

High Commissioner's Opening Statement
To the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme
(Geneva, 9 October 2023)

Madam Chair,
Vice Chairs,
Rapporteur,
Distinguished delegates, including our newest member, Angola,

The shocking images of the appalling attacks carried out by Hamas against Israeli civilians have filled our screens in the last 48 hours. We are now witnessing another war in the Middle East, the escalation of which will inevitably cause more suffering to civilians, both Israelis and Palestinians; risks bringing grave instability to a region already plagued by tensions; and is another, very dangerous piece in a growing mosaic of crises which — if not addressed courageously — spells doom for world peace.

UNHCR is not mandated to deal with the immediate — and indeed tragic — humanitarian consequences of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it is present and active in the region. And it is present and active wherever war forces people to flee. Bear with me, therefore, if I start my annual statement to this Committee with some reflections on war. Because it is mainly conflict that has driven forced displacement to unprecedented numbers — 110 million refugees and displaced people, the highest in decades.

As conflicts grow, so does disrespect for international humanitarian law. Therefore, civilians are the most impacted. Innocent people must flee to stay alive, must run with their children, leave behind everything, often family members who are too sick or too old to make the arduous journeys.

And the words that some of the refugees fleeing the devastating conflict in Sudan told me when I visited Egypt, South Sudan and Chad this summer are telling: destruction; death; torture; rape.

They recounted how they had to run from the brutal violence that erupted without warning on 15 April. Their lives upended as suddenly as were those of the Ukrainians the year before — and of many Ukrainians now, facing every day the death and destruction resulting from the Russian invasion.

These stories are those of all 110 million people around the world who have been forced from their homes by conflict, violence, and persecution.

We often hear about the need to stop irregular movements. I understand, but let us not forget that 110 million people had no *choice* but to run from men who *chose* to fight; to kill; to persecute.

110 million people whom we at UNHCR are tasked to help protect, assist, and find solutions for.

Yet, the task with which you have entrusted UNHCR is at one of its most difficult moments in our history.

The world is increasingly divided, fragmented, and inward-looking.

Far too many politicians portray cooperation as capitulation.

They foment culture wars to divide into 'us and them'.

They tolerate (if not espouse) racism, xenophobia, misinformation, disinformation, religious hatred and hate speech.

But the world today — divided as it is — is smaller than ever. The climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic shocks show this. And yet, talk and action continue to be selfish and short-sighted.

My borders.

My country.

My resources.

And so, instead of telling you about solutions resulting from peace agreements and good governance, from respect for human rights, from progress on education, health, protecting the planet, and other Sustainable Development Goals, I come here year after year and have to speak about an ever-growing number of refugees and displaced people fleeing violence and wars.

Sudan today.

Ukraine last year.

Or Ethiopia the year before.

Or Syria, Myanmar, the Sahel, South Sudan, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and many others all before that.

Madam Chair,

The global situation is indeed dire, and it is getting worse. People are suffering, and humanitarians are being asked to pick up more pieces in more parts of the world; and to *try* to hold them together for longer. We are frequently asked to do this alone in the absence of political solutions. Engaging with those in control of territory and sometimes of entire countries, necessary as it may be, is often made difficult by geopolitics.

I appreciate the challenges and am sadly aware of today's divided context — and divisive politics. But I am asking — quite solemnly — that you focus at least on the areas on which we

can agree and especially that people forced to flee their homes due to conflict or persecution have rights — as human beings *and* as refugees and displaced. And that a strong, well-resourced UNHCR remains necessary, perhaps more than ever before.

Since we met last year, UNHCR — under the able guidance of Assistant High Commissioner for Operations Raouf Mazou — has responded to 44 new emergencies in 31 countries, capping off an awful record of number of crises in one year. The latest emergency saw 100,000 refugees arriving in Armenia from Karabakh just a few days ago. We are helping Armenia with the humanitarian response, including the identification of those with specific needs, and a humanitarian appeal was launched on Saturday. We also stand ready to assist in the search for solutions — which, when the time comes, should include addressing the voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees and other displaced people.

But we have seen violence continue in many other places, such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where nearly 1.5 million people have been newly displaced this year alone, 78,000 of whom fled within the country in just one day last week.

Or in Central Sahel, where — amidst growing political instability — violence perpetrated by armed groups is forcing more people to flee, including to coastal states.

Or in Somalia, where the climate emergency coupled with conflict has forced nearly 900,000 from their homes.

Or in Myanmar, where hundreds of thousands have been and are being displaced by fighting.

We, and other UN agencies, international and national NGOs, the Red Cross movement, as well as a growing number of refugee-led organisations – are literally on the frontlines of these and other crises. I am proud to be associated with my UNHCR and UN colleagues, and our partners, as we carry out our work in line with the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, even in the most difficult circumstances.

I saw, for example, the dire conditions in which humanitarians live and work alongside refugees in eastern Chad, close to the border with Sudan. Where day after day, night after night, colleagues help protect, support and provide the basics, including much-needed psychosocial support, to traumatized refugees. I listened as they told me how — at great risk — they also deliver supplies across the border into Darfur to Sudanese people in desperate need.

I saw the aftermath of the earthquake in southern Türkiye and in Syria — a level of destruction I have never witnessed before – and how humanitarians, despite losing their homes, possessions, and in many cases, family, friends and dear colleagues, were working hard to support the authorities and others in need, in a situation in which a natural disaster occurred in an already fragile area, such as we saw with the devastating earthquake in western Afghanistan on Saturday.

By being with affected people in the most remote locations, we also see how climate change adds fuel to the embers of unresolved grievances — poor governance, inequity, inequality — and combines with conflict, violence, and persecution to displace more people, including across borders.

Moreover, many of the world's displaced already live in highly climate-vulnerable settings and in countries which find it challenging to adapt and build resilience, like in the Sahel or in the Horn of Africa. As these areas become increasingly uninhabitable, the displaced and their hosts will further struggle to access water, energy, livelihoods — everything that would enable them to adapt to further environmental stresses.

Against this stark reality, as highlighted in our Strategic Plan for Climate Action, we are focusing on ensuring that climate-related displacement is an element of national adaptation plans, including through early warning systems, and that services and assistance provided are environmentally sustainable. We work with partners to help governments strengthen resilience, prevent displacement where possible, or support the displaced withstand the massive shocks and stresses arising from the climate emergency alongside their host communities.

Climate-related displacement can generate protection challenges. This is why climate action must also be seen through a human rights and legal perspective. In this context, UNHCR's expertise and its mandate for refugee protection are useful. We are providing technical and legal advice and guidance to States to ensure that international protection norms are upheld in situations of climate-related displacement.

And we will also continue to reduce our own carbon footprint, including by prioritizing strategic investments in renewable energy to transition many of our offices from reliance on fossil fuels.

But of course, it is addressing the root causes of climate change which is the most urgent — and we all expect leaders to take the right decisions. As they deliberate at COP28 in Dubai later this year, I hope that space will be given to listen to those most affected by the climate emergency, including refugees and displaced people, so that action — and especially the allocation of resources — is also guided by lived experience.

Madam Chair,

Given this backdrop, I am extremely worried about the underfunding of UNHCR and, broadly speaking, humanitarian operations. More worried than I have been in almost eight years in which I have held this office.

The Humanitarian Response Plan inside Sudan, which includes the more than four million internally displaced since April, is — for example — just one-third funded. The Regional Refugee Response Plan for refugees from Sudan, which calls for \$1 billion, is just one quarter funded. Host governments and humanitarians are doing their best, but with vastly insufficient resources to stabilise populations, nobody should be surprised that we are already witnessing the movement of people embarking on onward, dangerous journeys. Among those reaching

Tunisia and Italy today are Sudanese nationals who have recently fled the fighting and have moved on from countries neighbouring Sudan where assistance is vastly insufficient. This reminds us, sadly, of the situation in 2015, when thousands of Syrian and other refugees moved from the Middle East to Europe as assistance started declining — and by the way, the number of Syrians attempting to cross the Mediterranean now is also increasing at a time when humanitarian aid in Syria and in neighbouring countries like Jordan and Lebanon is experiencing, again, drastic reductions.

In Ukraine, humanitarian needs persist. Anyone who has visited Ukraine since the war began knows that the stoicism and resilience of the people are truly inspiring. International support does not just save lives. It also buoys the strength of the people to adapt to the changing circumstances.

But aid fatigue grows fast these days. Allow me to emphasise again that humanitarian support to Ukrainians — including those internally displaced who remain the focus of our large operational presence in support of the Government — must continue and must not falter, especially as people face another looming winter.

And allow me also to underline how important it is for *all* refugees and displaced people around the world to know that they have support — material, financial, moral, political. I appreciate the challenges and pressures that donors are facing. Their citizens are also confronted by inflation, unemployment, economic stagnation and other challenges. Therefore, I am grateful that humanitarian funding has continued to be substantial. Last year, for example, UNHCR enjoyed very high levels of contributions, led, once again, by the United States of America, followed by Germany — and both made exemplary efforts in ensuring that adequate resources were available to respond not only to the massive crisis in Ukraine but also in other situations.

I am also most grateful to our top donors of unearmarked resources: Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands. They are amongst the few who are resisting — and I hope that you will continue to resist! — the otherwise dramatic drop in unearmarked contributions, which runs contrary to the principles of the “Grand Bargain” commitments: just 12 per cent of government contributions last year were unearmarked, leaving us with little flexibility to respond to new emergencies or operate in underfunded contexts.

2022 marked also a high point in our non-government contributions with \$1.2 billion — 21 per cent of our global income — from individuals, companies and foundations. The private sector is also engaging in advocacy, combatting misinformation, hiring refugees, expanding complementary pathways, and investing in refugee and host communities to create economic opportunities for the future, a true reflection of the spirit of the Global Compact on Refugees. And UNHCR has expanded innovative financing initiatives, including continuing to grow support through Islamic philanthropy, as well as breaking ground in other areas, such as the Green Financing Facility.

All this support is appreciated. But the reality of today’s world is that there are more humanitarian needs than humanitarian resources available. Some key donors are telling us that their humanitarian budgets — despite more crises — are being reduced. Private funding

will be substantial, but not at the same levels as last year, when the Ukraine crisis drove a large solidarity effort. Funding levels this year and projections for 2024 are thus dangerously low.

I know what many of you will — legitimately — suggest. And I want to assure you all. We *are* prioritizing. We are making many hard decisions — believe me — to be even more efficient and effective. We have introduced new and streamlined systems, tools and processes. We are rationalising staffing structures to address duplications and gaps between headquarters, regional bureaux and country operations. In so doing, we are reducing the number of posts and the expenditure on staff to ensure that the focus stays on delivery. And in the context of wider United Nations reforms, we work closely with other agencies to rationalise expenditure where possible, such as with the integrated, unbranded fleet management service we co-lead with the World Food Programme.

Yet we continue to face a shortfall of \$650 million that must be filled before the end of this year. This is over and above contributions made and under discussion. And the outlook for 2024 is even more worrying, and it is most concerning for us and our closest partners, like the World Food Programme, which plays an indispensable role in providing food to refugees.

Some of our most reliable donors have promised help. It is very urgent, otherwise we will have to cut expenditure in many vital areas, including emergency responses. I am appealing to all — to all — for extra efforts, including donor states in the Gulf region and others whose contributions have declined or have never been substantial.

The consequences of financial shortfalls are stark, affecting refugees and displaced people and putting pressure on host countries (which remain the largest donors to refugees). We have already seen worrying cuts to food assistance in Bangladesh and Jordan, and several African countries, resulting in increased onward movement for some and negative coping mechanisms for others, with funding shortfalls leading, for example, also to reduced protection services — like in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, one of the places where these protection services are most dramatically needed.

Madam Chair,

With humanitarian resources stretched and their sustainability in question, it is crucial that we persist in strengthening partnerships with development organisations.

We have made phenomenal progress — and I use this word deliberately — phenomenal progress since the affirmation of the Global Compact on Refugees. OECD data highlight that just over the two-year period 2020-2021, more than \$11 billion in development assistance — from bilateral and multilateral banks — has been contributed to refugee responses. This is *in addition* to the funding that comes through UN agencies, NGOs, and coordinated humanitarian appeals.

I encourage you to read the World Bank's Development Report on Migrants, Refugees, and Societies, which proposes an integrated framework to maximise the development impacts of

hosting refugees, and I am looking forward to the release of the OECD refugee financing survey data, which will be available in time for the Global Refugee Forum.

One key challenge, however, is that the impact of development aid in refugee contexts becomes visible in the medium and long term in situations in which fast responses are needed. But we are beginning to see development assistance deployed at the start of crises, and in fragile situations — what I call, perhaps incorrectly (but it describes what I mean!) “emergency development”. In August, I travelled to Chad with the Managing Director for Operations of the World Bank, Anna Bjerde. While there, Anna announced \$340 million worth of development projects to help refugees and host communities. This was coupled with a separate announcement by the United States of \$163 million in *humanitarian* assistance to the Sudan situation. This was a very good example of humanitarian and development streams coming together at the beginning, early in a crisis, and I appeal that we follow this model in more places around the world, ensuring, of course, that commitments made by development organisations can be implemented rapidly. Because this helps enable the quick inclusion of refugees in national programmes, providing them with services and opportunities, while supporting host countries, until such time as refugees can return home voluntarily, in safety and with dignity.

Madam Chair,

Despite the funding shortfalls and reductions, UNHCR remains determined to press for solutions to displacement, even in challenging circumstances. Thanks largely to the United States, Canada and Australia, more refugees will depart for resettlement this year than last. Complementary pathways have also expanded, such as with programmes led by Ireland, Italy and other countries, and the significant efforts of Germany, Canada and Sweden in refugee education, among other areas. And speaking of education, thanks to the flagship DAFI scholarship programme, seven per cent of refugees are now in tertiary education, up from just one per cent a few years ago, putting us hopefully on pace to meet the target of 15 per cent of refugees in tertiary education by 2030.

States have also found some solutions to situations of statelessness. For example, in July, President Ruto of Kenya issued documentation confirming Kenyan nationality to members of the Pemba community who have lived in the country for years, allowing them to become full members of Kenyan society. As we enter the last year of the #IBelong campaign and launch the Global Alliance, a platform for learning and exchange which you are all welcome to join, I hope other States will accelerate action to address statelessness.

And including refugees in services and giving them access to economic opportunities remains key in protracted and even new situations of displacement. We are pursuing these options in several African countries, like Uganda for example, and in other continents, like in Colombia and Ecuador, which are leading examples of well-managed hospitality and the search for solutions.

Kenya, by the way, is also generously hosting over 600,000 refugees and is taking important steps to improve its protection and solutions framework, including through the forward-looking *Shirika Plan*, which promotes socio-economic inclusion of refugees by transforming

camps into integrated settlements. I am honoured that Kenya's Prime Cabinet Secretary will be with us tomorrow at an important side event on the *Shirika Plan*, to which you are all invited. UNHCR has already helped mobilize around \$200 million in development funding, and I encourage donors, both bilateral and multilateral, to participate in this ground-breaking initiative, including through climate-related windows.

And in spite of the prevailing challenges, the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees similarly remains an important platform. Nearly 200,000 Afghan displaced people and around 20,000 refugees have returned in the past 18 months, including to priority areas for return and reintegration. At the same time, the appalling restrictions on women and girls by the *de facto* authorities continue to deny them rights and future. As part of UN-wide efforts, we continue to encourage a reversal of these regressive policies. But meanwhile, it is important that humanitarian agencies are able to provide the people of Afghanistan, especially women and girls, with the critical support that they need and deserve. It will help them cope with hardships, as has been the case in the past two years, and will also serve to remind them that after 20 years of promises, they are not alone. The needs are immense, and I therefore urge that humanitarian operations are better resourced and more operational flexibility is granted by donors so we can continue to operate. And it is imperative that Iran and Pakistan, the main countries hosting Afghan refugees, are adequately supported. For decades, they have given protection to millions of Afghan refugees, and we trust that they will continue. Reports from Pakistan of possible deportations of undocumented Afghans are of concern, and we continue to engage with the authorities in Islamabad to help find solutions to address the challenges they face while ensuring refugee protection.

Solutions require a combination of factors, including trust that returning home will be safe, as well as resources to ensure the sustainability of returns. This is the case in places like Syria, for example, where more must be done on both fronts if we are to make significant progress. Recent discussions with the Government of Syria are important, and I encourage them to continue to address protection considerations and build the necessary trust. I also encourage more support to early recovery activities, enabling those who opt to return voluntarily to live dignified lives.

Myanmar presents another challenging situation in which we must all do more so that the Rohingya, a Muslim minority which remains one of the most discriminated in the world, can see prospects of returning voluntarily with their safety, rights and dignity respected. We owe it also to the countries hosting Rohingya refugees, and especially Bangladesh.

And we must not forget that solutions for internal displacement are within reach in some places. We are working closely with other agencies to achieve progress on the Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement in 16 pilot countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and the Americas.

Elsewhere, large numbers of refugees want to return, but resources are *the* inhibiting factor. In addition to the more than 225,000 Burundian refugees who have voluntarily returned over the years, for example, another 24,000 have now expressed the desire to return and reintegrate in Burundi, primarily from Tanzania, as well as Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda. But our repatriation programme faces a shortfall of more than \$13 million to facilitate

transportation and help them restart their lives at home. This is a rather straightforward consequence of funding shortfalls and an example of why you will continue to hear me appeal in the strongest of terms for greater financial support, especially where we can help refugees get where they want to go most: home.

Madam Chair,

Mixed flows of refugees moving alongside migrants along routes fraught with risks, like the scourge of human trafficking, represent one of the biggest challenges we must face. We all agree that these movements are complicated to manage. For countries of destination, of course, but also those of transit and origin. We see this in the Americas, across Africa and towards Europe, and elsewhere. The Darien, the Mediterranean, the Bay of Bengal have become synonymous with lives lost, vulnerable people exploited, and States facing increasingly difficult challenges. It is therefore imperative that we look at what can be done at each step of those long routes. I have referred to a “whole-of-route” approach — a concept that is gaining ground, which is good news, and which underpins important frameworks like the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, or the Pact on Migration and Asylum which will hopefully be adopted by the European Union.

I had a very constructive meeting last week with the new Director-General of the International Organization for Migration, Amy Pope. Among several things discussed, Amy and I agreed that we will step up our advocacy with States on the need to take this “panoramic” approach to mixed movements, and we’re already doing excellent work with the United States Government in respect of their challenges.

Because migration and border controls are necessary and are a country’s sovereign right. But it is both impractical and short-sighted to focus *only* on these measures, as is often the case. A whole-of-route approach must ensure access to territory for asylum claims as well as adequate capacity for fair and fast systems to make quick decisions on who is a refugee or not and then to return those without protection needs in compliance with their rights and dignity.

It requires strong resettlement and complementary pathways for refugees. And it also means (and on this, the Director-General of IOM is best placed to advise you) ensuring that safe legal migration paths are available. This is good for people choosing to migrate, for countries and economies that desperately need migrants, and also for asylum channels, which are often the only option available and, as a consequence, end up being overloaded.

A whole-of-route approach requires countries of destination to work with those of transit to provide resources to strengthen their migration and refugee management systems and give opportunities to people on the move. Let’s debunk the myth that all refugees and migrants are heading to rich countries — many, or even most, will exit at the first safe and viable opportunity — if it is available. Let’s remember that 69 per cent of refugees, for example, are in countries neighbouring their own and nearly 90 per cent of *all* forcibly displaced people remain in low- and middle-income countries. But it is also true, as we are seeing as I said already with the Sudan response, that if aid dwindles, some will take dangerous journeys or fall into the criminal hands of traffickers.

And of course, a whole of route approach requires much – much! – more to be done in countries of origin to address issues like human rights, lack of good governance and the rule of law, and ending conflict; as well as addressing the climate emergency, the development deficit, and creating more economic opportunities, especially for the youth.

Allow me to repeat: no matter the challenge, UNHCR is here to support States. We will work with you to find practical solutions — as we have done in many places — that respect the right to seek asylum, international law and States’ obligations, while understanding and adapting to the specific challenges. But let me be equally clear – we will always say that access to territory to seek asylum must be maintained. This is the cornerstone of international refugee law and reflects the principle of *non-refoulement* also enshrined in customary international law. We cannot and will not accept externalising or outsourcing asylum obligations.

Madam Chair,

I remain committed to making UNHCR more diverse, equitable and inclusive. We plan to launch a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Strategic Framework later this year, which will help us identify and achieve goals in this area. I am also proud of the steps we have taken over the past years in preventing sexual exploitation and abuse as well as sexual harassment and wish to pay tribute to Deputy High Commissioner Kelly Clements for her leadership in this area, not just in UNHCR, but across the United Nations system. And while we are pleased with progress, we know that we can never rest when it comes to this or other issues of integrity. Constant vigilance and continued action remain personal priorities for me and our Senior Executive Team.

And Madam Chair,

UNHCR is a construct of Member States. You have tasked us with a supervisory mandate over the application of the 1951 Refugee Convention and you have also mandated us to help protect people who have lost the protection of their State. Moreover, you have continued to ask us – time after time, resolution after resolution – that we uphold our mandate and protect those fleeing war and persecution.

In this context, before I close I would like to raise an issue which has led to difficult discussions among members of this Committee and wish to reaffirm that people who have been persecuted due to their sexual orientation or gender identity *are* of concern to UNHCR and must be protected if they seek asylum in another country. I assure you that on this — like on other matters — we will continue to engage in a respectful and inclusive dialogue with every State, while upholding my mandated responsibilities in all their aspects, as enshrined in instruments and the law.

Madam Chair,

In just nine weeks many of us will be back together for the second Global Refugee Forum. I am grateful to Switzerland for again co-hosting the meeting and to the co-convenors past and

present for your steadfast support and sage advice. I would also like to express my thanks to Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Gillian Triggs, for leading the preparations of the Forum. This is Gillian's last Executive Committee meeting. Therefore, thank you, Gillian, for your consistent, straightforward, clear, and eloquent leadership in protection matters over the past few years, for your positive spirit, your principled but practical approach, and your much-appreciated friendship.

At the Global Refugee Forum, we will take stock of the progress made towards operationalizing the Global Compact and of pledges made at the first Forum in 2019 and will renew our commitment through further whole-of-society pledges made by States, cities, the private sector, NGOs, academia, faith-based actors, UN country teams, sports organizations, and many more. We will count on a substantial presence this year of refugee representatives.

But I ask you to come to that meeting with energy, passion, and above all with a sense of unity in support of some of the world's most vulnerable people — the refugees — and their hosts. Because refugees have seen more devastating divisions than we can imagine, and because they have been divided from homes, from family, from friends, they especially need and deserve us to come *together*.

Together around protection, humanitarian aid, development, opportunity, inclusion, and *action* to better share burdens and responsibilities.

Together in the resolve to find solutions to at least this one global challenge.

Thank you.