

High Commissioner,

Nobody chooses to be a refugee. Yet, 70 years after the adoption of the 1951 Refugee Convention, UNHCR counts more than 82 million refugees and internally displaced people. The challenges before us today – be it COVID-19, the climate emergency or conflict – are formidable. But the fact that in the face of it all we come together, work together and plan for the future together, is just as powerful – the power of cooperation and partnerships.

Three brief remarks:

First, on protection: In Albania, we worked closely with UNHCR and the EU on adopting a new asylum law, which improves the rights of asylum seekers and brings the existing frameworks closer to the EU acquis.

- It ensures that asylum seekers have access to the asylum procedure and that the processing of applications is conducted in a regulated manner, providing more guarantees for the treatment of vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied minors.
- It provides for an expedited procedure for the rapid assessment of applications when conditions are met.
- It reinforces the framework for the integration of refugees, giving asylum seekers the right to move freely from the moment the request is filed. Free legal aid is guaranteed by the state, and individuals with refugee status will be able to apply for Albanian citizenship via naturalisation.

Second, on inclusion and self-reliance: UN agencies and other partners provided strong support to the inclusion of refugees in the health response to COVID-19. And UNHCR with the ILO are implementing a project in Albania which aims to increase the opportunities for labour market integration, by identifying and addressing the main legal and administrative barriers that asylum seekers, refugees and other individuals granted international protection face in their efforts to access the labour market.

Third, on burden and responsibility sharing: Albania is hosting a number of Afghan refugees that had to flee their country as the Taliban were taking over. They are mostly women and girls, children, human rights defenders and civil society leaders, journalists and other media workers, persons belonging to minorities, all forced to flee their country with nothing but the clothes on their backs, in fear of death, torture and persecution. It has been a remarkable experience for Albania – where support was abundant from the entire political spectrum, indeed, the whole society, but the capacities for hosting and supporting the Afghan refugees were woefully limited. And once again, cooperation and partnerships – with public and private actors – were key to taking this bold step.

A lot remains to be done. The challenges before us are many, but listening to everyone in this meeting, and the renewed commitment to solidarity and support, there is also great hope.

Thank you.

Permanent Mission of the Republic of Albania
to the United Nations Office and other International Organisations in Geneva