

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to once again update you on key protection challenges and opportunities we face in Europe. We have shared our regional update, which I hope you found informative and useful. I would like to begin by highlighting a few key areas of progress and future possibilities.

The first Global Refugee Forum in December 2019 served as a powerful demonstration of global solidarity and responsibility sharing. Collectively, European States made nearly 100 domestic pledges and over 130 global pledges in support of refugees. These pledges of member states were complemented by a series of innovative commitments from the private sector, civil society, and municipal authorities representing every corner of Europe. UNHCR commends these demonstrations of solidarity and support for refugees both within and outside of Europe, and we look forward to working closely with all of you to transform these commitments into concrete action.

The Forum also served to highlight the considerable progress in **including refugees and other persons of concern in national systems**, as well as the bold and innovative efforts of mayors and municipal authorities to welcome refugees and asylum seekers in towns and cities throughout Europe. The past year has witnessed important strides to ensure that refugees are able to gain access to national health systems, labour markets and education.

Refugees have much to contribute to host societies, if provided the tools and opportunities for meaningful inclusion. In this regard, UNHCR welcomes steps taken by Azerbaijan to integrate refugees into the national medical insurance system and continued efforts to ensure access to employment. Likewise Cyprus, having lifted its reservation to the 1951 convention, has also taken important strides to improve access to education and employment opportunities through scholarships, vocational training and mentoring programmes.

European states have continued to demonstrate solidarity through their willingness to receive refugees through **resettlement and complementary pathways**. We welcome increased resettlement and community-based sponsorship programmes, including the European Commission's pledge on behalf of member states to increase resettlement places to 30,000 in 2020. For refugee hosting countries, usually the direct neighbors of refugee producing countries and which host 90% of the world's refugees, resettlement remains a crucial,

tangible means of sharing responsibility and demonstrating solidarity. UNHCR hopes the example of the European Commission will inspire others to increase resettlement places and opportunities for complementary pathways.

I commend the recent announcements of a number of countries in Europe regarding their willingness to provide relocation and family reunification opportunities for unaccompanied and vulnerable children on the Greek islands. Given the increasingly precarious conditions, I urge these states to take action on these pledges and stress the urgent need for expanded relocation opportunities for children, and other vulnerable individuals.

I would also like to highlight the importance of **Community-based initiatives** in fostering social inclusion and countering negative stereotypes and messaging that is too-often ascribed to refugees and asylum seekers. NGOs, Civil society groups, municipal authorities, community activists and individual volunteers across Europe have risen to the challenge, responding with empathy, commitment, and innovation. They are all, and will remain, crucial partners of UNHCR. I would particularly like to commend the contribution of young people in fostering inclusion and recognize the achievements of community-based groups facilitated by the Youth Initiative Fund. These projects have supported initiatives from formation of a Youth Coalition in Armenia to the development of an IT hub for youth in Ukraine.

With respect to efforts to eradicate **statelessness** in Europe, UNHCR is encouraged by the outcomes of the High-Level Segment. 14 countries in Europe made a total of 40 pledges in a clear demonstration of their commitment. Important steps have already been taken by states to implement these pledges with Malta's accession to the 1954 convention and the more recent accession of North Macedonia, in January, to the 1961 convention. Work to share good practices and translate more of these commitments into action must however continue.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates

The positive developments I have just highlighted cannot obscure the fact that we continue to face significant challenges. Allow me to highlight a few.

Containing the spread of the Corona virus has become an urgent global priority. UNHCR is, however, concerned by increasing reports of pre-emptive measures imposed, or under consideration, by states in Europe which may limit the ability of people to seek asylum.

Equally troubling, these measures may contribute to the emergence of false narratives that unfairly apportion blame to refugees for the spread of the virus. If temporary border management restrictions are imposed, UNHCR urges states to apply any measures in a proportional, non-discriminatory way—and to find sensible, innovative ways that preserve the right to seek asylum, even in the midst of a temporary public health emergency.

You are all aware of the current situations at the external border of the European Union. Our message is simple: all countries have a right to manage their borders in an efficient manner, provided that international obligations are respected. It is therefore imperative that countries manage their borders in ways that preserve the right to seek asylum and avoid the use of excessive force. In this regard, UNHCR echoes the recent statement by the ECtHR that States are obliged to provide genuine and effective legal means of access to their territory and asylum.

UNHCR therefore continues to appeal for calm and the easing of tensions along the border between Turkey and Greece. Many highly vulnerable individuals arrived last week at various crossing points, as well as to the Aegean Islands. We have a collective responsibility to ensure access to humanitarian aid and protection to those who need it while avoiding actions that would increase the hardships they face. We also remain concerned about the impact of these movements on host communities, particularly on the Aegean Islands, where the situation has become truly unsustainable. [Thanks Greece for continued protection and ensuring due processes are followed.](#)

The fair and efficient management of borders, with due respect for international obligations, is a challenge elsewhere in Europe as well. The closure of official border crossings, strict controls at frontiers and denials of admission or **'push-backs'** continue to be observed, compelling some refugees to take dangerous alternative routes.

States at Europe's external borders must therefore not be left alone. Continued financial resources, technical capacity and concrete demonstrations of solidarity are needed to support states receiving the highest numbers of new arrivals as well as those hosting the largest number of refugees. UNHCR also stands ready to support these states in the identification of principled, practical solutions.

A well-functioning common **asylum system in Europe is dependent on access to efficient and fair procedures** for people fleeing conflict, violence and persecution. Equally, those who do not have international protection needs should be rapidly identified and returned with dignity. Existing lengthy asylum procedures often inadvertently incentivize the movement of individuals without international protection needs and contribute to inefficient returns.

UNHCR welcomes the initiative of the new European Commission to develop a **new Pact on Migration and Asylum**, which aims to create consensus among EU member states on optimal asylum procedures and solidarity within the Union as well as support to refugee hosting countries elsewhere in the world. Regarding the latter, allow me to reiterate that solidarity and support for refugees outside of Europe cannot be at the expense of continued direct access to asylum in Europe. UNHCR stands ready to continue our engagement with the Commission as deliberations on a new pact move forward.

Elsewhere in Europe, UNHCR continues to be fully engaged with partners to support the reinforcement and development of asylum systems throughout the continent to ensure quality decisions, including in the context of mixed movements. The **Quality Initiative in Eastern Europe** (QIEE), through which UNHCR works jointly with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to strengthen national asylum capacity, provides a positive example of such collaboration.

Reception conditions in a number of states also require urgent improvement to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable. Conditions within reception centres in the Aegean islands however remain of particular concern. Decisive action is needed to alleviate overcrowding through large-scale transfers of asylum seekers to the mainland, where additional reception capacity is required. Action to improve living conditions for those who remain on the islands, prioritizing water, sanitation and healthcare is also urgently needed.

Further action is also needed to respond to the needs of **children and survivors of sexual and gender-based** violence across Europe. In this regard, inclusion and non-discriminatory access to national support systems for children, and durable solutions in their best interests, are of critical importance. Immigration detention of children in Europe continues, despite international consensus that detention is never in the best interests of the child.

Access to information in a language and manner accessible to asylum-seekers and refugees remains a challenge across the region. In an effort to improve access to information for asylum-seekers and refugees, UNHCR launched its **help.unhcr.org** website in seven countries in Europe and will continue to further roll out this information tool.

UNHCR has also noted a number of situation-specific developments in the region. Allow me to briefly highlight a few.

First, **South-Eastern Europe** continues to be impacted by mixed movements of persons originating from North Africa, the Middle East and Asia. In partnership with IOM, and other stakeholders, UNHCR remains committed to supporting states in the region in managing mixed movements in a holistic manner including through asylum system building and the identification of opportunities for integration.

With respect to the situation of **internal displacement in the Ukraine**, UNHCR notes the recent adoption of legislation reinforcing the rights of the internally displaced. Provisions which permit internally displaced individuals to vote in local elections and facilitate their access to travel documents (passports) are undoubtedly positive developments which will improve the lives of these individuals.

Finally, efforts to develop pragmatic solutions to the **situation in the Mediterranean** have continued with discussions resulting in the Malta Declaration in September 2019, and the subsequent development of Standard Operating Procedures for *ad hoc* relocation exercises from Italy and Malta. We hope that these advances can be further discussed and developed in support of the definition of predictable disembarkation arrangements and strengthened solidarity with respect to refugees and asylum seekers arriving by sea.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

Allow me to close with an update on **UNHCR's Change process** and its impact on the Regional Bureau for Europe. As many of you are aware, UNHCR's ongoing transformation reached a milestone in September, with the transition of six of the seven Regional Bureaux to locations in the field. While the Regional Bureau for Europe will remain based in Geneva, we are very much a part of the corporate effort to work differently, more efficiently, and with greater accountability. This has involved a number of changes within the Bureau to align with a

common organizational design and way of working. We have strengthened our capacities in protection, integration, strategic planning and budget management, data analysis and external engagement. The overarching aim is to provide optimal support to the 49 countries and 1 territory which make-up the Bureau's portfolio, while ensuring a robust second line of defense capacity to assure quality and monitor impact.

Thank you for your attention.