

Check against delivery

**62nd Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Executive Committee of the High
Commissioner's Programme**

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**Introductory remarks by George OKOTH-OBBO, Assistant High Commissioner for
Operations to Agenda Item 3, "Regional Activities and Global Programmes"**

Mr Chairman
Excellencies Ambassadors and Heads of Delegations
Distinguished delegates
Colleagues from the humanitarian community
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning.

Mr Chairman, let me first thank you very much for your generous presentation of my colleague Mr Volker Turk, our newly appointed Assistant High Commissioner for Protection and myself, appointed along with him as Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, to this crucial setting of governance support and solidarity for UNHCR's mandate and work.

In the process leading up to the appointment, which as you might envisage can have its own trials, I received solidarity, support and encouragement from many of you present in this room today. Since the appointment was made some two weeks ago, you have graced me with kind messages of congratulations and good wishes.

Allow me to renew to you, one and all, the gratitude that I have expressed in my replies to your messages. I have recognized that the appointment is a trust of profound responsibility, especially coming at this moment when, as the High Commissioner has highlighted in his messages to you, UNHCR is facing its most daunting financial outlook in ten years.

Following up on the difficult policy and operational choices we must make in responding to this situation is already a key element of my work in my new position. Other striking priorities of the function, some of which in fact I will overview in more detail shortly, include the implications for UNHCR operations of a humanitarian system whose capacities, both financial and ergonomic, are presently stretched to the limit. Cutting - edge effectiveness in our performance, including through more telling recourse to creativity and innovation, will be ever more critical. So also more engaged partnership with Governments, agency partners and other players in all the different domains including, particularly, social and economic development to leverage the drive for solutions which the Organization will have to pursue more resolutely than before.

I have thus greeted the appointment with renewed commitment to give even more of my energies and dedication to the new responsibility as I have strived to demonstrate these past five years when I have been the Director of the Office's operations in Africa whose own compelling features you are all familiar with.

In those five years, I was privileged to work closely with, particularly, the Governments and Permanent Missions of the countries of the region, the African Union, representatives of our financial donors, our NGO, UN system and other international, regional and national partners and the Member States of the Executive Committee at large. I look forward to continuing this collaboration with all of you in an even more engaged manner. And, to my colleague the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, I have been stressing that our appointment together on the same day is more than a matter of only coincidence. It underlines that the two sides of the work of our Office with which we have been entrusted – protection and operations – must demonstrate the firmest and most organic interface. We have both committed to collaborate strongly in supporting our Representations and Field colleagues in meeting their even heavier and more telling responsibilities in this manner.

Mr Chairman, distinguished delegates ladies and gentlemen.

Unavoidably, the financial situation of the Office overshadows this session of the Standing Committee and will cross-cut our review of our regional activities and global programmes. In introducing the agenda item on “Regional Activities”, I shall, in the first instance, overview the imperatives and even risks that we are attentive to in this situation. I will then go over in a more granular manner the measures we are taking and, finally, commend to you some key messages.

Mr Chairman

You will glean from the regional overviews you will hear today and tomorrow from my colleagues the Bureau Directors that the spiral of continuing, escalating or new emergencies remains the most evocative, compelling and indeed even defining feature of the operational landscape that UNHCR faces world-wide today. You will hear that the Central African Republic and South Sudan Situations in Africa, the Iraq and Syrian crises in the Middle East and the situation in Ukraine are among the most poignant chapters of this critical context. The

acutely evolving Nigeria Situation – meaning the over 600,000 Nigerians displaced internally already by the activities of Boko Haram and the still rising number of now thousands of others who are being displaced externally into Cameroon, Chad and Niger - will be highlighted as probably our most pre-occupying new emergency response frontier today. All are calling for a strong operational drive of core protection, life-saving and life sustaining interventions.

It is vis a vis these on-going or new emergencies that our critical resource outlook presents for the Office its most serious potential operational and accountability risks. Lives are at stake. People arrive in exile in a highly vulnerable condition which, as you will hear from my colleague the Director of the MENA Bureau, Mr Amin Awad, can be compounded by extreme weather conditions and the resourcing challenges that our other humanitarian partners are themselves facing, particularly, at the present moment, the World Food Programme which has been obliged to cut food rations for refugees, sometimes by as much as half, in a number of key operations around the world. Massive resources are often required in the initial stages of the humanitarian response when the infrastructure for the response – whether camps, settlements or networks and systems for delivery outside the camps – call for capital investments. Yet, even in times when donor response to the requirements of UNHCR and other humanitarian actors have been at their best, critical shortfalls which can go close to or more than 50% of the needs are typically experienced.

These shortfalls can translate directly into a matter of life and death for the refugees and internally displaced persons who have often already by this point lost everything. The grim financial outlook however threatens fundamental protection, assistance and solutions objectives and compromises the opportunity to realize positive solutions and transformative results even in on-going operations. You will hear in the updates from my colleagues of many of these situations including so-called “small operations”; those such as Yemen in which are ingrained serious protection and operational factors; protracted situations and the situation of Afghanistan refugees which the Director of the Asia Bureau, Ms Daisy Dell, will describe as now delicately poised on the imperative for solutions. Elsewhere, other vital protection, empowerment or solutions stakes could also get on the cusp: the battle against malnutrition, SGBV and inadequate basic services; the risks and dangers of irregular mobility by land or the high seas; the prevention or resolution of statelessness; getting children into and keeping them in school; community development; livelihoods and many others.

The Latin America and Caribbean region which my also newly-appointed colleague, Ms Renata Dubini, the Director of the Americas Bureau, will overview in more detail later on deserves a special mention in this respect. This is a region which quintessentially reflects the classical protection and solutions catalogues that I have referred to. In December last year, almost all the countries of this region adopted the Brazil Declaration and its Ten - Year Plan of Action to commemorate the 30th Anniversary of the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees. The Plan of Action – which includes 11 protection-based and solution-oriented programmes for refugees, stateless persons and to advance refugee law in the region – is a pivotal policy, strategic and operational platform upon which the Latin American and Caribbean States commit to address the region’s humanitarian challenges with innovation, flexibility and the spirit of solidarity. The implementation of the Plan of Action will have a profound impact on the lives and situation of thousands of refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons. Mr Chairman, it would be most regrettable if financial austerity measures were to result in these or other opportunities drawn from UNHCR operations in other parts of the world getting lost or wasted.

With all this in mind, I would like to assure the Standing Committee that the measures to keep operational commitments within anticipated resource availability are being taken in a predictable and responsible manner that guards against undue impacts on our beneficiaries. Particularly, the reprioritization – the magnitude and figures of which the Deputy High Commissioner elaborated a short while ago - is being guided by the imperative to secure core protection needs and maintain life-saving assistance particularly in new or escalating emergencies. Thus, the Ukraine and Nigeria Situation emergencies are specifically excluded from the mandated cost reductions. Investments in solutions and progress in the fight against statelessness are also secured as are security arrangements for persons of concern and staff. With regard to internally displaced persons, effort will be made to preserve UNHCR’s ability to provide effective and predictable coordination and operational delivery in the three areas in which it has assumed inter-agency leadership responsibilities.

Administrative and programme support costs are the first targets for the cost reduction measures. Activities in which there is consistent lack of delivery of expected results and/or impact will also be sharply scrutinized as will be those which have demonstrated persistent over or under expenditure in prior years including, particularly, so-called legacy programmes. The Office will also focus on improving the effectiveness and efficiency of its delivery. Thus,

Field Offices have been asked to redouble their efforts in targeting interventions at the most vulnerable and at-risk persons of concern and to increase the use of cash-based interventions.

Unavoidably, UNHCR operations budgets implemented by partners, both Governments and NGOs, will also be touched. Field Offices have however been asked to review these budgets in the fullest spirit of transparency and consultation with partners. Moreover, partnership agreements which have not yet been concluded should be reviewed first while those which have already been signed should be re-opened only if absolutely unavoidable.

Every possible attention will of course continue to be assured for solutions, including re-energization of the High Commissioner's Global Initiative on Somali Refugees; the global campaign to end statelessness; the attention which will be focused this year on the Afghanistan refugee situation through the High Level Segment of the Executive Committee in October and, in Europe, special efforts to crack "legacy situations" in the Western Balkans and Caucuses.

Institutional measures for greater operational effectiveness will give priority to core protection and life-saving measures, especially in the context of emergency response as you will hear from my colleague the Director of the Division of Emergencies, Security and Supply, Ms Terry Morel, when she later elaborates the steps which have been taken or are still under way in reconfiguring our emergency response services to increase our standby deployment capacity; maximize the efficiency and performance of our supply chain; and ensure a robust security management system to be able to remain and operate in high risk environments. You will also hear from the Director of the Division of Programme Support and Management, Mr Steve Corliss, an update on the four major initiatives the Office launched last year that all cumulatively aim at greater organizational effectiveness namely the global strategies for safe access to fuel and energy (SAFE); livelihoods; settlement and shelter; and public health.

Mr Chairman, in grappling with the difficult choices that we must make, partnership – with States of course and just as crucially with our agency partners – becomes ever more important. You will hear from my colleague the Director of External Relations, Mr Daniel Endres, that UNHCR remains dedicated to inter-agency coordination in both its mandated responsibilities and the efforts to address broader humanitarian challenges, needs and

objectives. For its mandated responsibilities, UNHCR's platform for leadership and inclusive coordination is its Refugee Coordination Model which seeks to clarify roles and responsibilities and make UNHCR's approach to coordination more predictable, inclusive, partner-friendly and ensure that refugees and other populations of concern receive the assistance and protection they need.

[By rearticulating UNHCR's role in the context of the current inter-agency operating environment, the RCM reaffirms the integrity of the High Commissioner's mandate and accountability for refugee leadership. Providing the right level of leadership to implement the RCM, the High Commissioner has now designated five (5) Regional Refugee Coordinators, for the CAR, South Sudan, Great Lakes, Syria/Iraq and, most recently, Nigeria refugee situations. They lead operational planning and resource mobilization and use Regional Refugee Response Plans (RRRPs) to provide UNHCR and partners with a common platform for planning, delivery and fundraising. Overall, four (4) Regional Refugee Response Plans were launched covering 16 refugee hosting country operations each having their specific country plan. Through these plans, over 233 partners were brought together under the common planning and fundraising platforms. In 2014, we also launched the 2015 Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) developed jointly with UNDP. During its launch, the innovative approach of harmonising humanitarian and development approaches was lauded as a "global first". The 3RP illustrates our approach to resilience and solutions and is evidence of the greater collaboration which we seek with development actors to improve the impact for refugees and host communities. Meanwhile, continuing the thrust of the High Commissioner's Dialogue with NGOs, UNHCR undertook broad consultations with partners for the implementation of its Enhanced Framework for Implementing with Partners so as to further strengthen the quality of our partnerships and accountability].

UNHCR remains an engaged and active participant in selected multilateral or inter-agency processes including the World Humanitarian Summit, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the Chief Executives Board and its related bodies, the Sendai process and others. In all, UNHCR's overriding objectives are to safeguard protection and core humanitarian principles, improve the way we deliver together and draw in the development, financial and private sector communities into refugee issues.

Mr Chairman, I would not deny that in these different coordination contexts, we still face a number of challenges including relationships that have been somewhat rocky and capacities which we have needed to improve critically. What I would reiterate is that UNHCR is fully committed to coordination as a crucial means to achieve streamlined delivery of protection, assistance and solutions in a way that maximizes the capacities of humanitarian actors.

Mr Chairman, let me conclude now on some four over-arching themes.

First, asylum countries the world over have continued to keep their doors open and provide a place in which refugees and asylum-seekers can find safety in a predictable manner. We recognize that the combination of protracted exile, ever rising numbers, or restricted resources have imposed ever greater difficulties and challenges. Yet, I must appeal that the critical safety net of protection and the ability for refugees to reclaim as full membership to society as possible should be preserved against all odds. In the efforts to safeguard this system of protection, UNHCR commits to continue collaborating and supporting asylum states in the most resolute manner feasible.

Secondly, all humanitarian workers - of UNHCR, other UN system agencies and NGO partners - are the mainstay, the true heroes of the response we are entrusted to deliver. Both ours and partner workers, as indeed of Governments, have put their lives on the line. Their sacrifices are earnestly acknowledged.

Thirdly, returning to the difficult resource situation of the Office with which I started my remarks, and while acknowledging and appreciating the support that we have continued to receive solidly from our financial donors even as they face their own economic difficulties, I have to call for special support to allow us overcome the daunting outlook and be able to remain accountable to our persons of concern.

Finally, Mr Chairman, at this similar meeting last year, speaking then in my capacity as Director of the Africa Bureau, I decried the diabolical and visceral enterprise of ethnic, political, religious or regional brutality and the egregious human rights abuses which had produced the humanitarian crises in, among others, the Central African Republic and South Sudan from which we were then reeling. Preoccupied that even the most fulsome humanitarian responses that the international community could manage would mount to but

only palliative bandage care, I called for astute, responsible and sustainable management of the political, religious, ethnic, or regional diversities in the drive to build stable and productive nationhood and move forward in peace, stability and a focus on growth and progress we all owe our societies. This is the same call with which I would like to end my remarks today.

I thank you very much for listening to me.

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