

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Madame Chair, Distinguished Delegates

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you on key developments in Europe over the course of the past year. You have all received the Regional Overview for Europe and I will be happy to take your questions in the plenary session.

For the second straight year, my remarks from this podium are framed by tragedy and sadness. Last month's earthquake in Türkiye has resulted in devastating destruction and loss of life. Our partners and ourselves were also affected, as we have lost dear colleagues. The scale of destruction in the affected provinces is difficult to comprehend and harder still to be put into words but our thoughts are with the thousands of people, Turkish, Syrian, refugee and other families, who have lost loved ones.

Through AFAD and local authorities, we have already distributed tents and core relief items to tens of thousands of affected families. UNHCR will continue to work with sister agencies and many local partners as part of a coordinated, government-led international effort to help families who have lost everything, and we call on the solidarity and generosity of the international community to support efforts of recovery in the difficult months ahead.

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The war in Ukraine continues to result in human suffering, loss of life, and destruction on an unfathomable scale. More than five million people are internally displaced, nearly eight million have sought refuge in host countries across Europe, and some 12 million are directly impacted by the war and in need of humanitarian assistance. The Ukrainian people continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience and perseverance. However, the deliberate and cruel targeting of civilian infrastructure has exacerbated the misery facing millions and has compounded the challenges facing humanitarian actors. UNHCR condemns these unlawful acts in the strongest possible terms.

As part of the Government-led response in Ukraine and together with our partners, we are delivering life-saving assistance and protection interventions in difficult and often dangerous circumstances. Millions of IDPs and others impacted by the war have been helped with multi-purpose cash, protection

interventions, shelter repairs, core relief items, and access to emergency services, including psychosocial care and trauma recovery. This could only be possible through a very close coordination with the Humanitarian Coordinator and sister UN agencies, the leadership of government authorities, the generosity of our donors, and the exceptional courage of our partners—particularly local organizations and officials. As we look to the future—and to emerging prospects for return and early recovery in safe parts of Ukraine, we count on this continued support and collaboration.

The refugee response has likewise been met with solidarity, empathy, and cooperation at every level. Neighboring countries kept their borders open to millions of uprooted refugees. Mayors and local organizations served as first responders, mobilized legions of volunteers and distributed a vast array of food and relief items. Municipalities in other parts of Europe mobilized funds to send to sister cities in Ukraine and on the frontline and supported relocations to bring people to safety. The private sector stepped forward with in-kind supplies and direct funds, innovative ideas, and provided an alternate lens through which to view and respond to a humanitarian crisis. Individual families opened their homes to refugee families—and continue to host hundreds of thousands of refugees one year on.

Women and children constitute nearly 90 percent of the refugees from Ukraine. Early on, the risks of gender-based violence, including potential sexual exploitation and abuse were evident. In response, we launched the *Stay Safe Campaign*, together with our partners. It provided information and advice to nearly 2 million refugees on how to protect themselves and their families. PSEA networks were established in regional host countries and is now comprised of 170 national, international and local member organizations. These efforts have been complemented by the establishment of a toll-free regional call center to help refugees to find needed information or access assistance. Forty-one *Blue Dots* have been established by UNHCR and UNICEF in seven refugee-hosting countries, complemented by a virtual *Blue Dot*, to provide refugees with vital protection services and to connect refugees with NGOs and local providers.

European Union Institutions and its member states have also acted with unity and resolve, triggering for the first time in its history the Temporary Protection Directive. The impact of this decision transformed a collective humanitarian response into a profound statement of solidarity—and a reaffirmation of the principles of refugee protection and responsibility-sharing. In this spirit, UNHCR also welcomed the adoption of similar national temporary protection arrangements by the Government of Moldova last month and activation of temporary protection regimes by Albania, Montenegro and Serbia. Other countries, such as Norway and Switzerland, have put in place similar measures as well.

The TPD creates a common legal framework across 27 member states for refugees from Ukraine to be protected and included in the socio-economic fabric of host communities. It is a temporary solution. An interim means to enable refugees to reestablish themselves with dignity and hope, self-reliance and independence until they are able to return to Ukraine—which the vast majority tells us they intend to do.

But the TPD has also proved challenging to implement in several respects. UNHCR's protection monitoring has revealed gaps, inconsistencies, and practical barriers in its application that impact the quality of protection of Ukrainian refugees. Administrative and legal barriers, compounded by information gaps and language challenges, often impede the ability of some refugees to enjoy basic rights—and can translate into *de facto* exclusion. As the rights guaranteed under the TPD are often interdependent, the inability to access one right often creates a 'knock on' effect, impacting their ability to realize other rights. UNHCR has also identified a trend in several states toward more restrictive interpretations of the TPD. This has the potential to adversely impact the ability of refugees from Ukraine to enter territory, to register for temporary protection, and to retain their status should they temporarily return to Ukraine.

Such challenges are inevitable, and the gaps are surmountable. They require innovation and resources, continued collaboration among states to share promising practices and ensure regional coherence, and the political will to adapt and move forward. As the war in Ukraine continues and displacement extends into a second year, UNHCR cautions against applying more restrictive interpretations of the TPD.

The appropriate care and protection of unaccompanied and separated children has also emerged over the course of the year as a key concern. In this regard, we strongly emphasize the paramount importance of respecting the rights and best interests of each child when considering optimal temporary care arrangements in all host states. This includes maintaining their civil status and identity as well as preserving the integrity of family relations for all separated children. The latter underscores the importance of family tracing and family reunification as promptly as possible. The best interests of the child must remain central to all of these decisions. And their continued protection and well-being will remain at the heart of UNHCR's technical advice and advocacy.

Looking beyond the Ukraine situation, I would be remiss if I did not flag UNHCR's ongoing concerns regarding developments in the Lachin Corridor separating Armenia and Azerbaijan. We call on all sides to de-escalate tensions and ensure freedom and security of movements in line with previously reached agreements.

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We should not be surprised or troubled that Ukrainian refugees fled first within the region—to neighboring states where kinship and economic links have long existed. This is the pattern of continental refugee hospitality all over the world. The vast majority of refugees find protection in states immediately bordering their own. But there is no denying that the welcome and solidarity afforded to refugees from Ukraine contrasts sharply with the response of many European states to new arrivals from other parts of the world. While asylum applications in the EU have increased in recent months, it remains a manageable challenge—and a management and solidarity issue.

Pushbacks—often violently—continue at many of the Europe’s land and sea borders. Countless lives continue to be lost as desperate asylum seekers risk dangerous journeys in the hands of smugglers. Reports of unspeakable cruelty and humiliation of people seeking to access territory at Europe’s external borders regularly feature in the mainstream media. While improvements have been made in some reception facilities, conditions in others remain appalling—and fall far below acceptable standards. NGOs on the frontlines often find it difficult to operate because rather than receiving our full support for their efforts to save lives or help manage new arrivals, they sometimes find their efforts criminalized by states. Europe should be capable of far better.

Protecting refugees, and finding solutions, are fully compatible with sound border management by sovereign states. It requires high-level political commitment and close cooperation between states – within Europe, among regional institutions, and with transit and states of origin. UNHCR welcomed the *Solidarity Declaration* by EU Member States in June, and the *EU Action Plan for the Central Mediterranean* in November. Renewed collaboration and partnerships are at the core of both, but efforts are urgently needed to translate these agreements into action, particularly regarding Search and Rescue, safe disembarkation, and predictable solidarity.

Alternatives to dangerous journeys and reliance on smuggling networks are urgently needed. We were pleased at the interest generated in the *High-level Forum on Legal Pathways to Protection*, hosted by DG Home Commissioner, Ylva Johansson, in November. UNHCR also welcomes the continued interest and concrete pledges of many European states to resettle refugees or facilitate humanitarian admissions. However we urge states to do more to ensure rapid processing and departures so that targets are respected—and lives are not left in limbo. This includes supporting the right to family unity through flexible, efficient procedures. It perhaps goes without saying that UNHCR would urge states in Europe to look at ways to increase resettlement pledges in the coming years.

We renew our call on EU member states to adopt and implement the reform proposals outlined in the proposed *EU Pact on Migration and Asylum*. UNHCR has tabled a number of proposals in support of the Pact that are eminently achievable. They call for improvements to reception arrangements, better care and protection for the most vulnerable, swift and efficient registration and screening processes, and a fair and fast adjudication of asylum claims. UNHCR will continue to engage with EU institutions and member states to develop innovative approaches and different ways of working that share responsibility, foster greater solidarity, and support the return and reintegration of those found not in need of international protection. Any proposals that seek to share rather than shift responsibility to states beyond Europe's borders are welcome and worthy of consideration. UNHCR will, however, continue to speak out against proposals and agreements by states that externalize international obligations for the protection of refugees.

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If the emerging picture from my brief tour d'horizon appears mixed—it is simply a reflection of the breadth and complexity of the challenges, we face in Europe. There are no simple solutions. We are encouraged, however, by renewed engagement and collaboration on difficult issues across Europe. By the willingness to think boldly, to innovate, and to act collectively. This was particularly evident in the response to the new refugee arrivals from Ukraine. This same political will can and should be mobilized to better manage access to territory and procedures for all in need of international protection.

The second Global Refugee Forum will take place in December. It offers an opportune moment to take stock of the many achievements, new partnerships, and innovations that emerged following the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees and first Forum in 2019. And it will provide us with a window to the future—and a chance to renew our shared commitment to protect refugees and find solutions through concrete, impactful pledges.

Thank you. I am happy to answer your questions.

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