

**3. (a) vii: The Middle East and North Africa – Presented by Mr. Ayman Gharaibeh, Director,  
Regional Bureau for the Middle East and North Africa**

**77<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee**

Geneva, 11 March 2020

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Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an **honour for me to address this distinguished audience today** and look forward to working with you in my new capacity as Director for the Middle East and North Africa Bureau since the 1<sup>st</sup> of January.

**By the end of 2019, the region hosted more than 16 million people of concern to UNHCR,** including over 3 million refugees and asylum seekers. The region also has the largest number of IDPs globally with more than 12 million IDPs, while 365,000 persons continue to suffer from statelessness.

**We continue to work hard in addressing the challenges in the region with innovative approaches, relying on the solidarity and compassion from host communities.**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have to start by highlighting the **Syrian crisis** where I regret to reiterate that it is during this month that this conflict enters its 10<sup>th</sup> year. As the largest displacement crisis in the world today, it has generated more than 6.1 million internally displaced, and over 5.5 million refugees in neighbouring countries. Inside Syria, humanitarian access to areas with IDPs and returnees remains challenging. It is a sad fact that over 2.5 million Syrian children live as refugees in the region, while an additional 2.5 million are displaced inside Syria.

In the **north-west of Syria**, and in Idlib particularly, ongoing conflict has resulted in the displacement of **nearly 1 million people** since December 2019. It is a fact that over 80 per cent are women and children. UNHCR is **deeply concerned about the safety and well-being** of civilians. we welcome the agreement on the cessation of hostilities that came into effect as of Friday. UNHCR is stepping-up to reach those in need;

however, it remains a challenge due to **access constraints, and continuous shifting of frontlines**. Safe humanitarian access, and the safety of humanitarian workers, must be ensured.

The humanitarian situation in **the north-east** remains dire, with some 1.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, including in Al-Hol camp. As of mid-December 2019, almost 70,600 people remained displaced from the Governorates of Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, and Aleppo. Furthermore, some 19,000 refugees had fled from Syria to Iraq as of January 2020.

In 2019, UNHCR provided basic relief items and shelter support to more than 358,000 people through **cross-border interventions from Turkey**. These interventions continue in accordance with the Security Council resolution in January 2020. International humanitarian actors are attempting to plan for other alternatives in the event that cross-border activities would come to an end as of 10 July 2020.

**In the context of the Whole of Syria approach**, and despite operational challenges, in 2019 UNHCR reached more than 1.7 million people with protection activities, some 236,000 of whom are children; around 1.8 million people received basic relief items; over 520,000 individuals benefited from UNHCR's shelter support; and around 428,000 people were provided with health assistance.

Living **conditions for Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries** continue to be precarious, with over half of the population living in poverty. Continued support from the international community remains essential in the areas of access to health, education and legal employment. Together with UNDP, UNHCR continues to lead the implementation of the regional refugee and resilience plan (3RP) in response to the crisis. The 3RP 2020-2021 requires over \$5.4 billion to help some 9 million people.

**On the returns to Syria**, the level and pace of movements has gradually increased over the past year. In 2019, UNHCR verified the return of over 96,000 refugees to Syria. Refugees' own decisions will remain UNHCR's main guidepost honoring the right to return of those who wish to do so, and the rights of those who prefer to stay in host countries for the time being. UNHCR is in dialogue with the Government of Syria, host countries, and other stakeholders to address these obstacles.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is unfortunate that the conflict in **Yemen** continues to drag-on, resulting in a dire humanitarian situation, with around 80% of the population in dire need of assistance. The operational environment remains challenging as critical funding shortfalls impede the implementation of UNHCR programmes.

In 2019, the Office provided protection and assistance to IDPs and refugees in 19 governorates across the country. This included cash assistance, shelter kits and basic household items. With over 275,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in the country, UNHCR continues to advocate for an improved protection environment. Given ongoing hostilities, we will also continue to prioritize the **assisted voluntary return programme** for Somalis.

**Turning now to Iraq**, while over 4 million people have returned to their communities since the height of the conflict in 2014, some 1.8 million IDPs remain in Iraq, more than half of whom have been living in displacement for at least three years. Some 1.9 million children require humanitarian assistance and protection, over 800,000 of whom are in acute need. Significant challenges continue to hinder return; these include security concerns, lack of social cohesion, documentation issues, few livelihood opportunities as well as destroyed or damaged housing.

We are working to incorporate the needs of IDPs in the government development plans and to support a gradual absorption into the Iraqi social welfare system. In the interim, UNHCR has provided IDPs and IDP returnees with multi-purpose cash grants, core relief items and primary health assistance. Some 250,000 Iraqi refugees are registered with UNHCR in neighbouring countries. The Office provides these refugees with basic services in support of the efforts of neighbouring countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The operational and security environment in **North Africa** remains complex with new and protracted displacement. The security situation in **Libya** continues to be volatile, with hostilities fuelling internal displacement. By the end of January 2020, over 343,000 people were displaced inside the country, while some 450,000 IDPs had returned. Almost 47,000 refugees and asylum-seekers are registered with UNHCR in Libya.

Despite the challenging operational environment in Libya, UNHCR provided assistance to IDPs, refugees and asylum-seekers, including medical consultations, NFIs, shelter kits and cash. UNHCR continued to advocate an end to detention for some 2,000 persons of concern. The Office conducted over 1,200 visits to detention centres and registered more than 3,500 asylum-seekers in detention. Those in the most vulnerable situations were subsequently transferred to the gathering and departure facility (GDF) in Tripoli, where they remained until their evacuation to a third country. In 2019, UNHCR provided a total of 2,427 people with solutions in third countries through resettlement or evacuation to Italy, Niger, Romania and the new Emergency Transit Mechanism in Rwanda.

The spontaneous arrival of some 900 individuals at the GDF between July and October 2019 resulted in the suspension of transfers from detention centres to the GDF in the last two months of the year, due to overcrowding and the facility no longer being able to function as a transit centre. Amid safety concerns, UNHCR announced on 30 January 2020, the suspension of its operational work at the facility. More than 90% of those at the GDF have relocated to urban areas to receive assistance packages, concurrent with the expansion of UNHCR's urban assistance programme.

The number of dangerous crossings to Europe through the central Mediterranean route has decreased. Some 9,000 people were rescued or intercepted at sea by the Libyan Coast Guard and disembarked in Libya, but the majority were subsequently transferred to detention centres.

Given the deteriorating situation in Libya, the Office, in coordination with the Government of **Tunisia** and partners, has undertaken preparedness measures in the event of a potential influx.

In **Algeria**, UNHCR continued to provide humanitarian assistance in the five camps located near Tindouf. The Office continues to advocate the establishment of a national asylum system in order to ensure access to international protection.

**In Egypt**, some 252,600 refugees and asylum-seekers from 57 countries are registered with UNHCR. In 2019, the Government of Egypt announced plans for the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers in the local health and education systems. In **Mauritania**, the Government continued to issue documentation for over 57,000 Malian refugees in and around the Mbera camp. Inflow of new arrivals into Mauritania persisted owing to the deteriorating security situations in Burkina Faso and Mali.

Turning to **Morocco**, UNHCR worked to enhance integration and the self-sustainability of refugees through multisectoral programmes. The Office is working with the Government to renew momentum towards the approval of the national refugee law.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

**Creating a favourable protection environment; ensuring protection of persons of concern from violence and exploitation; achieving durable solutions; and mobilizing support through strategic partnerships** were key areas of focus relating to UNHCR's Global Strategic priorities.

**Detention** of asylum-seekers and refugees is common in a number of MENA countries. UNHCR is concerned about the continued use of immigration detention, particularly that of children. We continue to work on ensuring that alternatives to detention are incorporated into national laws and implemented.

2019 marked 5 years since the beginning of the **IBelong Campaign** leading to the high-level segment on statelessness during the seventieth session of the Executive Committee in October 2019. The Government of Mauritania made several pledges, including to ensure access to civil registration and documentation for refugees. UNHCR is cooperating with the League of Arab States towards the implementation of the Arab Declaration on Belonging and Legal Identity, adopted in 2018.

Working with governments and partners to promote access for refugee children and young people to national education systems ensured 1.2 million school-age Syrian refugees were enrolled in schools. Some 800,000 children, some with disabilities, remain out of school across the region. Access to tertiary education remains limited, with only 1 to 7 per cent of students able to enrol.

In 2019, UNHCR enhanced efforts to integrate **mental health and psychosocial support** as a cross-cutting issue within the overall MENA protection response.

UNHCR uses cash assistance with other services to enhance **child protection**, prioritizing the best interests of the child, and leveraging mental health, psychosocial services, legal aid and community engagement to promote access to civil documentation, including birth and marriage certificates.

**Community-based protection** approaches are being implemented across the region. Over 4,200 community members work directly with UNHCR and partners to identify people at risk and ensure they receive support in an inclusive manner.

Preventing, mitigating and responding to **sexual and gender-based violence** remains a priority for UNHCR in the region. Between January and September 2019, some 100,000 survivors and people at risk, including boys and men, benefited from multisectoral services.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Achieving **durable solutions** continues to be a challenge. Given the protracted nature of displacement in the region, as well as its scope and scale, working towards favourable longer-term national and regional policy frameworks for persons of concern remains a priority including work with **faith-based actors**, the **private sector**, development actors and financial institutions, including the **World Bank**.

Some 41,500 refugees from the region were put forward for resettlement in 2019. This represents only 6 per cent of the region's overall resettlement needs for the year (around 690,000 refugees). In line with the commitments set out in the Global Compact on Refugees, **UNHCR encouraged new resettlement programmes and the expansion of existing ones** as a means of burden- and responsibility-sharing with host countries. We are also working on the expansion of **complementary pathways** for admission to third countries, through implementing access to family reunification, scholarship opportunities and labor mobility schemes.

Country operations across the region engaged civil society, academia and other stakeholders through the **Civil Society Network for Displacement**. The **first regional annual consultations with NGOs and civil society**, held in Jordan in 2019, reinforced continued collaboration.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The MENA region continues to host the largest displaced and conflict affected populations. While the international community has shown solidarity, the bulk of the burden falls on host communities in the region, which have displayed their generosity. They very much deserve to be acknowledged and supported. **Thank you.**