
**Executive Committee of the
High Commissioner's Programme**

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Summary record,* Thursday, 14 March 2024, at 10:10 a.m.

Chairperson: Mr. Cristian Espinosa Cañizares (Ecuador)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Mr. Cristian Espinosa Cañizares (Ecuador), 1st Vice-Chairperson, chaired the discussion.

Regional activities and global programmes *(continued)*

a. Regional updates *(continued)*

v. Asia and the Pacific

1. The **Director of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific** (UNHCR) thanked refugee host countries, donors and partners for making the work of UNHCR possible. She had taken up her post at a challenging time, with more than seven million refugees in the region: the highest number since records began. Displaced people from Afghanistan and Myanmar remained in dire need. In a recent visit to Afghanistan, she had heard about the devastating impact of edicts, particularly on women and girls, and in all her discussions with the authorities she had highlighted their effect and the need for change. In Kandahar, she had met with families who had recently returned from Pakistan, with more than half a million having returned since the end of 2023. For many returnees it was their first time in their home country and they needed support to reintegrate, with opportunities for work, education, resources and a place to live. UNHCR would continue to support returnees and to improve conditions in their areas of return. Millions of Afghan refugees remained in neighbouring countries, largely in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. To support those countries, the Regional Refugee Response Plan for 2024-2025 sought to assist 7.3 million Afghans and host communities and more than 50 partners. She counted on the strong support of members as they planned how to allocate resources for the coming year. UNHCR remained committed to the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees and hoped to hold another meeting with the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2024. She thanked the Core Group of the Support Platform of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees for helping to garner resources and support for the situation.

2. The situation in Myanmar had worsened in recent months; increases in violence and conflict had led to nearly three million internally displaced persons in the country while some people had also tried to move across borders. UNHCR called on countries neighbouring Myanmar to provide safety and refuge to those in need. In that context, it was critical to sustain support to countries hosting refugees, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and to the single largest host, Bangladesh. The 2024 Response Plan for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh had been launched on the previous day with senior officials from the Government of Bangladesh. UNHCR and its partners required \$852 million to support one million refugees and their generous host communities. UNHCR counted on the support of members which had been steadfast and deeply appreciated since the major influx in 2017. The generosity of donors was particularly appreciated given the high number of emergencies around the globe. UNHCR was working on further cost-saving and efficiency-gaining measures and rationalization, but funding shortfalls were already impacting refugees in Malaysia, Indonesia and Bangladesh.

3. Statelessness remained a major issue in the region. Progress had been made, but 2.5 million stateless people still resided in Asia. She had recently attended the World Conference on Statelessness 2024 in Malaysia, the largest ever convened on the subject, at which she had reaffirmed UNHCR's commitment to the issue in the region. As the #IBelong Campaign to End Statelessness drew to an end, it was hoped that the launch of the Global Alliance to End Statelessness would provide a platform for action. UNHCR had hosted the second Global Refugee Forum in December 2023 where more than 160 commitments had been made for and from the Asia region, including major pledges for Afghanistan and Myanmar. 2024 presented an opportunity to shift from commitment to impact, building on the compassion and goodwill evoked at the Forum and demonstrated every day in the region. In closing, she thanked UNHCR colleagues in the field for their commitment and dedication to serving displaced people, highlighting especially the work of national colleagues in Myanmar and dedicated female colleagues and partners in Afghanistan, with whom she had been honoured to mark International Women's Day in Kandahar on 8 March.

4. The representative of the **European Union** (group statement of the European Union and its member States) expressed deep concern about the situation in Afghanistan, where the population continued to face not only a severe humanitarian crisis, with alarming poverty and food insecurity, but also a human rights crisis with devastating consequences, especially for women and girls. The European Union had responded with funding to UNHCR in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries.

The European Union condemned the Taliban's deliberate and systemic oppression of women and girls and would continue to call for the full and equal enjoyment of their human rights and for their protection from all forms of violence, in accordance with international obligations.

5. The European Union appreciated that UNHCR was responding to the humanitarian needs of returnees, providing protection and basic needs services, as well as life-saving assistance. UNHCR's work demonstrated the relevance of collaborative international efforts to uphold international standards. The European Union remained committed to a comprehensive regional response for Afghan refugees and recalled that UNHCR continued to advocate against their involuntary return. The Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and central Asian countries were hosting millions of forcibly displaced Afghans; their access to education, health and livelihoods was acknowledged and their access to protection, registration and documentation should continue to be encouraged. As confirmed by UNHCR, the conditions in Afghanistan were not conducive to safe, voluntary and dignified return. Until the United Nations protection thresholds were met, it was key to ensure that the right to asylum was respected, the principle of non-refoulement was maintained and the resilience of refugees and host communities continued to be strengthened. Concerning the recent decision in Pakistan to repatriate unregistered foreigners, the European Union reiterated that respect for human rights was essential and underlined the importance of screening, verifying and registering Afghans and all those who were entitled to international protection. The European Union supported efforts to provide Afghans with a sense of security and predictability through the extension of relevant identity documents.

6. Three years after the military coup in Myanmar, the humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate. The European Union closely followed developments in conflict-affected areas and urged all parties to respect International Humanitarian Law, including the protection of civilians and reiterated its call on the military authorities to immediately stop the indiscriminate use of force and ensure unhindered humanitarian access. The European Union supported the efforts of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Nations to help Myanmar find a peaceful solution and encouraged UNHCR to continue to engage with host countries, ASEAN and other regional actors to promote cross-border assistance.

7. The European Union recognized the challenging tasks of UNHCR related to the Rohingya refugee response and insisted on the importance of robust safeguards for the protection of Rohingya refugees in the camps, appropriate monitoring mechanisms, dedicated resources and cooperation with national authorities to ensure accountability for criminal acts. The European Union reiterated its support for the 2023 Joint Response Plan (JRP) for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis and its offer to accompany new advocacy initiatives aimed at preparing refugees for self-sufficiency in line with pledges announced at the Global Refugee Forum 2023. She deplored the tragic loss of life following the alarming surge of Rohingya deaths in the waters of the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea and supported the Office's call for prevention measures, conducting search and rescue operations and finding a solution for safe disembarkation. In Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, access to basic services were encouraged and UNHCR's efforts to register all asylum-seekers and refugees in need of protection was welcomed.

8. The representative of **the Philippines** expressed concern at the situations of large-scale and protracted displacement in the Asia and Pacific region and drew attention to the social and economic challenges they posed for refugee-hosting countries. The Philippines encouraged the international community to continue to support Rohingya refugees as the crisis remained one of the most underfunded operations of UNHCR. Bangladesh and neighbouring countries had shown generosity in sheltering hundreds of thousands of refugees; ultimately they needed support to transition to long-term, durable solutions that upheld the human rights of the Rohingya, which could only be achieved through the political will and determination of the parties involved. The Philippines was committed to providing support through the refugee response plans for the Afghanistan and Rohingya situations and aspired to scale up its programme to take in Rohingya refugee students through its Complementary Pathways programme, as promised as part of its pledge at the Global Refugee Forum 2023. At the regional level, the Philippines supported ASEAN, which played an important role in addressing the political situation and in providing humanitarian assistance, facilitating repatriation and promoting sustainable development.

9. The Philippines appreciated the support of UNHCR in addressing statelessness in the region and it had worked successfully with UNHCR and other international and civil society organizations in its statelessness and birth registration campaigns. On the seventh anniversary of the #IBelong

campaign, attention should continue to be given to the challenge of ending statelessness and achieving positive and measurable solutions. The Philippines had already expressed its intention to lend its support in the transition to the Global Alliance to End Statelessness Solution Seeker Programme.

10. The Philippines encouraged the Office's focus on climate- and disaster-induced displacement, since the Asia Pacific was one of the most climate-vulnerable regions. Preventing climate displacements also required full commitment from governments.

11. The representative of **Australia** commended UNHCR for its tireless efforts to address protection in protracted crises in the region. Australia was deeply concerned by the ongoing crises in Afghanistan and Myanmar and by the substantial humanitarian funding gap they had experienced in 2023. At the recent Global Refugee Forum 2023, Australia had announced additional funding to support UNHCR to respond to those crises in 2024. Funding had continued to drop in the Asia and Pacific region and donors were urged not to lose sight of the increase in displacement. Australia encouraged more Member States to consider making contributions to responses in the region.

12. Australia highlighted the substantial refugee hosting responsibility that had been shouldered by states in the region, commending Bangladesh for hosting more than one million Rohingya refugees and both the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan for their decades-long commitment to Afghan refugees. Many countries in the region had a proud history of refugee protection stewardship, including upholding the principle of non-refoulement; all stakeholders in the region were encouraged to refrain from actions that undermined that legacy.

13. Australia noted with concern those reported dead or missing in the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Australia remained committed to countering maritime people smuggling and to preventing deaths at sea and worked closely with countries in the region on those issues, including through the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime. Australia commended UNHCR's efforts to build the climate resilience of refugees and to address the risks of misinformation to reduce harm and improve protection outcomes. Australia was also supporting the region through an increase in its annual humanitarian programme of up to 200,000 places, representing its largest in a decade. Australia welcomed the continued efforts of UNHCR to support resettlement in the region and to seek the support of host countries to facilitate it through streamlined processes. Australia looked forward to the continued, constructive engagement with UNHCR and its partners as the many pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum 2023 were implemented.

14. The representative of the **Republic of Korea** expressed appreciation for the efforts and achievements of Member States and UNHCR in the region and particularly valued the contribution of the three largest host countries: Bangladesh, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. The Republic of Korea would continue to contribute in response to regional issues. In the previous three years, the Republic of Korea had donated \$74 million to assist Afghan refugees and \$80 million to assist Rohingya refugees and displaced persons. The Republic of Korea was also mindful of the importance of supporting host countries and therefore their programme included development cooperation projects for refugees and host communities in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan.

15. The Republic of Korea expected to focus more on addressing the root causes of the refugee crisis in the region, emphasizing humanitarian access and assistance to vulnerable populations, particularly women and girls, and their enjoyment of rights. It was also essential to uphold the principle of non-refoulement. His Government looked forward to meaningful achievements through the route-based approach: there would be many factors in its development, including the different contexts in the region, the different nature of movements, the length of the route and the number of stakeholders involved. He would expect to receive relevant briefings from UNHCR to explain the key differences and expected outcomes of the new approach as well as any changes to regional and country programmes. Noting the joint International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNHCR project in the Philippines funded by the Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund to operationalize the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, he underlined that it was clear that the development sector was feasible and sustainable in conflict situations only when peace actors were involved; he encouraged the United Nations and other actors in the field to work with Member States towards meaningful solutions.

16. The representative of **Thailand** expressed appreciation for UNHCR's continued work in the protection of and assistance to persons of concern and its efforts to find durable solutions. The Global

Refugee Forum 2023 had been an important milestone where more than 1,700 pledges, the majority of which were multistakeholder pledges, underlined a collaborative spirit and a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. The pledges, including one million pro bono hours of legal support and billions of dollars in aid, gave hope to refugees, displaced persons and all stakeholders at a time when crises and conflict were at every corner of the globe. Work must continue to build upon the momentum and translate commitments into concrete and tangible action, as Thailand had started to do.

17. On asylum systems and capacities, 170 persons had passed through preliminary screening to be qualified to apply for protected person status in the first phase of Thailand's national screening mechanism. Thailand would continue to work closely with UNHCR, particularly on technical capacity-building, on the establishment of a protection framework for those screened-in, as well as information sharing for the screening process for those already recognized as persons of concern by UNHCR. Her Government had developed a national action plan on the reduction of statelessness, with priority given to stateless children and improving access to civil registration services by stateless persons. Thailand thanked all those who had worked on the #IBelong campaign and reiterated its commitment to address statelessness by joining the Global Alliance to End Statelessness.

18. In light of the escalation of conflict within Myanmar, Thailand had scaled up its humanitarian assistance to more effectively address the needs of affected populations along the border. Its initiative supported implementation of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus which called for the cessation of violence, humanitarian assistance and inclusive dialogue. Thailand continued to monitor irregular movement in the Andaman Sea and undertook necessary measures within its territorial waters to provide assistance to those in distress in accordance with humanitarian principles; it would continue to work constructively with partners, including through the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime, to effectively address irregular maritime movements. Her Government thanked and encouraged partner countries able to offer more resettlement opportunities for Rohingya in Thailand. Her Government had contributed \$4 million in cash and in kind to assist Bangladesh and Myanmar. At the Global Refugee Forum 2023, it had pledged to provide humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya and to continue providing development assistance to Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine State, to enhance preparedness for the safe, dignified and sustainable return of displaced persons. Finally, Thailand wished to confirm its commitment to the principle of equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing and to work with UNHCR and its partners within the region and beyond.

19. The representative of the **Netherlands (Kingdom of the)**, aligning his statement with that of the European Union and its Member States and speaking further in a national capacity, commended UNHCR's Afghan refugee response in Pakistan. With the introduction of an "Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan" in Pakistan, the importance of close coordination between the donor community, UNHCR, and other agencies of the United Nations had increased and information sharing and outreach to the new Government would be key. In addition to Afghan Proof of Registration Card (PoR) holders in Pakistan, other groups of Afghans, such as Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders and undocumented Afghans should be included at all times in outreach and in advocacy towards the Government.

20. The representative of **China** thanked UNHCR for its regional reports on operations carried out and on the difficulties encountered. The global refugee situation was unprecedentedly serious and complex, with a rising number of displaced persons and a widening funding gap. It should not be forgotten that persons in many countries had been forcibly displaced while other countries had opened their arms to refugees and were currently under pressure. The humanitarian workers of UNHCR, UNWRA and the ICRC were working under harsh conditions and even sacrificing their own lives. The international community should alleviate the suffering of refugees, adhering to the principles of shared but differentiated responsibilities in which humanitarian assistance was provided by host countries, countries of origin and humanitarian agencies. Firstly, emergency humanitarian assistance should be provided through multilateral and bilateral channels to meet the urgent and basic needs of refugees; subsequently, efforts should be made to seek lasting solutions, to improve self-reliance of refugees and their ability to adapt and then to support their return to a normal society. Finally, it was necessary to eliminate the root causes of refugees' problems, pursue mediation, insist on respectful dialogue and refuse to provoke confrontation. China had always attached great importance to international cooperation and endeavoured to contribute to the

humanitarian cause. On the issue of people fleeing turmoil in Rakhine State, China had used its good offices to assist Myanmar and Bangladesh in their friendly consultations and had actively promoted the renewal of Myanmar's Memorandum of Understanding with UNHCR and UNDP and had provided assistance to people who had fled to Bangladesh. China had provided humanitarian and development assistance to Afghan refugees through bilateral and multilateral channels, including assistance to Palestinian refugees, calling for a ceasefire to avoid a greater humanitarian disaster, assistance to African countries and the Belt and Road Initiative. China's contribution to international development through its Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund and its Global Development Initiative was closely related to the work of UNHCR. His Government was willing to continue to deepen its cooperation with UNHCR so as to build a shared future and address the global refugee crisis.

21. The representative of **Brazil** commended UNHCR for its commitment to pursuing protection and innovative solutions for the 14 million refugees and other vulnerable groups in the region. Her Government was especially concerned by the situation in Afghanistan where women and girls faced particular risks and required special protection in the context of repeated violations of their rights. Since 2021, Brazil had recognized the situation of serious and widespread violation of human rights in Afghanistan, allowing its nationals to benefit from facilitated procedures to enter Brazil. Around 10,000 visas had been issued to those groups, positioning Brazil as one of the few countries openly welcoming Afghan nationals. Brazil counted on UNHCR's support in welcoming Afghan nationals to its territory.

22. The representative of **Switzerland** expressed concern for displaced persons in Afghanistan and Myanmar; with the proliferation of crises around the world, it was vital that the international community did not lose sight of those situations which were rarely reported on. For that reason, his Government welcomed the solidarity expressed at the Global Refugee Forum 2023: it was important that the pledges made there were honoured.

23. The situation of the Rohingya refugees, as they began their seventh year in exile, was critical, especially in Bangladesh. Given recent events in Rakhine State, it was unlikely that safe and dignified return of refugees would be possible in the near future. Switzerland would continue to work alongside the Government of Bangladesh and the international community to strengthen the self-reliance and resilience of Rohingya refugees.

24. The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate, with over half of the population dependent on humanitarian aid and 40 per cent experiencing acute food insecurity. Switzerland would continue to support UNHCR in providing life-saving assistance and protection operations in the country. Despite an increase in the number of voluntary returns to Afghanistan in 2023, the very high number of expulsions from neighbouring countries and the protection gaps resulting from them was a cause for concern. In that context, UNHCR and other actors were undertaking important work, in particular at the borders. It was essential that long-term solutions for Afghan refugees be found, in particular through the Support Platform of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees of which Switzerland was a member. Similar solutions would be required for the 6.6 million persons who were internally displaced. He wished to learn how UNHCR would engage with the Secretary General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement which included Afghanistan as one of 14 pilot countries. Switzerland had worked with its partners in the region over a long period to find durable solutions to situations of protracted displacement and believed that an approach combining humanitarian aid, development cooperation and peacebuilding was essential.

25. The representative of **Bangladesh** expressed shock that some 570 people had been reported dead or missing in the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal in 2023; serious efforts must be made to prevent the perilous maritime journeys that resulted in those outcomes. His Government appreciated the focus of UNHCR on building the climate resilience of refugees and displaced persons through innovative programmes in the areas of clean energy, sustainable livelihoods and waste management. Bangladesh continued to host over 1.2 million Rohingya, undertaking the burden of one of the largest humanitarian crises of the present time. Despite resource and land constraints, the Government, in collaboration with UNHCR and other United Nations agencies, was trying to ensure that their temporary stay in Bangladesh was safe and secure. Around 6,800 acres of reserve forest had been degraded due to Rohingya settlements in Cox's Bazar. The Government had deployed thousands of public officials and security forces to operate 33 refugee camps, thereby depriving the people of Bangladesh of the services of those officials. The prolonged stay of such a large population in a congested area was also having impact on the surrounding environment, with

deforestation caused by the felling of trees to provide shelters and fuel. The camp population already outnumbered the host community in Cox's Bazar, causing social imbalance. In order to decongest and de-risk the camps at Cox's Bazar, a camp had been developed at Bhasan Char to which 100,000 Rohingya could be voluntarily relocated; to date, some 35,000 had voluntarily moved and United Nations agencies were engaged to support and enhance the livelihood opportunities of Rohingya living there.

26. Since the beginning of the exodus in 2017, not a single Rohingya had been able to return to their homeland. It was noted that under the Memorandum of Understanding, UNHCR and UNDP were implementing projects in Rakhine State despite security and access constraints. Bangladesh was deeply concerned by the evolving turmoil across Myanmar and was of the view that more visible and impactful measures needed to be taken in Rakhine to build trust and confidence among Rohingya people. In that context, his Government urged UNHCR to engage meaningfully with Myanmar to create an environment conducive to early repatriation of Rohingya from Bangladesh. While appreciating the humanitarian support of the international community for the Rohingya and host communities, Bangladesh noted with concern that, every year, the Joint Response Plan (JRP) fell short of its funding target while the Rohingya population to be covered was increasing. The World Food Programme's food rations had been steadily declining and in 2023 only 51 per cent of the estimated fund for the JRP had been secured: it was challenging to meet the needs of the growing Rohingya population and mitigate the suffering of the host community in Bangladesh with the donations received. He strongly urged the international community, donors, humanitarian actors and development partners to join the JRP with a view to shouldering responsibility for the Rohingya crisis on the basis of the principle of equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing.

27. The representative of the **United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland** said that his Government continued to work closely with UNHCR in Bangladesh to address the significant challenges in the response to the Rohingya refugee crisis. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland remained deeply concerned that conditions for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh in 2023 were deteriorating – with protection incidents and insecurity rising significantly and ration cuts pushing malnutrition to emergency levels – and might continue in 2024.

28. With global humanitarian needs exceeding funding, it was essential that the response should continue to be as effective and efficient as possible to meet the requirements of those in need. In addition to continued vital life-saving assistance, greater collective efforts were required to address the worsening protection and security challenges in the camps and to offer the Rohingya more self-reliance and less dependence on humanitarian aid.

29. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland called for greater openness and transparency from UNHCR with donors: there should be greater engagement and consultation about key decisions affecting response; and data from non-sensitive studies and research projects should be shared. His Government would continue to maintain the international profile of the crisis, thereby keeping it on the international agenda. The United Kingdom remained committed to supporting the Rohingya as well as the communities hosting them and to working to resolve the underlying causes of the crisis.

30. UNHCR and IOM should continue their joint work in Afghanistan and demonstrate strong engagement with other actors such as the World Bank in supporting reintegration efforts. The Office should effectively manage its engagement with the Taliban to minimize the risks of them benefitting from support provided by the international community. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland thanked UNHCR and IOM for their support to Afghans in connection with Pakistan's repatriation plan in late 2023, and for the great efforts by staff to provide that support under very stressful circumstances. It was necessary for all to work together to find a sustainable solution.

31. The representative of **Denmark** said that the massive humanitarian needs in Afghanistan continued to be a matter of deep concern. Afghans were living through not only a humanitarian but also a human rights crisis and Denmark remained committed to supporting them. While women and girls paid the highest price, society as a whole was affected when they were denied education and work. UNHCR was to be commended for "staying and delivering" in Afghanistan despite the challenging circumstances. Her Government condemned the continued ban on female NGO workers, especially given the crucial role female staff played in ensuring that assistance reached women and girls. Denmark called on UNHCR and all partners to advocate, in a continuous and

coordinated manner, for compliance with human rights and for women's and girls' participation in society.

32. The political instability and displacement arising from the conflict were transcending borders and placing strain on Afghanistan's neighbouring countries. She acknowledged the longstanding role of Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran in hosting Afghan refugees. Denmark was part of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) Support Platform and during the Global Refugee Forum 2023 had made a substantial pledge demonstrating its continued support for the people of Afghanistan. A new Danish regional programme to provide a bridge between humanitarian relief and development aid was being drawn up. Focusing on the resilience and self-reliance of displaced Afghans, particularly women and girls, as well as the host communities in Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, the programme would improve safety and increase access to rights and sustainable livelihoods.

33. Her Government was deeply concerned at the deteriorating humanitarian and human rights situation in Myanmar and at the lack of prospects for more than one million Rohingya refugees; it was a situation that deserved the utmost attention.

34. The representative of **Canada** expressed appreciation to Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Bangladesh for hosting some of the most vulnerable refugee populations in the region and demonstrating genuine commitment to international responsibility- and burden-sharing, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees. However, her Government was very concerned at the worsening protection environment for Afghans and Rohingya in the region. The forced repatriation of Afghans exposed individuals to grave risk of persecution, including arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, gender-based violence and other forms of inhuman treatment while en route, and upon return, to Afghanistan. While efforts of UNHCR in assisting returnees were to be commended, further information would be appreciated on how its return and reintegration measures for Afghan returnees addressed the specific needs of women, ethnic minorities and other vulnerable population categories that encountered compounded safety and security challenges. Canada remained committed to advocating for refugees and asylum-seekers, including Afghans bound for Canada, and called for the principles of non-refoulement to be upheld. Her Government condemned the ban by the de facto authorities on female employment and girls' education and wished to know how operational measures of UNHCR secured access to aid and services for women and girls.

35. Canada was also concerned at the compromised protection environment for the Rohingya amidst the escalating conflict and deteriorating humanitarian situation in the region of Rakhine in Myanmar; reluctance to accommodate more Rohingya elsewhere in the region, coupled with incidents of boats being turned away, further compromised the vulnerability of the Rohingya – one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. While acknowledging the tremendous generosity of host countries, her Government urged strict adherence to the principle of non-refoulement and continued to call for immediate cessation of violence against civilians, adherence to international law and full and unhindered humanitarian access in Myanmar.

36. Her Government was deeply troubled by the growing safety and security challenges, such as the instances of gender-based violence at the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and those related to the surge in maritime migration, which exposed the Rohingya to perilous sea routes. Canada continued to provide life-saving humanitarian and development assistance to support the needs of crisis-affected people in Bangladesh and Myanmar, including the Rohingya. Continuing its resettlement efforts, Canada had requested UNHCR to refer 1,000 Rohingya refugees over the course of 2023 for admission in 2024, which process had begun. Her Government would welcome more information on how UNHCR was strengthening its protection infrastructure in Cox's Bazar, especially the development of a robust, responsive and effective complaints and feedback mechanism, and wished to hear more about how the Office was responding to irregular maritime movements in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal.

37. The representative of **Pakistan** congratulated UNHCR on the successful Global Refugee Forum 2023, which had achieved a milestone of nearly 1,700 pledges, including financial commitments of some \$2.2 billion. He noted that it was now time to implement them in an effective and time-bound manner in a spirit of burden- and responsibility-sharing, against the backdrop of a turbulent global humanitarian landscape.

38. For the past 40 years, Pakistan had been a top refugee and migrant hosting country, experiencing intermittent returns and circular inflows of Afghan nationals triggered by conflict and

socioeconomic drivers in Afghanistan. That complex situation had resulted in different streams of Afghans arriving in Pakistan, including refugees, migrants for education, medical and work purposes and Afghans who had exploited the host country's generosity and were illegally resident in Pakistan. In addition, following the withdrawal by international forces from Afghanistan, Pakistan had received another huge flow of Afghans, including those promised resettlement to third countries by foreign governments; further progress was awaited in that regard.

39. It was crucial to address the administrative and governance challenges arising from such mixed flows distinguishing between migrants and refugees, in order to protect the international normative refugee regime. Against the backdrop of a precarious security situation the Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan had therefore been implemented to manage illegal migration. Pakistan valued its partnership with UNHCR to address those ongoing challenges, had welcomed the recent UNHCR delegation visit to Pakistan and looked forward to continuing the ongoing discussions.

40. Pakistan took its obligations under international law seriously and had always advocated for a serious strategic approach to refugee protection as well as durable solutions, not just in theory but in practice. Initiatives in that regard included the Refugee-Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) programme, which addressed both the humanitarian and development needs of refugees and host communities, and thousands of scholarships – 40 per cent of which were reserved for women and girls – to young Afghans granting them free access to higher-education and skills-development programmes in coveted Pakistani universities and institutes.

41. Those initiatives were in line with the regional Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR), to which his Government remained committed. Pakistan appreciated the role of the SSAR Support Platform and Core Group in mobilizing international solidarity with Afghan refugees and host communities in Pakistan. However, more could and should be done, bearing in mind the positive results yielded by UNHCR's area-based approach in priority areas of return and reintegration. Pakistan looked forward to working closely with UNHCR and other international partners to advance sustainable solutions for Afghan refugees in tandem with assistance interventions for both refugees and host communities.

42. The representative of **the Islamic Republic of Iran** said that frequent unlawful military interventions and other interferences by outside powers in the region had caused instability, insecurity and underdevelopment which in turn had led to a mass influx of refugees across the region, particularly to the Islamic Republic of Iran. For more than 45 years, the country had been hosting one of the most protracted refugee crises in the world, with the latest political turmoil in Afghanistan in 2021 causing a particularly large number of Afghan displaced persons to seek refuge in the Islamic Republic of Iran, reportedly turning it into the largest refugee-hosting country in the world.

43. The approach of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards refugees had been one of humanitarian and human solidarity, despite having to shoulder the burden inflicted upon the region as a result of the irresponsible coercive policies and militancy of certain states in the region, and the country had generously shared its limited resources with huge Afghan refugee populations, despite all the odds much of which originate from the unilateral coercive measures imposed by the United States of America. It had also done its best to provide refugees with basic living standards, health care and education. All Afghan children of school age were eligible to attend school regardless of their documentation status; more than 700,000 refugee children were currently registered in public schools across the country. Additional training courses and classes were provided for Afghan adults as part of a literacy promotion movement. Many Afghans, in particular female students, were studying at Iranian universities and colleges, and were eligible for government support and scholarship.

44. While those inclusive policies had been extended to Afghan nationals, it was simply neither fair nor feasible for a single country to host the largest and most protracted refugee crisis on its own. The principle of burden- and responsibility-sharing required more equitable distribution of the costs of refugee hosting among a greater number of States. While the report presented highlighted the need for sustainable solutions to address the refugee crisis effectively, it would be difficult to implement them without increased financial resources and support, contributing to the challenge of achieving long-term stability and security for refugees and displaced persons in the region.

45. The plight of Afghan refugees could not be resolved without their return to their home country. The United Nations, neighbouring States, donor countries, UNHCR and other concerned actors should work together to help Afghanistan develop the necessary economic, political and

security infrastructure to attract Afghan refugees back to their country of origin. The primary responsibility of Afghanistan's ruling authorities could not be overemphasized in that regard.

46. The representative of **Germany** said that the regional director was taking up her post at a challenging but crucial time. Acknowledging that host states in the region had been providing assistance for a long time, for which his country was grateful, he underlined the importance of returns being safe, dignified and voluntary in all cases. He thanked UNHCR for its continued commitment to act as the secretariat for the SSAR Support Platform; it was vital to keep the platform up and running. Support was vital given the deep concern at the dire humanitarian and human rights situation caused by the authorities in Afghanistan. Germany would continue to defend women's rights and fundamental freedoms and called on the de facto authorities to respect international obligations. United, strong and principled stands by the international community remained key in that regard. Germany also welcomed support of UNHCR to Afghan nationals affected by repatriation from Pakistan. With the help of humanitarian partners such as UNHCR, assistance was delivered to women and children, enabling Afghan women to work. Adherence to the guiding principles and donor expectations outlined in February 2023 remained of the utmost importance in that regard.

47. Concerning the Rohingya refugee situation, Germany continued to support UNHCR in its efforts to create conditions for the voluntary, safe and dignified return of Rohingya to Myanmar and of all refugees to their countries of origin if conditions allowed. The international community should continue to work together to that end, even though the security situation in Myanmar had deteriorated. Assessments for a needs-based response required free and unimpeded humanitarian access to those in need; only on that condition could humanitarian assistance be provided in accordance with humanitarian principles. In order to allow refugees to return to their countries of origin Germany joined partners in calling for an end to all violations of the rights of Rohingya, to ensure freedom of movement, access to education and equal rights in Myanmar.

48. Given the serious impact of climate change and extreme weather events in the region, Germany appreciated the support provided by UNHCR for life-saving interventions in Bangladesh and Myanmar in response to cyclone-related events, and called for further investment in anticipatory action models in order to mobilize adequate resources before the onset of disasters.

49. The representative of the **United States of America** thanked UNHCR for scaling up its border reception and transit centre operations in Afghanistan to provide critical humanitarian assistance to returnees from Pakistan. As the largest humanitarian donor in Afghanistan, her Government supported the efforts made to prevent the situation from deteriorating further and had contributed more than \$2 billion in humanitarian assistance since August 2021.

50. In light of the Taliban's ongoing restrictions on women and girls, the United States of America encouraged UNHCR to continue to adhere to a principled humanitarian approach, upholding the inclusion and participation of female staff in humanitarian operations. It was necessary for Afghans, particularly women and girls, to be able to seek international protection, access assistance and request asylum. Neighbouring states were encouraged to maintain close collaboration with UNHCR, adhere to their international obligations, including non-refoulement, and seek durable solutions, while safeguarding refugee protection.

51. The United States of America encouraged UNHCR to continue to develop a national refugee protection framework in coordination with the Government of Pakistan, welcomed the release of the Afghanistan Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRRP) for 2024, encouraged robust donor support and continued to request that UNHCR prioritize the most urgent needs.

52. Her Government condemned the ongoing persecution of the people of Myanmar by its armed forces and called for an end to violence, the release of those unjustly detained, unhindered humanitarian access and restoration of a path to democracy. Myanmar's neighbours were urged to provide refuge for those fleeing violence and persecution. The United States of America had contributed nearly \$2.4 billion since 2017 in response to the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, Bangladesh and the region and was committed to working with others to meet humanitarian needs and develop durable solutions for displaced persons in and from Myanmar, including the nearly one million Rohingya refugees generously hosted by Bangladesh.

53. The United States encouraged more disaster-resistant shelters and expanded opportunities for refugee self-reliance in Bangladesh, particularly the ability to work and earn money inside and

outside the camps. Her Government supported a comprehensive regional approach to solutions, including third-country resettlement, and welcomed the efforts of UNHCR to seek greater regional responsibility-sharing, including rescuing and safely disembarking refugees in distress at sea. In Nepal, UNHCR was urged to continue engagement on integration and documentation for Bhutanese refugees, and to engage Bhutan on voluntary returns.

54. Her Government also encouraged UNHCR to redouble its advocacy on behalf of Tibetan refugees, while appreciating Nepal's protection of those refugees and encouraging continued respect for the principle of non-refoulement. Nepal was urged to resume registration of Tibetan refugees and issue personal identity documents allowing access to formal employment, public education and social services, so that Tibetans could contribute fully to Nepal's economy and society. The United States of America was committed to working with the international community to provide assistance, protection and solutions for North Korean asylum-seekers and members of ethnic and religious minorities from China.

55. Regarding statelessness, the United States of America congratulated UNHCR on its successful years-long engagement with the Governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to resolve all known cases of statelessness. Central Asia had led by example in fulfilling the goals of the #IBelong Campaign. Member States were encouraged to join the Global Alliance to End Statelessness when it launched in autumn 2024.

56. Her Government welcomed Nepal's enactment of legislation to extend citizenship documentation to more than one million individuals, commended the Philippines for significant progress on refugee status and statelessness determination procedures, commended Thailand's efforts to implement its national screening mechanism and alternatives to immigration detention and thanked UNHCR for its continued partnership with the Government of Thailand.

57. The representative of **Bulgaria** welcomed the commitment of UNHCR to continue addressing the reported ongoing challenges of large-scale displacement, forced repatriation, restricted humanitarian access and discrimination across Asia and the Pacific, which were deeply concerning. His Government also appreciated its prioritization of assistance for the most vulnerable – especially women and girls – and its efforts to ensure inclusive protection and solutions for the millions of refugees, internally displaced persons and stateless persons in the region, including by identifying further opportunities to achieve durable solutions through resettlement, complementary pathways and expanded partnerships. The efforts of UNHCR to better address information integrity and mitigate the impact of misinformation on the protection space were similarly acknowledged.

58. The deteriorating security, human rights and humanitarian situation following the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and the significant number of Afghan asylum-seekers and refugees in neighbouring countries, namely Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which had been hosting millions of forcibly displaced Afghans for years, continued to be a matter of concern. In 2023, Bulgaria had continued its financial contribution to UNHCR activities to support the Iranian Government in providing enhanced health care and education for Afghan refugees, especially children, under the Team Europe initiative on the Afghan displacement situation. At the Global Refugee Forum 2023 his Government had reiterated its commitment to support UNHCR activities under the comprehensive refugee response framework regarding Afghanistan. Fully aware of the complex humanitarian and security situation on the ground in Afghanistan, Bulgaria welcomed and further encouraged the prioritization of facilitating conditions for the voluntary repatriation of refugees, the sustainable, safe and dignified return of internally displaced persons, and their reintegration.

59. Upholding the right to full and equal enjoyment of human rights by women, and their right to participate in humanitarian action and all spheres of public, social, economic and political life in Afghanistan, Bulgaria strongly condemned the continuing de facto authorities' ban on women working in NGOs and called for it to be immediately revoked, as it hindered efforts to provide effective humanitarian aid and basic services to women and girls in Afghanistan. His Government encouraged UNHCR to continue its advocacy for the uninterrupted and non-discriminatory delivery of humanitarian assistance to women and girls, as well as for the enjoyment of their rights, especially in the areas of education and work.

60. The representative of **Indonesia** (observer), expressing appreciation for the work of UNHCR, particularly in Asia and the Pacific, said that his Government had always upheld the principle of *jus cogens* by applying a policy of non-refoulement. Despite criticism of the way some

countries in the region treated refugees, Indonesia had always done its utmost to assist refugees in its territory.

61. Indonesia had first-hand experience of the dramatic surge in irregular sea crossings; since November 2023 it had rescued 12 boats containing refugees stranded in Indonesian waters, resulting in an additional 2,000 Rohingya refugees in its territory. Many of the refugees were clearly victims of trafficking in persons and people smuggling and his Government intended to take firm action against the criminals involved. Countries and partners in the region should work together to address those transnational organized networks, including through the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime.

62. In conjunction with UNHCR, IOM and other partners, his Government had worked to meet the basic needs of refugees, including access to education and health care as well as birth registration for babies born in Indonesia. A considerable number of refugee children were registered in accredited schools and local communities had given classes to more than 1,000 refugee children and young persons.

63. While Indonesia welcomed the 86 per cent increase in resettlement submissions in 2023 compared to 2022, the fact remained that low- and middle-income countries hosted 75 per cent of the world's refugees and others in need of international protection. The international community should make a stronger collective effort towards greater burden- and responsibility-sharing, particularly in the case of Rohingya refugees. In that regard, he expressed appreciation to Bangladesh for hosting approximately one million of those refugees. His Government urged developed countries to expand resettlement and complementary pathways for Rohingya refugees, instead of shifting the burden to Myanmar's neighbouring countries. As part of the ASEAN, Indonesia would continue its engagement and dialogue to address the root causes of displacement in Myanmar. Recalling his Government's annual unearmarked contributions of \$120,000 in 2022-2023, he said that Indonesia stood ready to continue working with UNHCR to address the root causes of displacement and seek durable solutions.

64. The representative of the **Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)**, recalling that Afghanistan was grappling with a complex and protracted humanitarian crisis driven by conflict, food insecurity, natural disasters and chronic poverty, said that the acute humanitarian situation faced by Afghan refugees and internally displaced persons was of serious concern and required urgent action. She commended the commitment of UNHCR to support and protect forcibly displaced persons in that context. The situation in Afghanistan was an important matter for the OIC, which had established the Afghanistan Humanitarian Trust Fund placed under the umbrella of the Islamic Development Bank. In December 2023, seven implementing partner agreements with UNHCR, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee had been signed in the framework of the Trust Fund to implement projects aimed at supporting Afghan communities in areas including health, education, agriculture, food security and women and youth empowerment.

65. Agreements had been signed with UNHCR to implement three projects to benefit over 240,000 individuals. The first project would improve access to education through the construction of educational facilities for children living in priority areas of return and reintegration, with a total cost of \$7.5 million; the second focused on improving access to health services for vulnerable communities with a total cost of \$5.4 million; and the third would provide livelihood opportunities to foster women's and girls' empowerment, with a total cost of \$1.4 million. The OIC would continue to engage with a number of partners to mobilize additional funds for the Trust Fund and reiterated its commitment to help alleviate the humanitarian and economic crisis in Afghanistan and also pursue dialogue with de facto authorities on key issues including the pressing need to improve the rights and situation of women and girls.

66. The representative of the **Asia Displacement Solutions Platform** (NGO group statement) said that in 2023, displaced and host communities in Asia had faced renewed challenges, the solutions to which required building on the Global Refugee Forum 2023 and preventing donor fatigue. In Afghanistan, the protection environment had deteriorated through the combined effects of earthquakes, unequal access to services largely caused by the ban on female NGO workers and decreasing manifestations of solidarity from neighbouring countries. Afghans ordered to return, particularly women, faced loss of livelihood, family separation, harassment and anxiety in a gender-segregated society. NGOs therefore called for the ban on female NGO workers to be reversed and

called on donors to fund humanitarian organizations and support longer-term approaches including protection-sensitive border screening mechanisms, a gendered response to returns and reinforcing community-based reintegration mechanisms. They also urged host countries to preserve the asylum space; avoid deportations; provide access to documentation and legal stay; and respect the UNHCR non-return advisory and the non-refoulement principle; and called for increased third-country solutions and responsibility-sharing.

67. In Myanmar, factors including conflict, climate-related events and rights violations had increased displacement and statelessness; in addition, deteriorating living conditions in camps and dwindling humanitarian assistance were driving Rohingya refugees to embark on dangerous sea journeys where they faced pushbacks, detention and xenophobia. NGOs called for diplomatic and political efforts to address displacement drivers and for renewed support for humanitarian activities in the camps in Bangladesh. They also called on members of the Bali Process to share responsibility for protection of refugees, adopt alternatives to detention and facilitate family reunification. Further, governments in the region should work with civil society to counter xenophobia and States should increase responsibility-sharing through a joint framework on third country solutions.

68. It was necessary to create enabling environments for durable solutions to statelessness. States should also develop and implement non-custodial community and human rights- based alternatives to the detention of forcibly displaced and stateless persons. Further, it was necessary to integrate climate change into national and regional refugee protection policy and programming responses. Lastly, sustained political commitment and advocacy for solutions were needed to ensure that pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum 2023 were indeed transformational.

69. The **Director of the Bureau for Asia and the Pacific** (UNHCR) expressed appreciation for the calls and commitments to support the work of UNHCR in the region. Calls to ensure that returns were voluntary and safe should be accompanied by continued support for host countries but also for donors and returnees. She welcomed comments on resettlement, in particular the description of Afghan refugees' integration in Brazil, and on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. As UNHCR was unable alone to fully address the situations arising in its work, it would prioritize within its appeals – as had been the topic of some Member State questions – and proactively seek out partners in assisting refugees and returnees, as far as the widespread financial constraints allowed. She welcomed the positive comments on advances in statelessness, thanking governments that had made such advances and donors who had enabled UNHCR to continue them.

70. She stressed that UNHCR maintained a principled engagement with de facto authorities in the region in order to fulfil its mandate from Member States. The issue of the treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan continued to be discussed with the de facto authorities both by UNHCR and United Nations organizations in the country as a whole, though it was a particular priority for UNHCR, which had recently sent senior-level missions to Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan to investigate what improvements could be made to its complaints receiving mechanism and what needs women and girls had in different settings, in order to incorporate those findings into planning for the coming five years. Regarding comments on a ban on women workers in Afghanistan, she was pleased to report that when she had visited Kabul and Kandahar during the previous week, she had had constructive discussions with the de facto authorities and met with female colleagues throughout the country, whom she had been glad to see either in the office or in the field, as well as female partner colleagues in Kandahar, who had told her about the challenges they faced. She had asked the de facto authorities to ensure the continued work of female colleagues and female partner colleagues as their presence was necessary for providing direct assistance in return areas as well as border entry areas. In that regard, UNHCR shelter projects focused on family access and direct access to women and girls, which allowed information to be gathered on the challenges facing them and how best UNHCR could assist them.

71. Many comments had also been made about the maritime situation, a challenging regional conversation that would continue and must involve donors. Responding to requests for more briefings and information on that process, she stated that UNHCR would be happy to ensure that Member States had all the information they required, perhaps following discussion with the Standing Committee on the best way to do so.

vi. Europe

72. The **Director of the Bureau for Europe** (UNHCR) said that two years into a devastating

war, the Ukrainian people continued to face severe hardship, with some 40 per cent of the population needing humanitarian assistance. Needs in eastern regions, principally those on the frontline, were particularly critical, underlining the importance of humanitarian access to all who needed it.

73. UNHCR, alongside sister agencies and partners, continued to support government-led efforts to deliver life-saving aid and protection services. Millions of internally displaced and war-affected people had received support through multi-purpose cash and protection interventions, shelter repairs and core relief items. The international community's financial support for the response remained paramount – those resources were a lifeline for millions of Ukrainians. With the prospect of return and recovery in some areas of Ukraine, UNHCR would continue to support the Government's national recovery plan in coordination with nexus partners.

74. Beyond Ukraine, nearly 6 million refugees remained displaced across Europe. The European Union's decision to extend its Temporary Protection Directive until March 2025, and the extension of similar national arrangements, was a reaffirmation of the commitment to protecting refugees. At present, Europe was also witnessing the tangible contributions that refugees could make to host societies if effectively included. A UNHCR-commissioned study had found that in 2023, Ukrainian refugees had contributed between 0.7 and 1.1 per cent to Poland's gross domestic product.

75. Looking towards March 2025 and the expiration of temporary protection in the European Union, it was important to maintain a coordinated, predictable and harmonized approach among States. UNHCR welcomed the recent discussions at the European Union's Justice and Home Affairs Council emphasizing the need for a common, coordinated and comprehensive approach, and stood ready to work with all States to develop protection arrangements to safeguard rights, uphold legal obligations and support the well documented trends in pendular movements, which ensured continued ties to Ukraine and would eventually facilitate voluntary return.

76. The war in Ukraine had had an exacting toll on children, who comprised nearly 40 per cent of the refugee population. Recent surveys painted a concerning picture: nearly 50 per cent of households with school-aged children reported at least one child not enrolled in national education, which meant hundreds of thousands of children outside of formal education with potentially devastating consequences for their academic performance and life aspirations. The international community must prioritize returning those children to high-quality learning environments. The plight of unaccompanied and separated children from Ukraine also remained of significant concern. UNHCR remained committed to working with all actors for the safety and well-being of those vulnerable children, guided by their best interests.

77. The situation at Europe's external borders remained deeply concerning. Violent pushbacks continued, while increasing numbers of people continued to tragically lose their lives at sea. Also of concern was the growing number of States seeking to externalize asylum obligations, a practice that UNHCR strongly opposed.

78. The growth in asylum applications across the European Union earlier in 2024 had increased pressure on national asylum processing and reception capacities; however, stricter border controls alone would not address that complex issue. Alternatives to dangerous journeys for people on the move were urgently needed, including mutually beneficial labour mobility and other complementary pathways. Moreover, it was critical that States should renew their commitments to sharing responsibility with countries along key mixed movement routes, supported by efforts to address the root causes of displacement. Greater investment was essential in humanitarian assistance, asylum capacity and development aid to support basic services for refugees, migrants and host communities. That route-based approach required sustained political will and targeted, coordinated investments by European States to expand access to protection and solutions in countries of origin, asylum, transit and destination.

79. The European Union's Pact on Migration and Asylum agreed in December 2023 offered hope for greater solidarity with European States receiving the highest number of arrivals and might deliver better outcomes for the displaced, host countries and European Union member States alike. UNHCR stood ready to lend support to European Union institutions and Member States in protection-sensitive implementation following the adoption of the Pact.

80. The Global Refugee Forum 2023 had served as a powerful demonstration of solidarity. Collectively, European stakeholders had made around 600 pledges in support of refugees worldwide. UNHCR looked forward to collaborating on enacting those commitments.

81. The representative of the **European Union** said that the candidate countries North Macedonia, Montenegro and Georgia, the European Free Trade Association countries, and Norway, a member of the European Economic Area, aligned themselves with his statement.

82. He thanked UNHCR for organizing the Global Refugee Forum 2023. With their pledges and continued activities, the European Union and its Member States had reconfirmed their commitments to burden- and responsibility-sharing, demonstrating that they remained a leading humanitarian and development donor and a major refugee hosting and supporting entity.

83. Over two years since the Russian Federation had started its war of aggression against Ukraine, forcing millions to flee their homes and disrupting global food and energy markets, he reiterated the European Union's resolute condemnation of that war, which was an unacceptable violation of the Charter of the United Nations, as recalled by several General Assembly resolutions. The Russian Federation must be held fully accountable for waging that war and other serious crimes under international law.

84. He reaffirmed the European Union's unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders and its inherent right of self-defence against the aggression of the Russian Federation. That support was clearly shown on 1 February 2024, when all European Union leaders had agreed to establish a new dedicated instrument, the Ukraine Facility, to support its recovery.

85. The European Union remained extremely concerned by reports of Ukrainian children being forcibly deported to the Russian Federation and Belarus, and supported initiatives to clarify the fate of all missing persons. Those practices, as noted by the International Criminal Court (ICC), might constitute war crimes, and should be stopped. Children abducted must be returned to their families without delay. He called on the Russian Federation to ensure immediate and unimpeded access for UNHCR and other mandated agencies to all Ukrainian refugees, in particular children.

86. In Ukraine, the terrible impact of the Russian Federation's war of aggression on civilians continued unabated, with a surge of aerial attacks on densely populated areas heavily affecting essential services such as water, heating and electricity. In that context, he welcomed the adoption of the 2024 Ukraine Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan, calling on UNHCR to continue providing adequate support, particularly to persons in vulnerable situations. In the Republic of Moldova, UNHCR should continue addressing the most pressing needs of Ukrainian refugees and host communities while working towards inclusion.

87. Regarding the situation of displaced Karabakh Armenians, he recalled the European Union's concerns at the extremely difficult situation arising from the mass exodus of Karabakh Armenians to Armenia following the military operation on 19 and 20 September 2023 and the nine-month blockade of the Lachin Corridor. He commended the rapid humanitarian operation of UNHCR and the positive steps by the Armenian authorities regarding both temporary protection measures and longer-term solutions for the continued safeguarding of their rights. He emphasized the importance of creating the conditions for the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of refugees and to preserve cultural, religious heritage and property rights. The European Union continued to support all efforts towards sustainable peace and security in the region.

88. He reaffirmed the European Union's commitment to providing international protection to those in need, to the principle of non-refoulement and to providing a high-quality asylum space within the European Union, recalling the recent Pact on Migration and Asylum, which, once fully implemented, would strengthen the European Union's migration and asylum system, which was crucial in view of the continued high migratory pressure at its borders. He reiterated the European Union's commitment to saving lives, calling on partner countries to step up efforts to counter human trafficking and migrant smuggling in line with its Call to Action on a Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling of November 2023. Earlier in 2024, the European Union's external borders had seen attempts by States to exploit the vulnerability of human beings for political purposes. He condemned any attempts to instrumentalize migrants and refugees by orchestrating their movement across borders.

89. He confirmed the European Union's continued commitment to providing safe and legal pathways to protection. At the Global Refugee Forum 2023, it had pledged 61,000 places for resettlement and humanitarian admission for 2024–2025. The European Union would also dedicate greater efforts to promoting refugee labour, education pathways and other innovative tools,

including community sponsorship schemes, with the support of European Union funds.

90. The representative of **France** said that his Government found the discussion of crises by continent useful. He welcomed the vital support of UNHCR for Ukraine, displaced Ukrainians and their host countries. Two years after the Russian Federation's ongoing attempt to invade Ukraine and annex part of the country, he thanked the High Commissioner for travelling to the field to recall that it was the largest forced displacement crisis since the Second World War, involving countless atrocities for which those responsible would answer as they were well documented. The Government of France was hosting over 100,000 Ukrainians under temporary protection, keeping its pledge to lighten other partners' hosting burden, and its humanitarian support to Ukraine had exceeded €300 million on 24 February 2022 and continued to rise. He commended the efforts of UNHCR to account for mental health and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence in its programmes. The Russian Federation must be held accountable for its actions and understand that it would not achieve victory in Ukraine on the ground or in the battle of words. In that regard, he emphatically reaffirmed that forcibly displaced or transferred persons, whatever their location, fell under the protective mandate of UNHCR. Their status was unquestionable.

91. More generally, his Government was concerned by the deliberate confusion of the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee' for reasons that were well known. In practical terms, it naturally supported close cooperation between UNHCR and IOM, especially in the context of mixed movements. All people, whether migrants or refugees, had the right to the protection of their fundamental rights. It was, however, important to recall the specific legal framework that applied to refugees, which UNHCR guaranteed.

92. Turning to the situation in Karabakh, in the light of which his Government had provided humanitarian aid to Armenia and €12 million for UNHCR operations in the country in 2023, he called for the implementation of the International Court of Justice order of 17 November 2023, under which the Government of Azerbaijan should ensure that anyone who had left Karabakh before 19 September 2023 and expressed the wish to return could do so in a safe, unimpeded and expeditious manner.

93. The representative of **Cyprus** said that her Government recognized the importance of multilateral cooperation in facing disproportionate migratory pressures, which were exacerbated by its inability to control the large, occupied part of its territory. Social inclusion and integration were central to its immigration policies, especially through education and access to the labour market and health care facilities. In collaboration with the European Union Agency for Asylum, it was formulating a national strategy for reception providing essential guidelines for reception procedures and housing, as well as a manual for guardians supervising unaccompanied minors to reinforce their protection and support framework.

94. The Government of Cyprus stood firmly in support of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and of the millions of refugees and internally displaced persons whose lives had been so brutally disrupted by the Russian Federation's illegal war. Her Government had welcomed thousands of Ukrainian refugees under the European Union temporary protection scheme. The forced exodus and severe humanitarian crisis impacting thousands of Karabakh Armenians due to the unlawful exertion of force and disregard for human rights by the Government of Azerbaijan was also a cause for concern. She commended the humanitarian response by UNHCR, and continued to call for the safe and sustainable return of refugees.

95. Her Government's partnership with the Government of Lebanon had been significantly strengthened, focusing on capacity-building, training and providing essential equipment to assist the Lebanese authorities in deterring irregular migration flows from their coasts. In parallel, her Government had initiated information campaigns in Cameroon and Nigeria to dissuade potential irregular flows of migrants from embarking on perilous journeys, seeking to disrupt smuggling and trafficking networks.

96. She commended the ongoing negotiations led by UNHCR to establish prerequisites for a change in status of the Syrian Arab Republic with a view to supporting safe, voluntary and dignified returns.

97. The situation in Gaza was unfolding into the gravest of humanitarian catastrophes; the international community had a responsibility to put an end to it immediately. In that regard, her Government had sought – together with partners – to facilitate the distribution of humanitarian aid,

especially through a dedicated one-way maritime route opened in the previous week.

98. She underlined her Government's unwavering commitment to upholding international law and fulfilling its international obligations by efficiently providing protection to those genuinely in need, for which the presence of UNHCR and assistance in her country was greatly appreciated. She called on the international community for continued support and cooperation in addressing the very substantial migratory pressures on her country.

99. The representative of **Slovakia**, noting the informative importance of the regional updates format, expressed appreciation for the continued support of UNHCR for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. The 2024 Ukraine Situation Refugee Regional Response Plan had particular significance as the Russian Federation's unlawful war against Ukraine entered its third year – that aggression violated international law and must be globally condemned. He further thanked UNHCR for holding the successful Global Refugee Forum 2023, at which his Government had presented pledges aligned with UNHCR efforts to transition from humanitarian aid to effective inclusion of Ukrainian refugees in host countries.

100. As the majority of refugees were women and children, his Government was focusing mostly on schooling, mental health support and psychosocial well-being, including by organizing sports activities. At present there were more than 114,000 refugees from Ukraine living in Slovakia, with nearly 1.5 million having passed through that country of around 5 million. Slovak support for the civilian population of Ukraine would likewise continue, having recently surpassed €16.5 million. In 2024, another humanitarian aid package had been sent to help people through the winter. His Government also stood ready to contribute technology and expertise to humanitarian demining in Ukraine in view of its particular importance for reconstruction in areas with unexploded ordnance.

101. The representative of **Italy** said that as the first country of destination for migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees using the central Mediterranean route and the fourth at the European level by number of asylum-seekers, his Government remained committed to providing international protection to those in need and stepping up international cooperation while also remaining concerned by the sharp increase in irregular arrivals at its borders and the high number of migrant smugglers and human traffickers. Over the years, his Government had strengthened its initiatives, most of them in partnership with UNHCR, to enhance international humanitarian crisis response and find durable solutions for refugees, as it had reaffirmed at the Global Refugee Forum 2023. He supported the European Union's Pact on Migration and Asylum as a tool for implementing solidarity and fair responsibility-sharing among Member States. Nonetheless, forced displacement was a global phenomenon that could not be tackled without strong multilateral action and partnership with countries of origin and transit.

102. Concerning the situation in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, he commended the launch of the Ukraine Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan and the enduring efforts of UNHCR and other international, national and local actors to support the Ukrainian Government in providing protection, shelter and other assistance including mental health and psychosocial support services. He further commended the governments of the Republic of Moldova and neighbouring countries for their long-standing solidarity, confirming his Government's support in welcoming and assisting refugees, in particular minors and persons in vulnerable situations. He resolutely condemned the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine, which undermined global security and stability and constituted a gross violation of international humanitarian law, including on the treatment of prisoners of war and the prohibition of forcible population transfer. Discussions on recovery, reconstruction and creating a socioeconomic environment for safe and dignified return and sustainable reintegration were of particular concern and should be addressed with further investments in essential services such as infrastructure and health care. In that regard, the Italian Special Envoy for the Reconstruction of Ukraine had recently visited Odessa to establish a coordination mechanism for the city's reconstruction projects. He would appreciate further information from UNHCR on its planned activities in that regard.

103. As his Government strove to be at the forefront in guaranteeing the economic inclusion of refugees, safe and legal complementary pathways were a key component of the global response that could help curb traffickers' networks and ensure protection. He therefore looked forward to the oral update on the External Committee's conclusions, expressing his Government's deep appreciation for and continued support of the work and dedication of UNHCR and its staff on the ground.

104. The representative of **Switzerland** said that UNHCR's coordinated action with host countries regarding the Russian Federation's military aggression in Ukraine showed exemplary solidarity and fair burden- and responsibility-sharing. Paying tribute to host countries' generosity to the 6.4 million Ukrainian refugees, his Government would continue its financial, technical and political support in responding to that crisis.

105. Turning to the essential action of UNHCR together with its partners – in particular IOM, the UNICEF and the World Health Organization – against gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, he asked for further information on how UNHCR worked with existing local organizations, in particular governments and their security and legal services, but also civil society, to ensure the permanence of those actions.

106. It was important that UNHCR and its partners should continue to respond actively to other forced displacement crises affecting the continent, including in Armenia. In that regard, he welcomed the publication in December 2023 of a joint statement by the Governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan reconfirming their intentions to normalize relations. In a world in turmoil, initiatives towards peace must be duly welcomed, as prevention and promoting peace were a core pillar of international cooperation. His Government would continue to engage resolutely in that area and to advocate for holistic commitment towards durable solutions.

107. The representative of **Romania** said that with the alarming level of continuing hostilities and associated long-term humanitarian and human rights consequences, the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine remained of grave concern for the international community. Respect for international law must be ensured regarding the reported atrocities on Ukrainian territory. That aggression continued to strike at the heart of a rules-based international order that relied on effective multilateralism.

108. Her Government was keenly aware of its responsibilities with respect to the Ukrainian refugee crisis and had worked, despite all challenges, to deliver an outstanding whole-of-society response. From 24 February 2022 to 31 January 2024, over 7 million Ukrainian citizens had entered Romania, of which 30 per cent of those benefiting from temporary protection had been children and 5 per cent had been aged over 65. In January 2024, over 2,000 new beneficiaries of temporary protection had been registered – an increase of 46.56 per cent compared to December 2023. From May 2023, her Government had implemented financial support establishing a specific cash amount, conditions and mechanisms for foreign citizens or stateless persons coming from the armed conflict area, and granting financial facilities for accommodation that encouraged the integration of Ukrainian refugees into the labour market, education system and local communities.

109. Ukrainian citizens had been integrated into various industries across Romania. The integration of Ukrainian children into the education system had been a major challenge since adapting it for the complex needs of children traumatized by war and forced displacement was a long-term process requiring periodic evaluation. That overall response had been possible only because the Government, local authorities, the private sector, civil society and international organizations had worked together in solidarity with the Ukrainian people to reflect the essence and strength of the free world: standing united in shared core values of humanity and democracy.

110. The representative of **Denmark**, condemning the Russian Federation's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, said that the people of Ukraine had shown impressive courage in facing that immense suffering and would continue to receive her Government's strongest support for their alarmingly high humanitarian needs. She commended UNHCR and its partners for their tireless efforts to support and protect Ukrainians forced to flee. The number of local partners in the Ukraine Situation Regional Refugee Response plan was very positive, and she called on UNHCR to continue strengthening partnerships, including through high-quality funding, capacity-building and meaningful participation of local actors in decision-making. That was key for the transition towards social inclusion and social cohesion within host communities.

111. Moreover, she commended the efforts of UNHCR to set up comprehensive response mechanisms and networks to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse. For the response within Ukraine, she was pleased to note the dual focus on addressing acute humanitarian needs and supporting early recovery. She would welcome more information on how UNHCR engaged with development actors and the private sector to progress from humanitarian response towards reconstruction. She underlined her Government's unwavering commitment to supporting Ukraine

in 2024.

112. Turning to the challenge of irregular and mixed movements towards the European Union, which had starkly increased in 2023, her Government was worried by the number of people putting their lives in the hands of people smugglers, with disastrous consequences for many. She therefore welcomed the commitment of UNHCR to holistic, whole-of-route approaches, as well as strengthening cooperation among countries along key routes. Her Government wished to create a more humane, sustainable and efficient asylum system in Europe, hoping to find new solutions to break the incentive structures and address the root causes of irregular migration and protect those in need, all while respecting international law and human rights as a matter of paramount importance. International cooperation and comprehensive partnerships were essential to deliver mutually beneficial results for countries of origin, transit and destination.

113. The representative of **Greece** said that two years on from the launch of the Russian Federation's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, Europe must not lose sight of the humanitarian situation in that country which, in the light of the fact that over 16 million people in Ukraine and refugee hosting countries were still in need of assistance, must remain at the top of the humanitarian agenda. Greece reiterated its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and independence and call for the immediate withdrawal of all Russian forces, which was key to enabling the reconstruction to begin.

114. On the tragic humanitarian situation in Gaza, Greece called for an immediate humanitarian pause, unhindered humanitarian access and the unconditional release of all hostages to pave the way for a sustainable ceasefire. It would continue to strive to provide humanitarian assistance to Gaza and welcomed the activation of a maritime route to deliver such assistance through Cyprus; all humanitarian corridors, whether by air, land or sea.

115. As to the many other serious crises in, among others, Ethiopia, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen and the Karabakh region. Greece fully supported the crucial work of UNHCR to provide assistance to all those in need, as reflected in the host country agreement that his Government's Minister of Foreign Affairs had signed with the High Commissioner on his visit to the country the previous month. That agreement marked a significant milestone in his country's long-standing partnership with the Office, which had resulted in the implementation of a range of projects to find solutions for refugees in terms of accommodation, cash-based assistance, integration and the protection of unaccompanied minors. Greece remained committed to upholding children's rights and strengthening child protection, as reflected in its pledge at the Global Refugee Forum 2023 to ensure that its national emergency response mechanism addressed the protection needs of every child arriving at its borders.

116. On the people-smuggling networks capitalizing on the suffering of those forced to flee their homes and encouraging them to put their lives at risk on perilous journeys, he said that combating those networks and dismantling their business model was an immediate priority in every region, including the Americas, where the Darién Gap situation resembled that faced by Greece in 2015–2016. His country's immigration policy sought to support the efforts of UNHCR, IOM and other European States to promote legal pathways through bilateral labour agreements and the regularization of third-country nationals, among other things.

117. The representative of **Canada**, recalling that the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation had just entered its third year, said that his Government remained steadfast in its condemnation of the unjustifiable aggression against Ukraine, which had had an enormous impact on the lives of its civilians and its economy and resulted in unprecedented levels of displacement in the region. Canada commended UNHCR staff and partners for their tireless efforts to prevent sexual exploitation, harassment and abuse and to respond to gender-based violence in Europe, which had helped to strengthen protection approaches and the capacity of partners to respond to the needs of the forcibly displaced. Canada welcomed the Ukraine situation humanitarian response and regional refugee response plans, which it regarded as vital instruments as it continued to provide funding to meet the urgent needs of the most vulnerable persons. More information would be welcome on the efforts of UNHCR to ensure protection and find durable solutions for Ukrainian refugees in the region and how it would maximize working relations with – and ensure quality funding for – local actors, particularly women-led organizations and women's rights groups, in the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

118. Canada also remained steadfast in its support for the Ukrainian people and efforts to find solutions for those seeking temporary refuge from the war in their homeland, such as the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) initiative, launched in March 2022, which granted Ukrainians and non-Ukrainian family members temporary residence for up to three years. Over 950,000 people had had an application approved to date, with more than 21,000 having arrived to date, and a new route to permanent residence status for Ukrainian nationals had been opened up in October 2023. More information would be welcome on the lessons learned from its engagement with host countries, settlement partners and donors and how UNHCR would apply them in its responses to other emerging crises.

119. The representative of **Poland** said that with Europe facing myriad challenges as a result of cross-border movements of populations of diverse origin, it had been regrettable to see some governments seeking to instrumentalize the movements and exploit the vulnerability of the displaced for political purposes. The most challenging situation in terms of numbers and complexity stemmed from the Russian Federation's continuing aggression against Ukraine, in violation of the Charter of the United Nations. Poland condemned the destruction of housing and civilian infrastructure and disruptions to essential services, which had left some 15 million Ukrainians in need of humanitarian assistance; the Russian Federation must cease the deportation of Ukrainian citizens, especially children; and UNHCR must be granted unhindered access to the temporarily occupied territories. His delegation commended the Office for its comprehensive response in support of Ukrainian refugees and their host communities; welcomed the latest Ukraine situation regional refugee response plan; expressed his country's support for the recent winterization support initiative, as reflected in its \$250,000 contribution; and took note of the Office's commitment to continue to support a harmonized approach to refugee protection beyond 2025.

120. Poland had kept its borders open and become a major host country for Ukrainian refugees in Europe. The scale of its commitment, ability and willingness to help those in need was such that close to one million were now beneficiaries of its temporary residence protection programme and the equivalent of 3 per cent of its gross domestic product – the largest contribution of any member country of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – had been allocated to the provision of assistance to Ukrainian refugees since 2022. Support was also provided for reintegration and voluntary returns. Those funds had made it possible to establish a comprehensive system to ensure access for refugees to education, and health-care, social and other essential services; over half a million refugee children had gained access to education, for example, and a similar number of Ukrainian had been enrolled in the national health service, although several complex challenges remained to be addressed, such as the provision of mental health support. Further, measures had been introduced to enable the effective integration and self-reliance of refugees through access to the labour market, the recognition of qualifications and offers of livelihood opportunities.

121. His delegation commended UNHCR for the rapid humanitarian response to the exodus of Karabakh Armenians from the Karabakh region the previous September and for the Armenia refugee response plan launched the following month; Poland, he recalled, had been among the first to respond to the call for support with a contribution to the funding and in-kind assistance for the refugees.

122. The representative of **Spain**, referring to the constant flow of asylum requests and irregular arrivals in recent years as a result of conflicts, international law and human rights violations, the impacts of climate change and the opportunism of human trafficking networks, pointed out that her country had received over 163,000 international protection applications in 2023, the second largest number of any country in Europe. The number of arrivals via the Mediterranean and West African maritime routes continued to grow exponentially and her Government was working at the national level and with countries of origin and transit – in particular Morocco and Mauritania for the West African route – to prevent further human tragedies; Spain was appreciative of UNHCR support in addressing the situation. The Government had granted temporary protection status to close to 200,000 arrivals from Ukraine, 32 per cent of them minors, since the Russian Federation's invasion of their homeland, which, two years on, her Government continued resolutely to condemn; Spain held to the view that respecting humanitarian law in that conflict, as in any other, was a legal and moral obligation. Over 55,000 Ukrainians had been granted refugee status or subsidiary protection, more than 8,000 now had statelessness status and another 40,000 had received humanitarian visas and her Government continued to respond to requests to adjust its protection capacity and

mechanisms.

123. Spain, as both a donor and host country, was committed to responsibility-sharing and global solidarity, which was crucial to achieving key agreements, as seen during its presidency of the Council of the European Union in the case of the Pact on Migration and Asylum – which would help to speed up global responses to the challenges of forced displacement – and the unanimous agreement of Member States to extend the Union’s temporary protection period for Ukrainian refugees to March 2025.

124. Pursuant to its pledges at the Global Refugee Forum 2023, Spain was in the process of gradually increasing its official development assistance and would allocate 10 per cent of its humanitarian assistance to refugees and the displaced, while reaching out to UNHCR and other United Nations agencies to work in partnership on the digital connectivity of refugees, with a special emphasis on the inclusion and education of their children; continuing to advance programmes focused on implementing the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, mainstreaming the gender perspective and combatting sexual and gender-based violence and facilitating access to climate finance in humanitarian situations; and continuing also to support responses to crises in Afghanistan, the Americas and the Middle East. The complexities of the crises called for rapid, effective – and human – collective responses, which formed the focus of the consultations on resettlement and complementary pathways that her country would be chairing in 2024.

125. The representative of **Bulgaria**, noting with concern that, after another year of war in Europe, the region faced unprecedented levels of forced displacement and mixed movements of the displaced via dangerous routes. He commended UNHCR for its dedicated efforts to protect the refugees and assist the countries affected and their neighbours; and welcoming the Office’s plans to further develop initiatives, training and awareness-raising through its “stay safe” and “safe online” campaigns on key issues, such as mental health support, sexual and gender-based violence and human trafficking. He underscored the need for all countries of origin, transit and destination to work harder to combat the criminal networks profiting from the plight of vulnerable persons seeking safety and dignity in Europe. UNHCR, for its part, was encouraged to continue to work closely with other international organizations and partners to tackle that challenge.

126. Two years on from the start of the Russian Federation’s illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, with the death and destruction continuing to contribute to a humanitarian crisis on an unprecedented scale, Bulgaria reiterated its strong condemnation of the aggressor and called on all parties to ensure that international humanitarian law was fully respected. It was deeply concerned about the reports of Ukrainian children being forcibly transferred to Russian territory and added its voice to those calling for UNHCR and other specialized agencies to have immediate unimpeded access to all Ukrainian hostages, in particular children; and it welcomed the Office’s continued engagement and decision to reinforce its presence in Ukraine in order to serve those in the most vulnerable situation and support government-led recovery efforts. Bulgaria had granted temporary protection to just under 175,000 of the more than 2.5 million Ukrainians entering the country since the start of the war, including 55,350 accompanied and 590 unaccompanied minors; just under 53,000 had received registration cards and given the right to remain. Particular importance was attached to the inclusion of persons with disabilities, the protection of children and their families and the socioeconomic and educational prospects of the refugees. Bulgaria, as a host country, understood well the challenges of the role and continued to stand in solidarity with others in that position; and its commitment to serve as a resettlement country was reflected in its pledge at the Global Refugee Forum 2023 to increase the number of persons resettled.

127. Lastly, his delegation commended UNHCR for its rapid response to the deeply troubling humanitarian situation in Armenia after the exodus of Karabakh Armenians from the Karabakh region.

128. The representative of **Estonia**, expressing her delegation’s deep concern about the 69 per cent increase in the number of refugees and migrants arriving on the shores of Europe in 2023 (nearly 270,000) compared to 2022, and its sadness that 3,840 deaths had been reported on the primary maritime routes. She stated that those statistics made clear that more must be done to address the root causes, including through mitigating the impacts of climate change.

129. Regarding the Ukraine situation, she said that the Russian Federation, 10 years after its invasion of the Crimean peninsula, had illegally occupied and annexed around 17 per cent of

Ukraine's territory to date. Over 30,000 civilian casualties, including nearly 2,000 children, had been confirmed by United Nations sources and millions had been forcibly displaced from their homes and country. The Russian Federation's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine was a major violation of the Charter of the United Nations and international law; the loss of innocent lives and attacks on hospitals, schools and other civilian infrastructure was intolerable; and the devastating nature of the ramifications, both in Europe and globally, could not be overstated.

130. Estonia condemned that war of aggression in the strongest possible terms. International law must be respected and unhindered humanitarian access guaranteed to enable humanitarian workers to work without fearing for their lives. Estonia was particularly concerned about the nearly 20,000 Ukrainian children reported by Ukraine to have been abducted and taken to the Russian Federation for involuntary naturalization and adoption; their national identity was being systemically erased. Those illegal practices must be stopped and the children returned immediately. More information from UNHCR on the current situation in terms of access to Ukrainian children in Russia would be appreciated.

131. Estonia had contributed over €25.9 million in humanitarian aid to Ukraine since February 2022, €6.8 million of it from public sector sources, and it would continue to assist the country and its people with not only financial but also economic, political and security-related support. It was hosting the largest number of Ukrainian refugees per capita of almost any country in Europe and its borders remained open to welcome others. Estonia commended all humanitarian actors, including UNHCR and its partners, for their relentless efforts to alleviate the human suffering, including in highly complex and dangerous circumstances. While humanitarian aid and reconstruction might be crucial, no amount of it could compensate for the lost lives, homes and hope. The Russian Federation had started the war and must end it immediately by withdrawing its troops from the internationally recognized territory of Ukraine.

132. The representative of the **Russian Federation**, expressing appreciation to UNHCR for its humanitarian efforts, which had been effective in saving millions of lives in countries and regions facing all manner of crises, urged UNHCR to abide by the principles of neutrality, independence, impartiality and humanity, in keeping with its mandate based on the 1951 Convention and its Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. His delegation commended the Office for its lead role in ensuring the success of the Global Refugee Forum 2023, whose outcomes were a definite milestone in the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees. It shared its concerns about the situation in Europe, marked by growing numbers of refugees and migrants arriving from the Middle East and North Africa, and the case of governments seeking to offshore the processing of asylum claims to other, non-European, countries. It was also concerned about the death toll on the routes into Europe.

133. His delegation welcomed the Office's continuing support for its voluntary repatriation initiative for Syrian refugees and encouraged it to continue to work actively to support reintegration in the homeland with a view to reducing the burden on host countries. It took note of the attention devoted to the issues faced by refugees and internally displaced persons in Armenia and Azerbaijan, recalling that a share of the Russian Federation's voluntary contributions to the 2023 budget had been earmarked for programmes to respond to their needs; and, in the light of the mass statelessness faced in several countries in Europe, urged UNHCR to keep the reduction of statelessness at the top of its agenda.

134. The Russian Federation, in the pursuance of its international obligations, continued to work tirelessly in cooperation with UNHCR to ensure effective protection for refugees through its comprehensive, well-established, asylum system and legislation that protected foreign nationals, including stateless persons, regardless of their nationality, race, religion or ethnicity, and its approach to refugee issues was fully aligned with the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees. It has received more than 75,000 refugees from 81 countries. The Government, in its extensive, ongoing, modernization of the country's immigration laws, had introduced a regulatory act that provided for new approaches to providing asylum status, underpinned by the fundamental right to protection and the principle of non-refoulement. That instrument, once adopted, would serve to streamline asylum procedures, providing clear criteria for approving asylum claims and granting temporary protection status; the current legal and social safeguards would remain in place. The reduction of statelessness was a core principle in his country's legislation – as reflected in a new federal law setting standards and simplifying procedures for granting Russian citizenship to the stateless – and particular attention was paid to the case of stateless children; Russian citizenship had

been granted to some 800,000 stateless persons since 1992. In 2022, owing to an emergency situation in a number of Russian regions, his country had taken in large numbers of forcibly displaced persons from Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, Zaporozhye, Kherson and parts of Ukraine. UNHCR could see for itself the effectiveness of the response in terms of their quality of life and protection by visiting them in their current location in the Russian Federation.

135. The representative of **Sweden** said that two years on from the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the war of aggression continued to have major consequences in Ukraine and across the region, with over 6 million Ukrainians displaced abroad and almost 4 million internally displaced. Sweden, reiterating its strong condemnation of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine, commended UNHCR for continuing its crucial yet difficult and often dangerous life-saving work in Ukraine and across the region. It encouraged UNHCR to continue to focus on reaching the most vulnerable persons in hard-to-reach and frontline areas so that precious humanitarian resources went where the needs were most severe; the same applied to the provision of protection and shelter to the vulnerable in population centres. His delegation welcomed UNHCR's collaboration with other relevant actors to ensure a nexus approach, bearing in mind the importance of burden-sharing in line with their respective mandates, and it encouraged the Office to continue its strong coordination with the Ukrainian authorities and NGOs, including at the local level; the close cooperation of UNHCR with Ukraine's Ministry of Social Policy was a good example of partnership with national institutions. His Government had contributed over €200 million in humanitarian assistance to the response to the Ukraine crisis since February 2022 and regarded continued assistance as a key priority; Sweden would continue to stand with Ukraine and the neighbouring countries affected by the invasion.

136. Regarding the situation of displaced Karabakh Armenians, his delegation commended UNHCR for its rapid humanitarian response and the local authorities for their constructive steps to ensure their protection; Sweden, for its part, had been quick to disburse additional financing to UNHCR and other humanitarian actors to meet the rising needs.

137. The representative of **Portugal** said that it had been just over two years since the Russian Federation had launched its invasion of Ukraine, triggering the largest movement of forcibly displaced persons in Europe since the Second World War; that its war of aggression ran counter to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations; and that its extensive destruction of civilian infrastructure and deliberate attacks on civilians, which had been independently confirmed by UNHCR and other United Nations agencies, were violations of international humanitarian law. Poland was particularly concerned about the reports of Ukrainian children being deported to the Russian Federation and Belarus, and called on the Russian Federation to ensure unimpeded access to those children.

138. Portugal had continued to play its part in supporting efforts to help the Ukrainian refugees in 2023, contributing to the work of UNHCR and UNICEF in Ukraine. It had received some 60,000 applications for temporary protection, mainly for women and children. Some 45,000 refugees had been issued a citizen's card, with social security, national health and tax identification numbers; most had found housing through an online government platform, with some 2,000 currently living in public housing; some 6,000 refugees were currently learning Portuguese free of charge; and some 4,000 Ukrainian children were enrolled in state schools. Her Government was committed to ensuring the refugees' integration through labour market inclusion, education, health and social security.

139. The representative of **Norway**, reiterating his country's strong condemnation of the Russian Federation's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, said that Norway stood with its allies in support of Ukraine as it exercised its right of self-defence and called on the Russian Federation to comply with international law, to cease all hostilities and to facilitate safe, unimpeded, access for humanitarian actors to deliver assistance to civilians in need on the front line and in the Ukrainian territory under its control.

140. Norway, as a leading humanitarian donor to Ukraine, would continue to channel its support through the Nansen Support Programme for Ukraine, which included refugee response for neighbouring countries, in particular the Republic of Moldova. Norway also granted displaced Ukrainians collective temporary protection status and had welcomed more than 70,000, which was more than 1 per cent of its population.

141. Norway commended UNHCR and its partners for their tireless work in scaling up their

response and provision of live-saving activities. Support for the Government of Ukraine in its effort to protect and provide assistance to the internally displaced must continue, and the Office must be able to ensure a rapid response and adjust to rapidly changing needs. Norway welcomed the cooperation of UNHCR with development actors, such as UNDP to generate durable solutions that fostered local economic recovery and access to protection and services, in line with Ukraine's priorities and plans.

142. The extensive use of explosive weapons in the urban warfare in Ukraine had caused tremendous harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure and been a significant driver of displacement, and his delegation looked forward to discussing the issue further in Oslo the following month at the first international follow-up conference to the political declaration on strengthening the protection of civilians from the humanitarian consequences arising from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

143. The representative of **Croatia** congratulated UNHCR on the successful Global Refugee Forum 2023, expressing the hope that the pledges made there would help to create a better world for those in need. It noted the illegal war of aggression against the sovereign State of Ukraine that the Russian Federation had been waging for a decade, since its illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula. That war, which was a blatant violation of the Charter of the United Nations and the tenets of international humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions, had forced 14 million to flee their homes in search of peace and safety and stability. The majority had stayed in neighbouring countries or elsewhere in Europe and almost 25,000 had chosen to accept temporary protection status offered by Croatia. While all were more than welcome to stay and had access to education, social security and employment opportunities, they naturally hoped to return home. One of the prerequisites for safe returns and sustainable economic development was humanitarian mine action and Croatia, thanks to its own post-conflict recovery process, had a wealth of expertise and best practices to offer its Ukrainian partners through its mine action training centre. Her Government had provided more than €59 million in humanitarian and development assistance from both public and private sources. It remained deeply concerned about the fate of the Ukrainian children forcibly deported to the Russian Federation and called for their immediate safe return.

144. Regarding the situation in Armenia following the mass exodus of Karabakh Armenians, Croatia had provided funding for humanitarian actors on the ground. On the statelessness issue, it had joined the pledge made by governments and civil society organizations at the conference on statelessness organized by UNHCR and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Skopje the previous October to resolve all known cases in south-eastern Europe, especially that of stateless children. On the global increase in mixed migratory flows, Croatia looked forward to the full implementation of the European Union's Pact on Migration and Asylum so as to ensure safe, orderly and regular migration and curb the illegal trafficking of migrants. Croatia had also joined the European Union pledge at the Global Refugee Forum 2023 on resettlement and humanitarian admission and reaffirmed its firm support for safe and legal pathways to protection.

The meeting rose at 1.10 p.m.