Madame Chairperson of the Executive Committee,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank you for your presence today and for your support to UNHCR's operations in the West and Central Africa region. While I trust that you have reviewed our regional update, I will use this opportunity to provide context around the facts and figures. I aim to illuminate the human picture, highlighting the critical situation faced by an increasing number of forcibly displaced people. I will shed light on the reality in which UNHCR and its staff, beset by unprecedented financial and operational constraints, are doing their utmost to deliver on our mandate and duty towards the people we serve.

When my predecessor stood before you last year, the total number of people UNHCR served in the region stood at 13.1 million. In 2024, that number is expected to increase by over a million, to 14.3 million, driven mainly by the Sudan Situation which has seen over half a million refugees arrive in Chad since April 2023.

Despite the number of displaced people doubling since 2019, the region remains one that welcomes protects and provides opportunities. We must consider how long states in the region can sustain their asylum policies if support from the international community decreases. How can we maintain the welcoming environment, and support these states in their efforts?

[1:15]

Chad has always been a most generous host country, but – aside from an influx of some 45,000 people from Cameroon and 11,600 from Darfur in 2022, it had until recently primarily hosted protracted refugee populations. UNHCR's interventions therefore were oriented towards inclusion and solutions.

Today, urgent action is needed to address critical gaps in meeting the lifesaving needs of Sudanese refugees, reorienting limited resources back to an emergency response.

Many member states here today will have sent missions to Chad and so I suspect you will have some understanding of the scale of human suffering and the logistical and financial impediments to addressing these needs in the remote east of the country.

So large are the daily arrivals that camps have been expanded and new ones built. The government of Chad, to whom I would like to express my appreciation for their generosity and support of these refugees, despite juggling the needs of their own population, is urgently requesting the establishment of three new camps.

But resources are not available, with even basic emergency support outstripping the funding available to UNHCR, its sister agencies and partners. Even the relocation of refugees to new sites **– a protection and security imperative**– is beyond our capacity. In 2023, such relocations did occur but only under the generous auspices of the French military.

In Chad, we have doubled down on our efforts to engage with development actors, notably the World Bank, recognising that long-term solutions need to be pursued from the onset of a crisis to help people transition from humanitarian assistance to self-reliance. Many of the Sudanese who have sought refuge

are educated and skilled. Their own competencies can be leveraged in their favour and we can seek to integrate them into existing national services.

[1:45]

Madam Chairperson,

I would like to also draw the attention of all present today to the **Sahel Situation**; one that has been losing visibility which is a risk, not least because the crisis has ramifications far beyond the region. In 2023, the long-feared spill-over into the Coastal Countries was a testament to that, seeing over 100,000 people from Burkina Faso alone seeking refuge in the Coastal Countries of Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo. These movements are due to insecurity, conflicts, political instability, and competition over scarce resources.

Against this backdrop, the Sahel region is undergoing a geopolitical realignment with far-reaching impacts. The people whom we serve and the rural communities that host them are amongst those worst hit, with sanctions exacerbating precarious economic outcomes.

In Mali, the non-renewal of MINUSMA's mandate, has restricted the humanitarian space by placing the security and logistical burden on UNHCR and its partners, cutting people off from aid and pushing them to seek safety in neighbouring countries, and increasingly further afield as part of mixed movements into Europe.

We remain in the Sahel, and we will continue to stay and deliver for the forcibly displaced, prioritizing interventions at community level to support them to become more cohesive, equipped to absorb shocks, and sustainably host, protect, include, and empower displaced persons.

Just as the Sudan Situation is one that straddles multiple regions requiring the coordination of two UNHCR Bureaus with ripple effect that are felt on the other side of the Mediterranean, the same must be said about the Sahel Crisis.

[1:25]

Madam Chairperson,

If it is not me who informs you of the USD 630 million budgetary requirement for Chad in the Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, it is our colleagues at WFP who might have warned you that almost half a million displaced people in eastern Chad will lose access to food aid this month.

The reality of increasing needs in the face of decreasing funding is progressively acute. We are concerned about the impact on our emergency response and on our programmes for protracted caseloads. While we are working hard to integrate refugees and implement solutions, displaced populations still rely on UNHCR for their protection needs and survival.

There is a risk of backsliding where we have made hard-won progress.

[00:40]

Madam Chairperson,

In our region, a concerning dynamic has emerged that heightens the complexity of the situation of the people we serve and threatens to see UNHCR's efforts regress not only operationally but also in terms of the very legal foundations and essence of our mandate.

In late 2023, our operations in the Coastal Countries began to report cases of refoulement, a trend uncharacteristic of a region where we have always seen borders remain open and governments exercise good faith towards refugees by maintaining an open-door policy.

While governments remain committed to their obligations towards displaced people and legal frameworks exist, security concerns abound. UNHCR is engaging with government security and stabilisation actors to maintain a balance between legitimate concerns and rights which must be afforded to refugees and asylum seekers.

The support of the international community is crucial.

One of the first steps is the Regional Dialogue on National Security and Refugee Protection taking place in Togo, on the 21st and 22nd of March. Co-organized by UNHCR it aims to provide a framework for discussions on the challenges faced by these States in securing their territories and protecting civilians, while ensuring the international protection of refugees.

[1.10]

I do not want to leave you with a picture that betrays the **opportunities**. **Transforming** the way, we do things is not merely a necessity but the soundest way to achieve the best outcomes.

We are optimistic about our efforts to foster inclusion.

Leveraging **data** has significantly benefited engagement with development actors. Systematically gathering and sharing displacement and protection data enable these actors and governments to effectively include forcibly displaced populations in their programming and response.

Our work with **local actors**, has fostered complementary collaborations. enhanced knowledge exchange, deepened understanding of communities, increased access and ensured a sustainable presence.

Madame Chairperson of the Executive Committee,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Now, more than ever, it's crucial to demonstrate the added value of our work to our donors. I hope that the challenging funding situation and high needs on the ground underscore the urgency of supporting our operations in West and Central Africa. Your continued support is essential in helping UNHCR fulfil its mandate and provide assistance to those in need.

Thank you.

[00:50]

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