

**MENA Oral Update
for the 56th Meeting of the UNHCR Standing Committee (5-7 March 2013) delivered by
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Madam Chair,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The last one year, since I had the honor of addressing the Standing Committee, witnessed a continuation of very dramatic events and developments in many parts of the Middle East and North Africa region. These resulted, sadly, in greater loss of life, more refugee outflows and more internal displacement.

Today, the most daunting challenge facing UNHCR and our partners and, indeed, the entire humanitarian community, is the **Syria crisis**. The number of Syrian refugees has multiplied over 30 times since the Committee's meeting in March 2012. We are now at the one million mark when counting the number of Syrian refugees, registered or awaiting registration in asylum countries especially in neighboring Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. These are not statistics. These are one million individual tragic stories the majority of which are told by women and children. The traumatic experience each one of these people went and is going through is beyond calculation.

Inside Syria, where I last visited five weeks ago, together with colleagues from OCHA and the key UN Humanitarian Agencies, we met Syrians who, up to now, are hosts to one of the largest refugee populations, mainly Palestinians under the care of UNRWA but also Iraqis, Afghans, Somalis, Sudanese and others. Today, violence has driven these hosts from their homes, their cities and their villages into displacement where they now live in collective centers spread around the country or are living in public buildings or staying with relatives in over-crowded conditions.

Estimates put the number of Syrians directly impacted by the conflict at no less than four million -- a number that we know keeps growing by the day. Estimates also put the number of the internally displaced at more than two million people, again a number that keeps growing by the day (**in fact recent government reports put the number of internally displaced Syrians at 3.6 million people**). In the areas we visited, Daraa, Homs, Rif Damascus and Talbisah the humanitarian needs were simply overwhelming. The material damage this conflict has claimed is beyond description, but what is more catastrophic is the human cost and the tens of thousands of lives that have been lost. This continues now, as we sit here and discuss.

Although security constraints have hampered our response and access in Syria, we were able nonetheless to reach the needy population in many parts of the country. UNHCR has been able to deliver assistance and relief items to more than half a million persons. I will be the first to say that this is a drop in the ocean of humanitarian needs. Our principal goal is

therefore to continue delivering life-saving humanitarian aid to affected civilian populations. In this regard, we are encouraged by a recent break-through when UNHCR and our partners were able to deliver over two hundred metric tons of urgently needed humanitarian items to displaced populations in the north western part of the country. This operation paved the way for an additional inter-agency humanitarian delivery to the same region. In full collaboration with the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator, the rest of the UN family and our partners in Syria we are fully committed to continue these efforts.

By keeping their borders open, the **countries neighboring Syria** namely Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey have demonstrated remarkable generosity and commitment to humanitarian principles. However, the continuous exodus of Syrians across borders has strained the national resources of these countries and has put significant pressure on the public services provided in the communities hosting refugees. It is absolutely imperative that the international community continues to share this heavy burden shouldered by the neighboring countries and others hosting Syrian refugees. The generous financial support provided by the international donor community is very much appreciated. More is needed, however, as we continue to respond to this crisis of unprecedented proportions in the region's recent history, if judged by the speed with which it is unfolding

Madam Chair,

While the Syria crisis is receiving much of the attention of the world, it is not unfortunately the only emergency that the Middle East and North Africa region has had to deal with. The situation in Mali continues to force people into neighboring countries, including **Mauritania**. Since mid-January this year, Mauritania received more than 15,000 new arrivals, the majority of whom are, again, women and children. Currently, Mbera camp in the south of the country hosts around 70,000 refugees who are completely dependent on the hospitality of the local community, and the assistance that UNHCR and our partners provide. While we remain hopeful that a solution to the Mali crisis will be realized, we must also remain vigilant keeping our contingency thinking and planning for further outflows under constant update and validation.

Yemen continues to generously host more than 237,000 refugees, mainly Somalis, while at the same time maintaining an open door policy towards those moving from the Horn of Africa. Last year alone, Yemen received a record number of new arrivals, over 107,000 persons, from Ethiopia and Somalia (compared to 103,000 in the year 2011). In addition, close to 350,000 Yemenis are still internally displaced, primarily in the north. Despite this situation, we have recently seen an example of how a solution can be implemented through the cooperation of all concerned. UNHCR and other humanitarian actors have recently supported IDPs who decided to return to their areas of origin in Abyan Governorate. I am happy to report that as of today, over 100,000 of those displaced have now returned to Abyan determined to resume their daily life, despite ongoing challenges. The success of this voluntary return is a fantastic reminder that humanitarian assistance, if delivered in a timely and predictable manner, can contribute to the stabilization of populations and the realization of durable solutions.

Speaking of durable solutions, **resettlement** remains a primary protection tool and, sometimes, the only permanent solution available to refugees throughout the region. UNHCR submitted more than 9,700 Iraqi refugees for resettlement in 2012 and continues to process cases of other nationalities.

Securing durable solutions to the 3,100 residents of Camp Hurriya, recently relocated from Camp New Iraq (formerly **Ashraf**), continues to be a major concern as the response to UN's call for resettlement has so far been very limited. We appeal once again to the international community to assist in finding durable solutions for this group.

Also on delivering permanent solutions, significant progress has been made last year for the populations stranded on the **Libyan borders** with Tunisia and Egypt. In Shousha refugee camp in **Tunisia**, 2,854 persons have departed on resettlement to third countries since the beginning of the resettlement process. As of the end of February, 907 individuals remain at Shousha camp awaiting solutions.

Whereas in Saloum, on the **Egyptian-Libyan border**, 565 persons have been resettled in third countries, leaving the remaining population at 1,700 persons. Inside **Libya** itself, there are still some 50,000 IDPs who are unwilling or unable to return to their areas of origin. We will continue to work with the Libyan authorities and our NGO partners to deliver life-saving assistance to this population and will continue the efforts to realize durable solutions.

As for the situation of Sahrawi refugees, the family visits between refugees in Tindouf camps in **Algeria**, and their families in **Western Sahara**, which form part of the Confidence-Building Measures (CBM) programme, have been running smoothly with the support of the parties and the neighboring countries. Last year, more than 4,600 individuals have benefited from family visits, with close to 17,000 having taken part in the programme since it began in 2004. The third confidence building seminar was successfully organized in Faro, Portugal, last month.

The Middle East and North Africa region is a crossroad for **mixed migration** movements and is both a transit area and a destination. The magnitude of the protection risks, and often dramatic abuses, associated with such movements has grabbed the world's attention. Security and political challenges in some parts of the region, coupled with the absence of law and order in certain areas, allow networks of smugglers and traffickers to flourish with impunity.

In this regard, the **mixed migration** phenomenon in Sinai continues to be of particular concern, with networks of smugglers deeply rooted in the countries of origin and transit. Given these transnational and trans-continental dimensions of mixed migration movements, a comprehensive regional strategy is developed to identify a wide range of solutions. Consultations on the strategy with the concerned Governments, UN, IOM and NGO partners will be pursued with the aim of ensuring a common approach and response. But as I said last year, this is obviously not a challenge for UNHCR alone, nor is it, I believe, a challenge for Egypt alone. This is a growing phenomenon of frightening proportions and one that requires concerted efforts by all to address it effectively.

In the **Gulf region**, we recall with great appreciation the over 1.5 billion dollar pledge made at the Syria Humanitarian Pledging Conference held in Kuwait at the end of January 2013. Out of this generous commitment, 900 million-dollars were pledged by three of the GCC countries, namely Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. This highlights the importance of strategic partnerships with the GCC region. It is therefore our ardent hope that an important part of this generous pledge will be delivered through multilateral channels including UN agencies and our NGO partners to ensure timely and effective response to the growing Syrian refugee crisis as well as the dire humanitarian needs inside Syria.

On the regional level, our cooperation with the **Organization of Islamic Cooperation** has advanced significantly and culminated in co-organizing the OIC Conference on “Refugees in the Muslim World” in May 2012 in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. The conference adopted the “Ashgabat Declaration” which represents a valued addition to the international instruments related to refugees.

At the same time, efforts with the **League of Arab States** are ongoing to cooperate in the drafting an Arab Convention on Regulating Refugee Status and promote the rights of migrants, refugees and IDPs in the Arab world. A recent experts meeting to discuss and revise the draft convention was held in Cairo in January 2013.

In concluding, Madam Chair, allow me to revert to the subject I started my presentation with and let me quote the High Commissioner, Mr. Antonio Guterres, who in an op-ed published yesterday in the New York Times said this: “if the world does not act now, we might soon face an explosion that no international response could manage. This must not be allowed. The Syrian crisis is now at a tipping point. Humanitarian organizations like mine can save lives and ease suffering, but it is up to those who have political responsibilities to stop this war before it is too late”. End of quote.

Thank you.