic of Tanzania) said that the United Republic of Tanzania was currently home to 283,412 refugees and asylum seekers, of which 205,169 were from Burundi, 77,807 were from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and 436 were from other countries. Burundian refugees received less financial support than any other group of refugees in the world and, as a result, they received very poor social services.

17. Since September 2017, the Government had helped more than 97,632 Burundian refugees to return to their home country. A further 4,942 refugees had voluntarily requested assistance to return home and were on a waiting list. The Governments of Tanzania and Burundi, together with UNHCR, had continued to hold tripartite meetings to discuss ways of expediting the voluntary repatriation of Burundian nationals. The Government called on the international community to provide more support to the communities in Burundi that would be receiving refugees in order to ensure that their return was sustainable.

18. The political situation in Burundi was becoming more stable with each passing day. Against that backdrop, the United Republic of Tanzania called on the international community to support the withdrawal of refugee status from Burundian refugees, the majority of whom did not require international protection but improved social services and economic opportunities in their country.

19. More than 50,000 Burundian refugees who had fled to the United Republic of Tanzania in 1972 were now settled in villages in Kigoma and elsewhere. As that group had been forgotten by the international community, and was severely deprived of basic social services, the Government would be grateful if UNHCR and the international community would provide them with assistance.

20. **Ms. Eilon Shahar** (Israel) said that the COVID-19 pandemic had highlighted the positive role that could be played by new technologies. They could, for example, bring people together while, at the same time, enabling them to maintain a safe distance. Israel, as a supporter of UNHCR and a leader in the development of new technologies, was prepared to share the fruits of its spirit of innovation.

21. Israel wished to be kept informed of disability-inclusion programmes in the field and efforts to ensure that disability inclusion informed programme design more generally. It was also important to develop tools to combat sexual and gender-based violence. There should be zero tolerance for sexual harassment, exploitation or abuse. In that connection, she wondered why, despite an increase in the number of complaints, the agency was apparently conducting fewer formal investigations into allegations of sexual abuse than it had in the past. She also wondered what role the Inspector General's Office had played in the decision by several victims of sexual misconduct not to pursue their cases against agency personnel and what steps UNHCR was taking to protect those victims.

22. Israel was compelled to set the record straight: the Syrian representative's assertions to the contrary notwithstanding, people were fleeing Syria because the Assad regime was gassing and otherwise killing its own people.

23. **Mr. Aspelund** (Iceland) said that although the COVID-19 pandemic had affected everyone, refugees, unlike most other people, generally did not have a home or nearby family to rely on and could not always count on State support. Social distancing was hard for them, and they did not always have access to clean water or washing facilities. They were the first to suffer when services were cut. Countries hosting refugees had nonetheless done admirable work during the pandemic.

24. Iceland had developed two sets of COVID-19 measures. One had involved earmarking funds for the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19, the United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund and other relevant initiatives. Iceland was pleased also to be able to provide UNHCR with a stream of flexible and predictable funding. It had recently entered into a multi-year agreement to increase its core contribution to the agency.

25. The country continued to emphasize focusing closely on women and girls, who were disproportionately affected by forced displacement. Actions to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex refugees were likewise important.

26. Iceland also shouldered its responsibilities at home. In 2021, for example, the number of refugees who settled in the country through its resettlement programme would be a third larger than it had been in 2019, a considerable increase for a country with such a small population. Domestic procedures for accession to the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness had recently been completed, and Iceland intended to become a party to the Convention later in 2020.

27. **Mr. Da Conceição** (Mozambique) said that the Government of Mozambique had endorsed efforts to step up the pace of progress within the framework of the global compact on refugees. It supported the integration of refugees into local communities and pledged to ensure that refugees living in Mozambique had access to education, health care, the labour market and sports activities.

28. Mozambique shared the African Group's dismay at the 2019 budget shortfalls and was concerned about the impact of those shortfalls on the people of concern to UNHCR, a large percentage of whom lived in Africa. Donor countries should thus provide unearmarked funding to enable UNHCR to allocate resources to the operations in dire need of them. Mozambique was also determined to honour the pledges it had made at the Global Refugee Forum in late 2019.

29. Terrorist groups operating in Cabo Delgado, the country's northernmost province, were causing thousands to flee their villages. The measures that were being taken by the country's partners, UNHCR in particular, to come to the assistance of those displaced villagers were saving lives.

30. **Mr. Bachtobji** (Tunisia) said that Tunisia wished to stress the importance on the principle of burden-sharing, which lessened the burden placed on any given country and helped ensure that migrants were treated with dignity. Foreign nationals in Tunisia had never been excluded from the measures taken by the authorities to stop the spread of COVID-19. The Government welcomed in that respect the support that had been provided by UNHCR to government agencies headquartered in Tunis and the Government's civil society partners.

31. As a result of the pandemic, a ministerial commission had been created to monitor the situation of particularly vulnerable refugees, and requirements on the maximum length of stay in the country had been suspended. In addition, a digital platform had been set up to facilitate requests for assistance, centres for the reception of migrants had been disinfected and protective equipment had been distributed. Refugees and asylum seekers were also given access to the labour market and social security protections.

32. **Ms. Stadler Repnik** (Slovenia) said that, in recent years, Slovenia had provided humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants through a number of agencies, including UNHCR. In 2020, it had allocated funds for the assistance of displaced persons from Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Palestine. It had also launched a Lebanon-based project. Another humanitarian project had been set up in Uganda. Both projects were led by non-governmental organizations. It had contributed to support for Venezuelan refugees in a Brazil beset by the pandemic and provided assistance in kind to migrants on the Western Balkan route and to the migrants at the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, which had been devastated by fire. Four minors currently in Greece would shortly be resettled in Slovenia. Refugee children had the right to enrol in school in Slovenia.

33. Steps had been taken to protect refugees and asylum seekers from COVID-19. Only one case of infection had been identified.

34. **Mr. Braithwaite** (United Kingdom) said that the United Kingdom was at the forefront of global efforts to respond to refugee crises and forced displacement. Since 2012, for example, it had provided more than £3.3 billion in response to the Syrian conflict. It continued to make generous contributions to UNHCR. The United Kingdom remained committed to doing its part within the framework of the global compact on refugees.

35. UNHCR was to be commended for its commitment to organizational reform. The swift action taken by the agency's country or regional offices in response to the pandemic attested to the benefits of efforts to decentralize. The agency was encouraged to strengthen ties with other institutions and development actors, including those in the private sector.

36. The closure of avenues to asylum as a result of measures taken to stop the spread of COVID-19 was troubling. In that context, UNHCR had a critical role to play in providing advice on meeting protection obligations. There had never been a larger population of internally displaced persons than in late 2019. It was therefore to be hoped that improvements to the means of meeting that population's needs were in store.

37. **Mr. Baddoura** (Lebanon), calling on the international community to provide UNHCR with more funds not earmarked for specific purposes, said that the refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the economic turmoil his country had been going through for the past year, was putting the Lebanese health system and the country as a whole to the test. The assistance that had been provided by UNHCR and others was therefore welcome. The country's future was at stake. The durable solution to the problem of the Syrian refugees who had been in Lebanon for nine years lay in their safe return to Syria.

38. **Mr. Grandi** (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), speaking via video link, said that the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela did indeed have a long tradition of welcoming those seeking safe haven. The situation had changed, however, and other countries, in admirable shows of generosity of their own, had begun welcoming fleeing Venezuelans. Efforts to help those refugees return to their country would require cooperation all around, including from the Venezuelan authorities.

39. He wished to thank the Government of Saudi Arabia for the support and funding that it had provided with regard to the situation in Yemen. He appreciated the efforts of the Tunisian Government to address the complex issue of mixed migration flows. He thanked Israel for its contributions in the area of new technologies. The representative of Israel was right to highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic had pressed home the need for technological innovation. He welcomed the Israeli representative's questions with regard to the agency's procedures for handling complaints of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment; however, in the interest of time, perhaps it would be more appropriate to address that issue at the following day's meeting, which would be dedicated to matters of management and oversight, when the Inspector General would be present. He wholeheartedly supported the Lebanese delegation's appeal for increased international support for Lebanon, which was facing multiple crises. As international support packages were rolled out, due consideration should be paid to the role of Lebanon as a long-standing major host country.

40. He congratulated the Philippines on the measures it had taken to ensure that refugees were treated with respect despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, he wished to thank Thailand, whose representative had raised a number of important points with regard to the improvements to his country's internal procedures for assisting refugees and the progress made towards the eradication of statelessness. More generally, he thanked all States in the Asian region that had contributed to the international response to the situation in Rakhine State in Myanmar.

41. He seconded the appeal made by the representative of the United Republic of Tanzania for additional funding to support host countries in the region and to facilitate voluntary repatriation. With regard to the withdrawal of refugee status from Burundian refugees, he said that such a move would be premature in view of the current political and security situation in Burundi. He shared the concern expressed by the representative of Mozambique with regard to the situation in Cabo Delgado. UNHCR was ready to work with the Government of Mozambique to find a swift solution to the crisis.

42. He was grateful to the representative of Slovenia for highlighting the situation of refugee children, and congratulated Iceland on its having joined the Executive Committee. He very much appreciated the attention that the Icelandic Government paid to assisting refugees from especially vulnerable groups, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender refugees. He was also grateful to the United Kingdom for its continued funding contributions. The United Kingdom representative's message on reform had been well received. Contributions from the private sector had increased in 2020, and UNHCR was committed to seeking out new opportunities for partnership with private enterprises.

43. **Ms. Ahmed Hassan** (Djibouti), speaking via video link, said that in recent years the Government had been taking measures and gradually adopting new legislation to ensure that refugees had access to health and banking services and employment opportunities. The Government had adopted a national refugee law in January 2018 to promote the socioeconomic inclusion of refugees and to foster conditions conducive to their development, and further legislation had recently been adopted to strengthen the legal and regulatory framework for the care and protection of refugees and the communities that hosted them. The refugee population had been successfully integrated into the basic education system. As of 2020, refugees also had access to secondary and higher education and to scholarships on equal footing with Djiboutian students. The Government paid specific attention to the situation of refugee women and girls and provided them with timely protection and assistance, including in cases of gender-based violence.

44. As a host country, Djibouti continued to fulfil its pledges and international obligations. However, to sustain its actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, it would require increased international financial support, particularly during the post-pandemic economic recovery planning phase. The pandemic had placed an additional burden on host countries, where already meagre resources were strained, highlighting more than ever the urgent need to implement the global compact and honour the commitments made at the Global Refugee Forum. More pledges were needed and the funds already pledged must be made available in a timely and predictable manner. In that context, at the regional level, it was important to put the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Support Platform launched at the Global Refugee Forum into operation more quickly and to mobilize the necessary political, technical and financial support in refugee-hosting areas in the IGAD region.

45. **Mr. Ahmad** (Chad) said that, as at 31 August 2020, Chad had registered approximately 880,439 displaced persons, including 479,550 refugees, as well as 9,898 asylum seekers and 99,804 Chadian refugees returning from the Central African Republic and Nigeria. To respond to the humanitarian crisis in the country, which had been exacerbated by recent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, attacks by Boko Haram in Lac Province and an influx of Sudanese refugees into eastern Chad, the Government had taken practical steps. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the school term had not been pushed back, and the Government had taken measures to eliminate the terrorist threat throughout the country.

46. While his Government welcomed the reforms introduced by the High Commissioner, UNHCR and its financial partners, including the World Bank, should step up the level of support that they provided to mitigate the impact of the prolonged presence of refugees in host countries. Multifaceted support was needed to strengthen the refugee protection and assistance framework and to reinforce development and peacebuilding activities in host countries.

47. **Mr. Konaté** (Mali) said that his Government was deeply concerned about the ever-increasing number of displaced persons in Mali and elsewhere in the Sahel region. Despite the conclusion of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali emanating from the Algiers process, the holding of an inclusive dialogue in Bamako in December 2019 and the concerted efforts of the international community, the northern regions of Mali and Ségou and Mopti in central Mali continued to be affected by armed conflict, giving rise to the forced displacement of populations. As of late July 2020, there were 141,676 Malian refugees in Burkina Faso, the Niger and Mauritania. The number of internally displaced persons had risen to 287,496, a 60 per cent increase on 2019, and Mali currently hosted more than 47,000 refugees and asylum seekers.

48. In the pursuit of durable solutions, Mali continued to work towards the voluntary repatriation of Malian refugees and had participated in various initiatives, including a high-level meeting on the repatriation of Malian refugees in dignity and security held in Niamey on 23 February 2018 and a regional dialogue on forced displacement in the Sahel held in Bamako on 11 and 12 September 2019. A ministerial meeting on humanitarian challenges in the Sahel was scheduled to take place on 20 October 2020.

49. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government had implemented a number of the measures set out in its national plan to combat statelessness, adopted in 2017, including the processing of 500 naturalization applications from refugees from the subregion, the preparation of a draft decree on nationality that addressed the issue of statelessness and the ongoing transposition of the provisions of the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa into domestic law. Those efforts were a clear indication of the political will of the Malian authorities to eradicate statelessness by 2024.

50. **Mr. Mailu** (Kenya) said that his Government commended UNHCR for its efforts to follow up on the commitments made at the Global Refugee Forum and to support the Governments of host countries in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Kenya, a major refugee-hosting country, faced a number of challenges in that regard. Resettlement to third countries and voluntary repatriations had been significantly hampered as a result of border closures and restrictions on movement. Refugees living in urban areas in Kenya had lost their livelihoods as a result of the measures put in place to contain the spread of the virus. While the Government welcomed the efforts of UNHCR to increase its cashed-based interventions, it had noticed an increase in the number of refugees returning to live in camps. Such movement was likely to increase congestion in the camps, making it even more difficult to protect refugees' health and enforce sanitary measures. There had also been an increase in refugees who were moving from the countries in which they had initially been granted protection to seek safe haven in Kenya.

51. The disproportionate burden borne by host countries was made heavier still by the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. His Government therefore called on the international community, in the spirit of burden- and responsibility-sharing, to redouble its efforts to respond to the COVID-19 appeal made by UNHCR and to make more unearmarked funding available to the agency to ease the pressure on host countries such as Kenya. The Kenyan Government also wished to encourage development actors to continue to grant funding to host countries, as such funding would benefit not only refugees but also the host communities by strengthening the humanitarian-development nexus.

52. **Mr. Ismail** (Sudan) said that the Sudan was facing exceptional circumstances as a result of natural disasters. Floods in the Nile River basin had caused massive loss of life and the destruction of tens of thousands of homes. His Government wished to thank UNHCR for the support that it had provided in that regard. The Government was currently implementing policies to tackle economic issues and bring about the conditions necessary for the voluntary repatriation of refugees. With the support of UNHCR, it hoped to facilitate the return of 20,000 refugees in the following year. To do so, it required development support and additional funding.

53. Solidarity was of the utmost importance in addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In that spirit, the Government had been working to lift all impediments to access to humanitarian assistance and had established a national plan to regularize the situation of refugees and displaced persons in the Sudan.

54. The Sudan hosted more than 1.5 million refugees, many of whom lived outside of established camps. The recent floods had made it difficult to bring assistance to such persons. In spite of some improvements in the national situation, the Sudan continued to face myriad challenges and required the support of the international community, especially in the areas of economic support and debt relief. In that connection, his Government hoped that the Sudan would be removed from the United States list of State sponsors of terrorism.

55. **Mr. Baiou** (Libya) said that, as a transit country for refugees trying to reach Europe, Libya faced many challenges, particularly in the context of the ongoing armed conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic. It was focusing on facilitating voluntary repatriation and transfers

to third countries, particularly for refugees from vulnerable groups. Libya needed to be supported through technical cooperation, capacity-building and investment, among other things. It would welcome the development of UNHCR databases that would help to combat the spread of COVID-19. Lastly, although refugees were the cornerstone of its mandate, UNHCR should step up its efforts to assist internally displaced persons and to enable them to return to their homes.

56. **Mr. Adjoumani** (Côte d'Ivoire) said that, despite the progress made by UNHCR in its various areas of work, there were real constraints hindering the effective implementation of its humanitarian programmes. The Executive Committee should support the efforts of the High Commissioner to create synergies in order to address the growing complexity of migration flows.

57. His delegation remained convinced that only durable solutions such as voluntary repatriation could put an end to the suffering of refugees. It welcomed the idea of adopting new approaches in the face of persistent armed conflicts and other challenges; however, it remained concerned by the chronic shortage of financing for humanitarian programmes and the increase in the costs being borne by host countries.

58. In order to strengthen the legal protection of refugees living in Ivorian territory, his Government had taken several measures, including the distribution of refugee identity cards and the drafting of a local integration strategy, the implementation of which would require support from the international community. Côte d'Ivoire was also counting on the international community and UNHCR to assist with the return of all Ivorian refugees, in dignity and security, in accordance with the road map adopted in Abidjan in November 2018. The successful implementation of the road map should lead to the invocation of the cessation clause for Ivorian refugees.

59. His Government had taken various measures to address the problem of statelessness, including the routine issuance of certificates of Ivorian nationality to children of unknown parentage born in Côte d'Ivoire; the adoption of the National Action Plan for the Eradication of Statelessness in Côte d'Ivoire on 8 January 2020; and the launch of an ongoing operation that had enabled 192,717 nationals at risk of statelessness to regularize their situation.

60. **Mr. Kasoulides** (Cyprus) said that, although the pandemic had delayed the implementation of the pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum, Cyprus remained steadfast in its commitment to supporting refugees. The Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees were more relevant today than ever before; promoting their ratification and full implementation, without any reservations, should remain a priority.

61. Over the previous four years, Cyprus had received a disproportionate influx of migrants, which had had a tremendous impact on the labour market and housing needs. Over 70 per cent of the asylum seekers in Cyprus had arrived from Turkey, including through the occupied areas. Cyprus would like to stress the need for cooperation between neighbouring countries and the full implementation of existing agreements such as the European Union-Turkey statement of March 2016.

62. Despite the pandemic, Cyprus had taken decisive steps to reform its asylum system and to maintain a humanitarian approach, in line with its obligations under international law. It welcomed the new pact on migration and asylum proposed by the European Commission, which would provide for greater solidarity and help frontier States members of the European Union to carry out their responsibilities.

63. **Mr. Okaniwa** (Japan) said that the global compact on refugees had demonstrated its relevance as the world responded to the pandemic. Host countries had generously included refugees in their national response plans and donor countries had promptly provided financial support. In handling the crisis, it was important to prioritize the provision of life-saving support and to take into account the needs of refugees when vaccines became available; it was also necessary to protect the livelihoods of refugees and to address the needs of host countries that were facing a dire economic situation.

64. Despite the pandemic, Japan had continued to provide emergency assistance to humanitarian operations in a number of countries, including the Syrian Arab Republic and

Lebanon. It was also committed to finding solutions to the Afghan refugee situation. It believed that the humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach was an effective way to deal with protracted refugee situations and welcomed the recent efforts by UNHCR to strengthen its partnerships with institutions such as the World Bank.

65. Japan also welcomed the steady progress of the UNHCR regionalization and decentralization process and requested the agency to share the evaluation of that process. It welcomed the integration of risk management into the results-based management approach and appreciated the efforts made by UNHCR to increase the diversity of its workforce.

66. **Ms. Werdaningtyas** (Indonesia) said that, although the pandemic was an unprecedented challenge, it was also an opportunity for States to display their solidarity. With 85 per cent of the world's refugees hosted by developing countries, the principle of responsibility-sharing had never been more relevant. The Global Refugee Forum had marked a milestone in terms of commitment to addressing the issue of refugees but its success would depend on States' cooperation and their fulfilment of the pledges made.

67. Despite not being a party to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, Indonesia had recently gone beyond its obligations by rescuing a boat carrying almost 400 Rohingya refugees. It was deeply concerned by the fact that some Rohingya refugees were also victims of trafficking. In that regard, it was unfortunate to note that, in a recent publication, UNHCR had stated that the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime had failed to save the lives of refugees and had resulted in inaction. Indonesia believed, on the contrary, that the Bali Process provided a framework within which to address the root causes of irregular migration. UNHCR should ensure that it always lived up to its mandate to prevent refugees from taking a dangerous journey and becoming victims of trafficking.

68. **Ms. Mendis** (Sri Lanka), speaking via video link, said that the pandemic had further exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities of displaced persons. The United Nations system had a pivotal role to play in addressing the disproportionate impact of the virus in order to make sure that no one was left behind.

69. Sri Lanka was one of the few countries to have successfully contained the spread of COVID-19 through proactive measures and a multisectoral approach. The COVID-19 fatality rate in Sri Lanka stood at 0.4 per cent, which was significantly lower than the global fatality rate. Asylum seekers and refugees hosted by Sri Lanka had access to the country's free universal health-care system. In its efforts to contain the pandemic, the Government had adopted an inclusive and non-discriminatory approach, aimed at safeguarding the health of both nationals and foreign nationals. In addition, despite the disruption caused by the pandemic, Sri Lanka had continued to assist UNHCR with the resettlement of refugees.

70. Thanks to the efforts of UNHCR and the support of the countries and stakeholders who had responded to the UNHCR emergency appeal, there had been a relatively low number of COVID-19 infections within refugee communities around the world. Sri Lanka wished to emphasize the need for dialogue and cooperation among the international community in order to sustain the fight against the pandemic. It stood ready to share its good practices with fellow nations and to work in solidarity with them.

71. **Mr. Grandi** (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), speaking via video link, said that he agreed with the representative of the Sudan that the peace agreement signed in Juba the previous week and the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan offered a wonderful opportunity to find solutions to the huge displacement that affected both the Sudan and South Sudan. Responding to the representative of Djibouti, he said he was glad that UNHCR had been able to support the extraordinary inclusion measures taken by such a small country in order to give more opportunities to its refugee population.

72. UNHCR would continue helping Chad to mobilize resources, for example through the World Bank. With regard to the situation in Mali, he wished to reiterate the importance of the upcoming humanitarian conference on the Sahel and to confirm that UNHCR would work with the new Government of Mali in a constructive way in order to find solutions.

73. He was pleased to note the efforts of Kenya, as host of one of the largest refugee populations in the world, to include refugees in its COVID-19 responses. Following the request by the Foreign Minister, he had promised to help increase testing capacity in Kakuma camp, though there had been delays due to global problems with the sourcing and supply of testing equipment. Given the large South Sudanese population in the camp, UNHCR would be involving Kenya in finding solutions for the refugees in the next few months.

74. The repatriation of Ivorian refugees should be able to resume shortly, thus enabling the start of discussions on a cessation clause, provided that all conditions were met. He welcomed the determination of Côte d'Ivoire in that regard and its progress on regularizing the status of stateless persons.

75. In a situation of constant insecurity, UNHCR efforts in Libya had focused chiefly on identifying people of concern and on trying to evacuate the most vulnerable through regular channels, with the help of countries, including the Niger and Rwanda. With the recent resumption of flights following a pandemic-induced hiatus, UNHCR would continue to work on evacuations. In the case of persons who could not be evacuated immediately or at all, it would continue to work with the Libyan authorities to ensure that it had access to persons in need of protection being held in detention centres and to provide assistance for internally displaced persons.

76. Cyprus was indeed a front-line country, a fact that was often overlooked in favour of Greece, Italy and even Malta but should not be ignored, as crossings into Cyprus were occurring, especially with the deteriorating situation in Lebanon, including for Syrian refugees there. Cyprus could count on continued support from UNHCR, including through a visit by the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, which he hoped could take place soon.

77. He was grateful to Indonesia for allowing a ship carrying Rohingya refugees to disembark in Aceh. UNHCR did value the Bali Process and was urging participating countries to establish a more predictable mechanism to improve sea rescues and disembarkation arrangements in the spirit of solidarity. He welcomed the Sri Lankan policy to include refugees in the country's COVID-19 response and the fact that the situation of internal displacement in that country had improved such that the focus could shift to the refugees it was hosting. Lastly, he fully agreed with Japan that COVID-19 might have accelerated the implementation of the global compact on refugees and helped to forge partnerships that were now proving vital to the pandemic response. He appreciated the point about the need to give displaced persons and refugees priority when a vaccine was found. He was very grateful to Japan for its early contribution to the UNHCR COVID-19 appeal and for its constant encouragement to advance on the nexus between humanitarian and development assistance.

78. **Mr. Tabu** (Burundi) said that the repatriation of Burundian refugees from the United Republic of Tanzania had continued during the general elections of May 2020, a testament to the peace and stability prevailing in the country. Burundi remained home to 85,900 refugees and asylum seekers, 99 per cent of whom were from North and South Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Since the 1970s, several waves of Congolese refugees had applied for asylum in Burundi following successive crises. The most recent peak of arrivals had occurred between July and October 2019, with an average of 1,200 new arrivals per month until the borders had been closed under COVID-19 prevention measures. A community programme, funded by the World Bank, would be rolled out to support refugees and host communities, and the Government would continue to improve its national plan in order to end statelessness. There were also 140,000 internally displaced persons in Burundi as a result of natural disasters.

79. Owing to marked improvements in the overall situation, massive numbers of Burundians abroad were choosing to return. Since voluntary repatriation from the United Republic of Tanzania had begun in 2017, more than 100,000 Burundians had returned, including over 21,000 in 2020. Furthermore, following the revival of the tripartite agreements with the United Republic of Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda, 2,000 Burundian refugees had been repatriated and a further 6,000 had registered and were

awaiting return. He called on the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda to speed up procedures to allow Burundian refugees to return home as soon as possible.

80. However, Burundi was facing major challenges in meeting its obligations with respect to repatriation, the first being the pandemic. Burundi was in great need of support to run the large-scale testing campaign initiated by the President in July 2020, improve health-care infrastructure and ensure the supply of medicine and equipment needed to treat COVID-19 patients. The second challenge remained the long-term socioeconomic reintegration of returnees. He called on partners and UNHCR to increase their support for the voluntary repatriation process by helping returnees to purchase seed and assisting them until the first harvest and by building villages with the necessary social infrastructure on public land the Government was prepared to provide.

81. **Ms. Darlow** (New Zealand) said that New Zealand welcomed the commitment of UNHCR to inclusive humanitarian action, in particular gender and disability inclusion. It remained committed to its long-standing refugee quota programme, which had recently been increased to 1,500 refugees a year and involved partnerships with service providers and communities across the country to support successful resettlement, recognizing the importance of the voice of refugees in shaping their own solutions and responses. New Zealand was working with international partners to support the resumption of refugee resettlement as soon as conditions permitted, including by ensuring that international travel routes were available for safe refugee movements and that appropriate health measures and controls were in place.

82. New Zealand was extending its community refugee sponsorship programmes. It reiterated its commitment to fully implement the pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum, including to improve education opportunities for young refugees and employment opportunities for adult refugees, to assist new and emerging resettlement countries in the Asia-Pacific region and to advocate for continued support from international finance institutions for countries hosting large numbers of refugees.

83. **Ms. Fonseca Ramos** (Guinea-Bissau) said that Guinea-Bissau had adopted a set of indicators on migration and a national action plan on the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, standard operating procedures for the protection and reintegration of migrants in Guinea-Bissau had been introduced to institutions and the naturalization process for all refugees who had entered the country more than 10 years previously had been completed. Despite the current state of emergency, the new Government had established a referral mechanism for the evacuation of migrants from Libya, and an interministerial committee would be set up to develop a national migration policy. International support provided to countries like Guinea-Bissau meant that no one would have to choose between life and homeland, as she had been compelled to do as a 16-year-old girl fleeing civil war only to return some two decades later and become a State Secretary. It was vital that donors approached migration from the point of departure, not solely the point of arrival.

84. **Mr. Sarafian** (Romania) said that, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Romania had remained committed to the protection and support of refugees. As member of “Team Europe”, Romania was also committed to the efforts to combat the pandemic, with special attention devoted to refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons and stateless persons.

85. On the national level, despite confinement measures, Romania had never completely closed its borders and the necessary measures had been put in place to allow asylum seekers and refugees to continue to receive international protection, while ensuring public health. The information campaigns on COVID-19 prevention measures conducted at refugee reception centres were considered to be good practice by UNHCR. Efforts to fulfil the pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum were ongoing, specifically with regard to increasing to 200 the number of refugees to be relocated to Romania in 2020–2021, from Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Romania had also continued to do its part in intra-European relocation by accepting the transfer of 34 asylum seekers from Malta and Italy in 2020 and by entering into agreements with Malta, Cyprus and Greece. The capacity of asylum centres nationwide, which currently stood at 1,600, was being expanded. In June 2020, the Government had

signed a new working agreement with the International Organization for Migration and UNHCR on the emergency transit centre for refugees in Timisoara, which would soon be moved to a new location to ensure an adequate, needs-based response.

86. **Mr. Rosinas** (Lithuania) said that, in the light of recent developments in Belarus, the Government of Lithuania had been granting authorizations to enter Lithuania on humanitarian grounds; 412 persons from Belarus had received such authorization so far. Despite the pandemic, Lithuania was well on the way to meeting the commitments made at the Global Refugee Forum, including the major reconstruction of the Refugee Reception Centre, which should be completed by the end of 2021, and had recently been able to resume its resettlement programmes. A number of municipalities had been involved in a pilot project aimed at developing a more comprehensive integration policy at the local level and creating a network of local actors involved in integration policy development. Legislation had recently been passed to facilitate access to the labour market for some categories of asylum seekers, and universities were collaborating on asylum-related education and research. Although there were very few stateless persons in Lithuania, almost all of whom had received a long-term residence permit, there had been active outreach to inform stateless persons about the procedures for acquiring citizenship and a bill to grant citizenship to children of stateless persons who resided legally in Lithuania had been submitted to the parliament in July 2020. In conclusion, Lithuania supported UNHCR reform activities and would act on the High Commissioner's call for more unearmarked contributions.

87. **Mr. Saffa** (Observer for Sierra Leone) said that the decision of States to act alone at the height of the pandemic had in many cases been the right one to protect the health and livelihoods of all populations.

88. Sierra Leone had a sizeable community of refugees and asylum seekers. After UNHCR had ceased its operations there, amendments to the country's refugee protection law had been put forward to empower various State institutions to better deliver humanitarian support to all persons of concern. The Government had recently amended the Citizenship Act to allow women to confer their nationality on their children, on an equal basis with men.

89. Sierra Leone welcomed the statement in the note on international protection that, while States had the sovereign right to regulate the entry of non-nationals, including to protect public health, international law required that such measures should not breach the non-refoulement obligation, and access to fair asylum procedures needed to be assured.

90. His Government welcomed the agency's appointment of a Special Adviser on Climate Action to underscore the growing importance of climate change to its work.

91. **Mr. Litim** (Algeria) said that emergency situations should not divert attention from protracted situations, the resolution of which required durable solutions, not just protection and assistance. His country saw voluntary return as the preferred solution and called for all obstacles to its free exercise to be lifted.

92. For 45 years, Algeria had been hosting refugees from the Non-Self-Governing Territory of Western Sahara in camps near Tindouf. A durable solution to that situation would entail the voluntary return of the Sahrawi refugees in connection with the comprehensive implementation of the Peace Plan for Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara, an indivisible package of interdependent measures for ending the conflict in Western Sahara, the root cause of the forced displacement. That plan called for a census of the Sahrawi refugees, not registration, which was used in other refugee contexts.

93. In the meantime, Algeria was providing protection and assistance and facilitating the implementation of humanitarian programmes in close collaboration with international partners. The efforts and collaboration had served to protect the refugees from the spread of COVID-19 in 2020. The operations, however, suffered from chronic underfunding, with only 44 per cent funded that year, despite the significant increase in refugee numbers over the preceding years.

94. Algeria urgently called on UNHCR to take official note of the conclusions of the March 2018 study "Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf, Algeria: total in-camp population", which set the population at 173,600, and to release the vulnerability assessment that was to supplement the study in December 2018.

95. **Ms. Al Salman** (Observer for Iraq) said that terrorist acts were increasing, leading to the displacement of millions of people. Government plans to monitor the waves of displacement had allowed it to contain the crisis, with the number of internally displaced Iraqis having decreased from 6 million to 800,000. Her Government hoped that international organizations would help rebuild infrastructure and remove mines and explosives in the areas that had been liberated from Daesh.

96. Although Iraq was not a party to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or the Protocol thereto, it sheltered hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring countries. Despite the economic difficulties facing her country given the drop in global oil prices, the Government had taken steps to ensure refugees' freedom of movement and their enjoyment of the right to education and the right to health. It had issued identity cards to refugees and was disbursing benefits to the most vulnerable refugees: children, women and persons with disabilities. Her country called for continued international support to local authorities and communities and for States to share their experiences in managing displacement.

97. **Mr. Alam** (India) said that his Government appreciated the efforts by UNHCR to deepen its partnerships with global financial institutions, including the World Bank, and to ensure the flow of funds during the crisis. It agreed with the High Commissioner that the key lesson from the pandemic was the need to better forecast risks and prepare responses accordingly. It welcomed the affirmation of the global compact on refugees, as a voluntary, apolitical, non-prescriptive and cooperative action-oriented framework premised on national ownership. The measures involved in the organizational transformation of UNHCR would result in an agency that was more agile, effective and results-oriented, fully governed by and accountable to the member States. His Government asked that UNHCR continue to help build and use national capacity for protection and humanitarian action and increasingly work with local responders to achieve local solutions and ensure local ownership of the process. India had consistently welcomed refugees from all over the world, despite its own developmental and security-related challenges, and continued to host them using only its own resources.

98. **Mr. Ndaie Musenge** (Democratic Republic of the Congo) said that, after years of large-scale armed conflict in the east of the country, the Government was facing other challenges, including the proliferation of Congolese and foreign armed groups, which was hindering the return of Congolese refugees from neighbouring countries. In order to stabilize certain areas and make sustainable return viable, the Government was engaged in military operations to track down and neutralize domestic armed groups that were not adhering to the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process and foreign armed groups. As a result of those operations, a number of localities were considered stable and suitable for receiving returning refugees and internally displaced persons.

99. In the following days, the Government planned to revive the tripartite agreements that it had concluded with UNHCR and the countries hosting Congolese refugees so that those refugees could return in safety and dignity. The Government sought support from UNHCR, the international community and humanitarian and development actors to help fund the repatriation and reintegration of the refugees.

100. There were some 525,000 refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to whom the Government planned to give access to basic social services under its national development plan. With respect to the Rwandan refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Government hoped that all obstacles to the application of the cessation clause would be removed. During the pandemic, measures had been taken to prevent the forced return of persons who were suspected of transmitting COVID-19.

101. **Mr. Grandi** (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), responding to the statements made by the States, said that he hoped that the post-election phase in Burundi would be a constructive period for joint efforts to reintegrate refugees in the areas of return. The return of refugees must, however, be voluntary and occur in the framework of the tripartite agreements, which set out a series of guarantees.

102. He welcomed the intention of the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to revive the tripartite agreements with its neighbouring countries so as to achieve the voluntary return of the Congolese refugees in those countries.

103. Valuable lessons could be learned from the experiences of countries like Sierra Leone, which had significant histories of conflict and displacement. He welcomed the gender-sensitive improvement to the country's nationality law and the story shared by the representative of Guinea-Bissau, which had brought to life the issues faced by refugees.

104. New Zealand, a champion of tolerance and inclusion, continued to be a strong supporter, especially in resettlement. It was now important for resettlement to resume wherever possible.

105. He appreciated the encouragement from India to continue to work together to ensure an asylum space for those who sought refuge in the country. UNHCR counted on India to play a role in addressing some of the regional crises, such as that affecting the Rohingya.

106. He welcomed the fact that Romania had not closed its borders and the relocation initiatives in Europe. UNHCR would be happy to continue to work with Romania on the emergency transit centre, which was a useful component of the burden-sharing mechanism.

107. He applauded Lithuania's efforts to continue to work on residential issues and on resettlement and its preparedness for a possible displacement crisis in the region.

108. UNHCR looked forward to working together with Iraq to address the causes of internal displacement, which, although vastly reduced by Iraq in recent years, remained quite significant.

109. With respect to the refugee situation in Algeria, as he had mentioned the previous day in his response to the statement delivered by Morocco, UNHCR would like for there to be more progress in the political process because that was the only way to emerge from the protracted refugee crisis, for which, as indicated by the representative of Algeria, it was becoming harder to mobilize resources each year.

The meeting rose at 1.10 p.m.