

Remarks for the 90th Standing Committee meeting
Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme
Kelly T. Clements, Deputy High Commissioner
01 July 2024

Madam Chair,
Excellencies,
Colleagues,

Good morning to you all.

It is a privilege to be with you, as always, and to share a few reflections as we open the 90th session of UNHCR's Standing Committee. As you know, the focus of this meeting is on protection. The core of our mandate – which we will spend some time discussing over the next two days, led by the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Ruven Menikdiwela, and the Division of International Protection.

Looking at the humanitarian landscape today, at the number of people forced to flee, it is clear that the need to protect, to aid, and to solve could not be more urgent. Not only are there more people displaced than ever before – 120 million per our latest report – but displacement itself lasts longer. Solutions seem farther and farther out of reach. And while conflict, violence and persecution remain the principal drivers of forced displacement, they are increasingly intertwined with climate impacts, like those we just heard, leaving no region or country immune, from Zambia to Brazil. Of the 7 emergencies we declared since we last met in this committee in March, four were climate-related. These add to the relentless pace of emergencies – this year alone we and partners have responded to an emergency every 10 days. In addition to protracted crises in Afghanistan, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others.

Humanitarian needs have never been more pressing. UNHCR's mandate has never been more relevant. And we have never been more determined.

Determined because, despite the challenges – and there are many – we make a real impact every day in the lives of families, of children, and of all those who are forced to leave their homes in search of safety. Families like the ones with whom I spoke a few weeks ago, as they waited to board a boat in Renk, near the border between Sudan and South Sudan. A mother who had just arrived from Sudan with her children. A mother who did not know what the future would bring. What the next day would bring. And yet, she put her trust in UNHCR. Because, thanks to your support, we, with our partners, are there every day. These and millions of other families put their trust in us to bring them to safety. To protect them. So they can start rebuilding their lives. In South Sudan, but also in Ukraine, in Uganda, and in so many other places around the world. Your support enables us to do that, and we thank you for it.

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Your support too is needed now more than ever.

We recognize and fully appreciate the generosity of host countries. Many of you have welcomed refugees decade after decade – and continue to keep your communities and your

homes open, despite economic and social challenges of your own. We know that generosity comes at a cost – and I look forward to the update during this Standing Committee on measuring the impact of hosting refugees.

Thank you also to our donors. We know that many of you also host refugees. That you must navigate complex political dynamics, both domestically and internationally. That you contend with the multiplicity of crises requiring attention, and with competing demands for resources, including for your own constituencies. UNHCR does not take your support for granted, and we call on those who can contribute more to follow your lead. Even as we must urge you to do more, we are redoubling efforts ourselves to mobilize the resources required to meet the needs of the people we serve, which, in 2024, translated to a budget of close to \$10.8 billion. We are expanding our donor base to non-traditional donors. We are developing new and innovative financial instruments – in Islamic philanthropy and climate financing, to name just two. Our engagement with the private sector has gone from strength to strength, including in fundraising, with contributions surpassing \$700 million in 2023, after a record-breaking year in 2022. And yet so far this year, our overall budget is only just over a quarter funded, and it is already July.

Of even more pressing concern is the low level of cash currently available to UNHCR, which represents just over one month of operational coverage. It is critical, for those who have committed to support us with the precious cash we need to aid people around the world, to disburse pledged funds as early as possible, to prevent any disruptions in our and partners' abilities to operate.

Given this current financial uncertainty, and the equally – if not more – challenging outlook for 2025, UNHCR continues to anticipate and adapt to change. We are not standing still.

For example, by introducing more predictability in our planning and programming. Starting in 2025, all UNHCR operations, including now Headquarters, will have submitted multi-year strategies under the new results-based approach. This will lead to stronger, data-driven programming and reporting. Using common indicators from year to year will allow us to better compare results and measure progress – as the 2023 Global Report, to be presented shortly, will illustrate.

We are also constantly reviewing our operational approaches, so we can build on the momentum generated by last year's Global Refugee Forum, and on our collective pledges to harness the transformational power of inclusion and self-reliance. Including forcibly displaced people in national planning, strengthening their self-reliance, bringing displaced and host communities closer together – these are not just investments in the future, these are first and foremost investments in the present. Economic investments certainly, but also social investments, investments in peace and stability. Where we see these opportunities – where *you* see those opportunities – we are working to support you, with partners, to create environments conducive to take advantage of these opportunities. Including refugees and internally displaced persons unlocks their potential, not only to contribute to their own wellbeing but also to the wellbeing of the communities that host them. And we have seen that countless times, and in remarkably different operational contexts – again, from Zambia to Brazil.

As you may have heard the High Commissioner say in his address at the University of Nairobi last month, bringing development actors, and the private sector, with us from the very first day of a humanitarian response will ensure that our programmes are designed sustainably. A joined up humanitarian-development response will stimulate growth and generate

employment opportunities. It will reduce reliance on short-term humanitarian funding, which, by nature, is designed for the most urgent needs, and for the most vulnerable.

Re-imagining and re-designing our activities through the lens of sustainability will also enable us to redirect our humanitarian focus to where we can make the biggest impact on people's lives.

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To modernize, to streamline, to become more efficient, more agile – that has been the driving ambition behind UNHCR's transformation in the last years. A transformation that continues – as I said, standing still is not an option – including through the ongoing realignment process, which has been an important step in fine-tuning UNHCR's decentralization and regionalization. By reviewing where – in Headquarters, in our regional bureaus, or in country operations – we can deliver more efficiently. By identifying opportunities to leverage the new tools available to us, after the launch of our digital systems, to recalibrate certain functions – in particular transactional functions in finance, or administration – and ensure these functions are streamlined.

Needless to say, learning is fundamental to our ambition to change and to improve. Without reviewing and evaluating what has been done, what we have accomplished, we would not be able to identify areas for improvement, or avoid potential future mis-steps. Learning also provides a critical opportunity to validate and reaffirm key milestones on our journey of transformation. Including on major undertakings such as the decentralization, or the Business Transformation Programme, which officially closed earlier this year. And we have welcomed the many such recent assessments, from a variety of entities, to give us an independent and unvarnished look as to how we are doing. This includes reports from the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network; from internal auditors, OIOS; from the evaluation office; from professional consulting firms; and from the external Board of Auditors. We just concluded last week a session with the Independent Audit and Oversight Committee, which also met with the Bureau of the Executive Committee. The story they tell is that UNHCR is a vibrant, modern organization. An organization that is nimble, that is on the right path, and well positioned for the future.

Of course, we also know that we still have work to do. To continue stabilizing our new systems. To continue streamlining our structures. To provide even more value for money. That is why we have decided to reinvigorate our existing transformation and change structure by transitioning it to a new entity, the Design and Development Service. It will bring new and existing resources under one institutional structure whose purpose will be to align UNHCR's people, structures, and processes with our vision to achieve greater coherence, efficiency, and effectiveness. The new service will also help chart the course forward, and guide the organization through, its next broader shifts – in reimagining partnerships, or rethinking our financing model.

A few words if you allow, Madam Chair, on our people. The individuals and teams who, day in and day out, as you saw in Mauritania, work under the most difficult of circumstances, and against all odds, to be there for people forced to flee and for stateless persons, on the frontlines. I am privileged to meet so many of them when I travel, and without fail, I am inspired by their dedication and their resilience. Confident in the knowledge that our people, UNHCR's people, are our greatest asset.

And I would be doing them a disservice if I did not mention that the rapid and profound change of the last years had caused tension within the organization. Because realignment, financial constraints and streamlining have also meant a reduction in force. Concretely, that means seeing members of the UNHCR family – many of them long-serving, dedicated professionals – leave, either because positions were discontinued or changed, or because some colleagues have taken advantage of a voluntary separation programme. As you can imagine, it been a particularly difficult time for all of us.

And while we continue to provide, under the leadership of the Division of Human Resources, support to our colleagues – including career development, coaching sessions, and learning resources – we also know that realignment has had and will continue to have a significant impact on morale. That is why, as we continue to move forward, we are in constant dialogue with our teams. To listen to their concerns, to their ideas and to their suggestions.

But also, to hear their grievances, and to act on them. We have worked tirelessly to build a culture of trust and accountability. A culture where all colleagues are empowered to speak up against abuse in all its forms. To report misconduct. And not to fear retaliation when they do. We make every effort to review and update our systems and policies so colleagues know what is expected of them, and what they can expect of us. And I hope you can join us later today for the side event on our newly-launched policy on sexual misconduct for which we are very proud.

Of course most workplace concerns can and should be resolved informally – through peers, through managers, or, when appropriate, through professional and confidential Ombuds mediation services. But when these concerns point to potential misconduct, allegations are independently investigated, and any established misconduct is sanctioned. As you have heard me say on several occasions in this Committee, UNHCR’s commitment to accountability is non-negotiable.

In closing,

Madam Chair,
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Colleagues,

Allow me once more to thank you most sincerely for your support to UNHCR, and for your commitment to the people we serve. They count on us, and we count on you.

Thank you.