

## STATEMENT

**by Mr. Fuad Huseynov, Deputy Chairman of the State Committee for Affairs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons of the Republic of Azerbaijan at the 74th session of the Executive Committee of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees  
October 9-13, 2023**

**Distinguished Madam Chair! Distinguished Mr. High Commissioner! Excellences! Ladies and Gentlemen!**

On behalf of delegation of the Republic of Azerbaijan I would like to thank High Commissioner for his thought-provoking opening statement, which clearly illustrates present global challenges the UN Refugee Agency, as well as the whole international community, have to face in order to respond to urgent humanitarian needs and large-scale forcible displacement caused by wars, conflicts, persecution, violation of human rights and climate change across the continents. I am confident that the results of this session will be useful for the work and joint efforts to improve the state of refugees and IDPs.

Unfortunately, despite the goal we set in our Global Agenda for 2030 to reduce internal displacement by at least 50 per cent, each year we face an unprecedented growing number of the displaced, which exceeds now 110 million according to UNHCR. As High Commissioner noted in his most recent report, today Europe faces the largest refugee crisis ever since the World War II. The humanity reached the moment when the doubled, even tripled efforts for prevention and solution are an absolute and urgent necessity.

Azerbaijan's sensitivities towards displacement problem are clearly understandable as a country that has been hosting, in per capita terms, one of the highest caseloads of the forcibly displaced in the world in the last three decades, comprising ten percent of country's population of 10 million (those were the victims of a former Armenia-Azerbaijan NK conflict and occupation of 20 percent of Azerbaijani territories). Today, in the aftermath of a 44-day Patriotic War of 2020, which put an end to a 30-year old standing conflict, and not only reinstated territorial integrity and national sovereignty of Azerbaijan within its internationally recognized borders, but also created conditions conducive for safe, dignified and voluntary return of hundreds of thousands of our compatriots to their homeland, Azerbaijan has entered into a new phase of its historical development.

Thanks to the tireless efforts taken by the Government, life now returns to the territories that have experienced unprecedented vandalism in 30 years of Armenia's military occupation. The first groups of displaced families (500 families) have already returned to their places of origin.

Great Return, along with reintegration of liberated areas into the national economy, has been declared as one out of five national priorities for socio-economic development of Azerbaijan to be achieved by 2030. The 1<sup>st</sup> State Program on Great Return was endorsed by Presidential Decree, and by end of a 5-year period a total of 34,500 families (150,000 persons) are planned to be reintegrated to their motherland.

At the same time, I would like to emphasize that Armenia has razed to the ground all the residential areas and contaminated Azerbaijani lands with mines and other unexploded ordnances to the extent that today, according to international experts, this area is considered to be one of the most mine-polluted areas on the Earth (UNHCR's mission to the liberated territories witnessed

this on the ground). By refusing to hand over accurate mine maps in full, Armenia grossly violates fundamental human rights, especially the right to life. Massive landmines in these areas negatively affect the exercise of an inalienable right of hundreds of thousands of IDPs to return to their homes in a safe and dignified manner. To-date 331 Azerbaijanis have been killed or injured by mines in the liberated territories since 2020. IDPs who have been looking forward to seeing their homeland for 30 years are also among them.

Continued heavy illegal military presence of Armenia in sovereign territory of Azerbaijan remained the most serious obstacle to a post-conflict normalization process between the two states, as well as to efforts to reintegrate ethnic Armenian residents of the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan after the signing of Trilateral Statement, under which the conflict was ended and completely new realities emerged in the region.

Unfortunately, despite a good will demonstrated by Azerbaijan for achieving peace in the region and repeated calls to adhere to Trilateral Statement, demanding withdrawal of all Armenian troops from the internationally recognized sovereign territories of Azerbaijan, Armenia continued to plant mines and keep a ten-thousand-armed formation equipped with heavy weaponry in the sovereign soil of Azerbaijan. No sovereign state would tolerate such a heavy illegal military presence on its soil. Nor did Azerbaijan. In response to military provocations, Azerbaijan launched local counter-terror measures (in less than 24 hours), exclusively neutralizing legitimate military targets with precision-guided ammunitions, in full compliance with international humanitarian law – and all measures were taken to avoid collateral damage on civilians and civilian infrastructure. Azerbaijan officially declared and numerous reiterated that the rights and securities of ethnic Armenian residents in Karabakh will be protected and ensured. They have been presented with free choice of legal status/citizenship in Azerbaijan and comprehensive plan for reintegration into Azerbaijan's society (including specific measures designed to address security, municipal self-governance, socio-economic development and enjoyment of rights, in particular those related to education, culture and religion), or freedom of movement. There has not been a single case of forceful expulsion of Armenians from the territory of Azerbaijan. An independent UN mission to Karabakh region of Azerbaijan on October 1, which included also the Director of Coordination Division of UN OCHA, confirmed that there was no damage to civilian infrastructure, including cultural and religious institutions, as well as incidents of violence against civilians (UNHCR's representative in Armenia also confirmed 'no recorded cases of mistreatment/harassment against people on move' – Press Briefing). In this respect, yesterday's statement by Armenian delegation questioning credibility of the UN system is totally unacceptable.

We reiterate that Azerbaijan has nothing to do with decision by local Armenians of Karabakh region of Azerbaijan (heavily influenced by separatist puppet regime causing panic among population) to move to Armenia or elsewhere. We are willing to create conditions for a better livelihood than they were under the hostage of the military junta created by Armenia; Azerbaijan is determined to reintegrate Armenian residents as equal citizens and the Constitution, the national legislation of Azerbaijan, and international commitments we have undertaken provide the solid ground to this end. Azerbaijan has a proud history of uniting different ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities within one nation. Ethnic Armenian residents are welcome to be part of our peaceful co-existence model.

Despite such serious challenges as severe mine-contamination and total destruction of the infrastructure, we are confident that with concerted efforts of international community, in the coming few years Azerbaijan will be in a position to present a new model of post-conflict rehabilitation and reintegration of the displaced persons, and will convert lands liberated from occupation, once abandoned and devastated, into a place of prosperity and fortune.

Restoring justice for IDPs and refugees is a solid foundation for any long-term peace and stability in the region, and the rights of 300,000 Azerbaijani refugees forcibly expelled from their ancestral homeland in Armenia, to return in safety and dignity, also need to be safeguarded and form part of any long-lasting peace agreement.

**Mr. High Commissioner,**

The Government of Azerbaijan and UNHCR enjoy solid and productive cooperation, based on the common goal to provide protection and adequate assistance to IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons. My country is making serious efforts to fulfill its international commitments on migration and refugee issues in the spirit of a fair and constructive collaboration. Azerbaijan has successfully completed implementation of the pledges voiced at the 1<sup>st</sup> Global Refugee Forum in Geneva in 2019, and plans to include, among others, the pledge to ensure a safe and dignified return of the displaced population to their homeland for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Global Refugee Forum in December 2023 (MoU with UNHCR on supporting durable solutions and voluntary return of IDPs in safety and dignity was signed). The Government of Azerbaijan recognizes the crucial times we live through, marked with a number of serious challenges, and we believe that only a genuine international effort towards adhering to the accepted international commitments, mutual respect and awareness of responsibility vis-a-vis future generations can produce just solutions to these problems, and Azerbaijan is committed to playing its role in this global process.

Thank you for your attention.