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International protection

Note on international protection

Note by the High Commissioner

Summary

This note on international protection highlights the critical need to abide by international legal standards and to fulfil commitments in the Global Compact on Refugees, as persecution and conflicts continue to force people from their homes in record numbers and solutions remain elusive in all regions of the world. It underscores the importance of partnerships, as exemplified through the many multi-stakeholder pledges made at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, in order to address the current challenges. It emphasizes opportunities to establish and strengthen fair and efficient asylum systems; respond more effectively and predictably to mixed and onward movements; ensure access to rights and the inclusion of refugees in national systems; harness development assistance, including for the benefit of host communities; and strengthen protection and responses through the meaningful participation of refugees in decisions affecting them. The note also underscores the importance of resettlement as a protection tool and the need to bolster access to safe and regulated complementary pathways, as part of wider efforts to expand durable solutions.

I. Introduction

1. There are currently more than 117 million people around the world who have been forced from their homes due to violence, conflict, political oppression, discrimination, other forms of persecution, and events seriously disturbing the public order. Over 68 million people remain displaced within their own countries, with the rest having sought international protection across borders.

2. Over the past year, major new conflicts displaced millions, while ongoing crises precluded return, including for many in situations of protracted displacement. The war in the Sudan, which reignited in 2023, forced nearly 9 million people to flee within and from the country. The war in Ukraine entered its third year, with millions of refugees continuing to benefit from temporary protection and similar arrangements abroad. In Haiti, gang violence intensified and with it internal and cross-border displacement. The conflict in Myanmar escalated in late 2023, leading to further displacement internally and across borders. Syrians remained displaced in large numbers across the Middle East and beyond, while the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza has caused immense civilian suffering. In Africa, from the Sahel, including Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger, to Ethiopia, South Sudan and the Sudan, as well as the eastern areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, conflict and political instability persist.

3. Peace remains elusive in an increasingly divided and fragmented world, with United Nations peace and security fora often deadlocked and Member States unable to reach consensus. Without progress towards political settlements, humanitarian responses – frequently the only option left on the table – are insufficient against a backdrop of ever-growing needs, with funding unable to keep pace. As the gap between funding levels and needs grow, immediate life-saving imperatives must be prioritized over other needs. Funding cuts may affect community-based interventions and resilience activities, undermining efforts to ensure inclusion in national systems and economies. While development support is increasingly recognized as a catalyst for protection and solutions, investments benefiting both displaced and host communities need to be more swiftly, widely and systematically made to address the challenges and generate opportunities.

4. In 2023, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) declared 43 emergencies, the highest yearly total in a decade. UNHCR scaled up its activities in 29 countries and assisted 38.5 million people worldwide. In many countries, conflict and instability – together with challenges around humanitarian access – complicated the delivery of aid. UNHCR and partners were called upon to work in dangerous political and security contexts, exposing personnel to targeted attacks and other serious risks. In 2023, a quarter of the UNHCR workforce was based in high- or moderately high-risk duty stations, where over 400 security incidents were reported. Meanwhile, environmental degradation and climate change caused more frequent and extreme natural hazards, which often interacted with conflict, violence, weak governance and socioeconomic fragility in ways that caused or increased displacement.

II. Asylum

A. Asylum systems

5. Persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, together with threats to life, freedom and physical integrity arising from serious public disorder, conflict and violence, give rise to the need for international protection. In some societies, people with varying beliefs, characteristics and identities are at heightened risk of persecution, and consequently displacement, including because of regressive laws and policies. International protection needs may also arise in the context of climate change, where its effects may exacerbate social, inter-ethnic and other tensions.

6. Fair and efficient asylum systems are central to the ability of States to ensure the full and inclusive application of refugee law, specifically through the determination of status and the enablement of protection. As the number of people seeking international protection continues to rise, asylum systems face significant challenges. With 3.6 million new asylum applications lodged in 2023, the backlog reached 6.9 million by year's end. This may leave people in exile for years without legal certainty, negatively impacting their access to solutions. Furthermore, in a context where some people who do not need international protection use asylum systems to temporarily regularize their stay, it is essential that States reinforce their asylum and migration management. UNHCR supports States in this endeavour, advocating lawful and comprehensive policy alternatives to externalization policies which shift responsibility for refugee protection.

7. Timely and effective registration of asylum-seekers is a critical first step to establish identity, provide legal status and documentation, and ensure protection. The use of digital technology for registration and documentation, in line with data protection principles and safeguards, can enhance the integrity and efficiency of asylum procedures and facilitate the provision of assistance. The development of digital tools has strengthened UNHCR accountability to displaced people by providing them with ownership over and access to their own data. In line with its digital transformation strategy, UNHCR expanded digital channels to 137 countries and territories, with over 13 million visitors in 2023.

8. Many States made improvements in their asylum systems and processes, often building on good practices from other States. In response to refugee outflows from the Sudan, the Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia and South Sudan granted refugee status using group-based *prima facie* approaches. Other countries used simplified approaches to refugee recognition, acknowledging that the high presumption of eligibility warranted simpler processes. This was seen in Benin and Togo (for arrivals from Burkina Faso) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (for arrivals from the Central African Republic and the Sudan). Other States, such as Brazil, leveraged investments in their registration systems to facilitate recognition for some asylum-seekers with a high presumption of eligibility, without the need for eligibility interviews or through shortened interviews. In March 2024, Colombia launched a digital tool that allows tracking of the refugee status determination process, from application to final decision. With support from the World Bank, Ethiopia introduced a national identification project, allowing asylum-seekers to be digitally cross-referenced in the national system to avoid nationals registering as asylum-seekers. Other States took steps to establish asylum frameworks, including Egypt and Iraq, or strengthened their legislation, including Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya and Somalia. In the European Union, temporary protection for people fleeing the war in Ukraine was further extended until March 2026, ensuring protection, legal certainty and support for nearly 3.9 million refugees.

9. To fulfil its mandate to promote international refugee law instruments and supervise their application, UNHCR systematically collects and analyses law and policy data. In 2024, it launched an interactive refugee treaty and legislation dashboard containing information on the global legal protection environment for refugees and asylum-seekers, including data on refugee treaties and asylum laws worldwide. The dashboard is designed to assist law and policy makers, legal practitioners, civil society, academics, researchers, international and regional organizations and other stakeholders in analysing laws relating to refugees.

10. The international protection framework remains strong, ensuring protection for millions of refugees each year. Its authority and currency are borne out by State practice, despite questions raised by political actors regarding its relevance based on implementation failures and gaps. Through this framework, courts around the world continue to render important decisions, upholding the rights of displaced and stateless persons. Positive laws and policies were adopted in 2023 and 2024 in many countries, although restrictive standards were legislated in others. South Africa proposed to withdraw from the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and re-accede with reservations. UNHCR advocated against this unprecedented move that would undermine refugee protection. In many countries, implementation of legal standards was insufficient. Other legal developments raised concern, particularly regarding pursuit of externalization measures, such as the arrangement between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Rwanda, impacting the right to seek and enjoy asylum and protection from refoulement. UNHCR recalls that States parties

are obliged to apply international instruments such as the 1951 Convention in good faith, along with the customary international legal principle of non-refoulement, even in instances where they are not transposed into domestic legislation.

11. A significant number of incidents of refoulement were reported around the world, from arbitrary expulsions to large-scale pushbacks and other non-entry measures at borders. UNHCR worked with partners to prevent and respond to refoulement. Together with lawyers, judges and bar and judicial organizations, such as the International Association of Refugee and Migration Judges, UNHCR raises awareness about aspects of international refugee law and contributes to capacity development. At the Global Refugee Forum, many pledges expressed commitment to law and policy reform as well as to the provision of technical support, training and resources.

12. UNHCR welcomed pledges related to inclusivity and broader age, gender and diversity considerations. It is, nevertheless, worrisome that instances continue to be reported of persons seeking asylum because of fear of persecution based on their nationality, ethnicity or their sexual orientation or gender identity facing legal and practical barriers to access asylum procedures, in breach of the right to seek and enjoy asylum and the principle of non-refoulement.

13. After establishing an online dialogue platform in early 2023 as a virtual space to facilitate relationship-building among States and other stakeholders, the Asylum Capacity Support Group stepped up its activities. A first technical event hosted by the Group looked at best practices in fairly and efficiently processing well-founded applications, with good practice examples provided by several States. Many regional organizations and networks strengthened their work on the development of asylum capacity. These included regional collaborative mechanisms devoted to human mobility and refugee issues, including the comprehensive regional protection and solutions framework (known by its Spanish acronym MIRPS) and the Quito process in the Americas, as well as increased engagement by economic and development communities at the sub-regional level in Africa. Regional processes and communities contribute play an important role in standard-setting and improving system quality.

14. This increased engagement was evident in the commitments made by States from all regions under the asylum capacity multi-stakeholder pledge at the Global Refugee Forum. With over 50 pledges, including 40 by States to improve their asylum capacity or support other countries, the outcome represented a tangible example of global solidarity. Many gaps nevertheless remain, including inefficient law and policy frameworks, weak institutions, outdated case management and other systems, under-resourced workforces with skills gaps, cumbersome back-office processes and inconsistent use of differentiated case-processing modalities. Increased, sustainable investment in asylum capacity is needed, including by development actors.

15. UNHCR issued country guidance, including on Burkina Faso, Colombia, Haiti, Iraq, Myanmar and Ukraine, to support asylum decision-makers and guide States. To increase the accessibility of guidance and broader law and policy information, UNHCR released in February 2024 an updated version of Refworld, the world's largest law and policy repository relating to displaced and stateless persons.

16. While UNHCR encourages States that do not have asylum systems to develop them, it continues to conduct refugee status determination under its mandate in approximately 50 countries that lack national systems. UNHCR worked on improving the quality and efficiency of its procedures and developing good-practice examples that could assist State systems, including through technology. Globally, many asylum systems face high staff turnover and burnout due to heavy workload and secondary trauma. UNHCR has developed training modules on well-being platforms that offer relevant tools and resources to address this.

B. Onward and mixed movements and related challenges

17. At the end of 2023, 69 per cent of refugees remained in neighbouring countries, a percentage similar to recent years. However, when they do not find protection or access to

rights and solutions there, many move onwards, attempting to reach a safe and stable country that offers prospects for the future. Restrictive approaches to refugees who move onward may limit their ability to access the protection to which they are entitled under international law. At the same time, refugees do not have an unfettered right to choose where they enjoy international protection. It may, thus, be permissible in some situations, where relevant standards are met, to expect those who benefited from protection in a first country of asylum, or who could have claimed it there, to return and re-avail themselves of protection or await the outcome of an asylum claim. In such cases, transfers need to be based on international cooperation and the sharing of responsibilities for displaced populations, ensuring respect for international refugee and human rights law standards and subject to judicial scrutiny.

18. Climate change is increasingly a contributing factor to the movement of people within and across borders. It forces many from their homes, compounding their vulnerability in exile and preventing them from returning. Not all who cross an international border in the context of climate change are entitled to international protection. However, if they do seek asylum, it is crucial that their claims are considered and the relevant criteria under international, regional and domestic law are applied. In some situations, notably where conflict and violence interact with climate impacts and disaster, or when individuals are exposed to discrimination amounting to persecution, those seeking asylum should be recognized and receive international protection.

19. In the context of mixed movements, people in need of international protection travel alongside others who have left their countries for different reasons, often using the same routes, means of transport and facilitators. While refugees have distinct needs and entitlements to international protection, migrants travelling in the same, frequently irregular, movements also face risks and vulnerability. Such movements also pose multifaceted challenges for States, including with respect to the effective operation of border management and asylum systems.

20. Public concern about migration and refugee arrivals is fuelled, in some contexts, by nationalistic, populist and anti-refugee, anti-foreigner narratives. Misinformation, disinformation and hate speech have proliferated in many regions, and racism, xenophobia and religious tensions too frequently go unaddressed. This is of growing concern for UNHCR. A survey of refugees who attended the Global Refugee Forum found that 85 per cent of respondents witnessed hate speech or misinformation targeting displaced people, while 72 per cent were personally targeted. To combat these threats, UNHCR launched a new project on digital protection to enhance its ability and that of its partners to respond to misinformation, disinformation and hate speech on digital platforms.

21. Reports of increasingly restrictive practices involving pushbacks and violence at land and sea borders are prevalent in many regions. Some States have considered or adopted draconian legislation to limit access to territory, including for asylum-seekers, in some cases citing security concerns as justification. Such practices may run counter to the principle of non-refoulement. Laws and policies hindering or preventing efforts by civil society to undertake rescue at sea are alarming. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, condemned the criminalization and repression of non-governmental organizations involved in rescue, noting how some policies introduced by States are aimed at obstructing essential and life-saving activities by civilian ships. To facilitate dialogue on challenges around interception, rescue and disembarkation among key stakeholders, including the International Maritime Organization and other United Nations agencies, the International Chamber of Shipping and civil society, UNHCR continued to lead an inter-agency group on the protection of refugees and migrants moving by sea. In 2023, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR launched an e-learning course on this subject. The course aims to deepen the understanding of relevant legal frameworks, equip stakeholders with advocacy tools and facilitate practical operational responses. At the Global Refugee Forum, a related multi-stakeholder pledge was announced on developing comprehensive responses to the protection challenges faced by refugees and migrants moving by sea.

22. In many countries, asylum-seekers and refugees, including children, are detained or subjected to movement restrictions of movement. This is often for prolonged periods, in inadequate conditions and without procedural safeguards, raising concerns as to the legality,

necessity, reasonableness and proportionality of such measures. Recognizing that immigration detention remains one of the most pressing issues before the European Court of Human Rights, and to promote the application of international and European standards, the Council of Europe adopted a guide for practitioners on the administrative detention of migrants and asylum-seekers. Even when restrictions on movement are seen as necessary by governments, UNHCR continued to underline that detention must remain a matter of last resort and only applied after less restrictive alternatives have been considered.

23. At least 77 countries have laws or policies permitting the detention of children based on legal or migratory status and, in practice, at least 330,000 children are detained each year on this basis. However, some other countries adopted laws or policies to prohibit or limit to the extent possible the detention of children in immigration, whether accompanied or unaccompanied, such as in Mexico. Detention is never in the child's best interests and would not meet the requirement of necessity. To highlight possible alternatives, UNHCR, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Detention Coalition supported the migration youth and children's platform in organizing global youth consultations on ending child immigration detention in 2023, bringing together over 80 young participants from around the world to discuss this issue. This also served to highlight the value of involving youth-led organizations and youth with experience of detention in policymaking.

24. Displaced and stateless persons often face discrimination, marginalization and destitution which, when combined with insecure or no legal status, may expose them to exploitation. They are easy targets for deceit and abuse by traffickers, who may coerce them into forced labour and sexual or other forms of exploitation. In the context of the conflict in the Sudan, the risk of trafficking is particularly acute in border areas and refugee camps. In many situations, victims of trafficking are not recognized as needing international protection and are arbitrarily detained or otherwise penalized for irregular entry and are at risk of expulsion, contrary to non-refoulement obligations.

25. A multi-stakeholder pledge was made at the Global Refugee Forum for the protection of refugees and migrants at risk of, or affected by, trafficking in persons. The pledge focuses on enhancing access to protection and solutions for these individuals. Measures to counter the risks of trafficking have been incorporated in emergency response plans and training activities. An introductory guide to anti-trafficking action in internal displacement contexts, published by the Global Protection Cluster in 2020, continues to serve as a relevant source in this regard.

26. Responding more effectively and predictably to the challenges of mixed and onward movements requires a comprehensive, rights-focused, "whole-of-route" approach. This approach, outlined by the High Commissioner in his opening speech to the Executive Committee in October 2023, aims to reinforce international protection and solutions for refugees, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees, uphold rights and create opportunities for migrants, while supporting States all along key routes, from country of origin to host, transit and destination countries. It involves interventions in key areas including ensuring protection-sensitive entry; strengthening asylum systems and rights-focused migration management; addressing immediate protection and assistance needs, as well as trafficking and smuggling; leveraging development for inclusion, protection and rights-centred options in countries along the routes; facilitating safe, legal and complementary pathways; and ensuring the safe and dignified return of people not in need of international protection or without other legal rights to stay. Based on cooperation and coordination among States, UNHCR, IOM, other United Nations partners, civil society, and refugee and migrant organizations, route-based approaches can provide lawful and viable alternatives to externalization, push-backs, irregular movements and attempts to shift responsibilities for refugee and migrant populations to unsafe, overburdened and under-capacitated third countries. In complement to asylum, innovative approaches to managing arrivals include lawful transfer arrangements among States, where these ensure access to protection and safeguards, in line with international standards and the principle of responsibility-sharing.

III. Inclusion and assistance

A. Access to rights, inclusion and host communities

27. The international protection regime establishes a framework that supports inclusion in national systems and economies, with access to rights on equal footing with nationals or non-nationals legally residing in the host country. Inclusion is essential to the enjoyment of asylum, self-reliance and sustainable solutions.

28. UNHCR supports the humanitarian, development and peace nexus. This includes peace and reconciliation processes involving refugee youth in Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, the Sudan and Uganda. In Ethiopia, UNHCR engaged in national transitional justice consultations, documenting the concerns of displaced populations. In South Sudan, UNHCR, in collaboration with the Government, held consultations with internally displaced persons and returnees in 10 locations across the country, as well as with refugees in neighbouring countries, to support their meaningful participation in the constitutional process. In Mauritania, there have been positive transitions from humanitarian- to development-led initiatives in the health, water and education sectors, exemplifying successful inclusion in national systems under government leadership. In the Somali region of Ethiopia, the Melkadida Refugee Compact 2024-2027 supports inclusion in the following areas: access to clean and renewable off-grid solar energy, sustainable water supply, expanding irrigable land, and health and education. These represent clear priority areas for longer-term sustainable development approaches, recognizing that humanitarian actors cannot and should not support parallel structures.

29. UNHCR signed a new global data-sharing framework agreement with the World Bank that will improve the timeliness of humanitarian aid and development assistance and strengthen protection for displaced and stateless people. It supported data projects, such as the Burkina Faso socioeconomic module for protection monitoring and the statistical inclusion of displaced persons in the census of Cameroon, to help foster inclusion in national development plans. The establishment of dedicated financing mechanisms by international financial institutions and bilateral development agencies signifies a renewed commitment to embedding displacement issues within wider development financing.

30. The efforts of UNHCR to promote inclusion in national systems and economies gained momentum, thanks to strategic partnerships with governments, development agencies and private sector partners. Today, refugees are better able to realize their economic and social rights. In 2019, only 18 per cent of refugees resided in countries with unrestricted access to labour markets, compared to 45 per cent in 2023. However, much more needs to be done. Inclusion in national identification, civil registration and justice systems would improve access to livelihoods and economic opportunities, stabilizing the situation of many displaced and stateless people and empowering them to undertake economic activity. There is growing evidence of the contributions that refugees make to their local economies, as reflected by the World Bank in its 2023 World Development Report on Migrants, Refugees and Societies. In Mexico, internal relocation and local integration programmes allowed over 36,000 refugees and asylum-seekers to access formal employment, contributing millions in tax revenues. Burkina Faso integrated the UNHCR livelihood strategy into its national development plan. Kenya took steps to improve its protection and solutions framework, including through the Shirika plan, which promotes the inclusion of refugees in national systems and economies by transforming camps into integrated settlements.

31. However, laws in many countries do not foster formal access to employment for refugees, with persistent restrictions and inequities in terms of economic opportunities, and only 5 out of 10 refugees are able to find formal employment in practice. Work permit-related and other administrative restrictions, coupled with high unemployment rates, pose significant obstacles. As highlighted in the 2023 Global Compact on Refugees indicator report, containing information on 132 countries hosting 34.5 million refugees, only 45 per cent of refugees lived in countries with unrestricted access in practice to formal employment, although 67 per cent had permission, in law, to work.

32. UNHCR reaffirmed its commitment to prioritize cash as an assistance modality, in line with its policy on cash-based interventions. In 2023, UNHCR was the second largest humanitarian cash provider based on amounts distributed. It delivered over \$760 million in cash to 7.3 million displaced individuals in 110 countries, largely in the form of multipurpose cash assistance, and through sectoral cash assistance. The latter includes “cash for protection” interventions aimed at addressing situations of violence and abuse. Multipurpose cash helps the displaced meet their basic household needs. While meant to address socioeconomic vulnerability, multipurpose cash interventions were regularly integrated with protection interventions and services. They effectively reduced child recruitment and harmful coping strategies, such as child marriage, child labour, and the sale and exchange of sex. Beyond direct cash assistance, the inclusion of displaced people in national systems to address poverty and social exclusion remained uneven and highly dependent on factors such as the legal framework, socioeconomic context, availability of development aid and maturity of the social protection systems of hosting States.

33. Many of the world’s displaced people live in climate-vulnerable settings. As conditions deteriorate, the displaced and their host communities will struggle to access water, energy and livelihoods. As highlighted in its strategic plan for climate action, UNHCR will work to ensure that climate-related displacement is addressed in national adaptation plans and will collaborate with partners to help governments strengthen resilience and prevent displacement resulting from climate conditions. In April 2024, UNHCR launched a climate resilience fund to protect the most threatened displaced communities, equipping them to prepare for, withstand and recover from climate-related shocks. The fund will support environmental restoration and investment in climate-resilient shelter and climate-smart livelihoods, while reducing the impacts of the humanitarian response on the environment.

B. Child protection

34. At the end of 2023, 47 million children were displaced, the majority due to armed conflicts. Conflict and violence have devastating effects on children and their families. In the past year, parties to conflicts in numerous countries blatantly disregarded international legal standards relating to the protection of children in conflict. UNHCR continues to advocate that parties to conflicts be held accountable and that the protection of children, among other civilians, is prioritized, based on international humanitarian law.

35. Governments hold the primary responsibility to protect displaced and stateless children on their territory and are encouraged to strengthen and ensure child-friendly asylum procedures, non-discriminatory inclusion and access to quality child protection systems, birth registration and basic services. At the Global Refugee Forum, the multi-stakeholder pledge on child rights, developed by the Initiative for Child Rights in the Global Compacts, resulted in over 200 child-focused and child-sensitive pledges. Among these, States committed to strengthen the capacity of national child protection systems to protect displaced and stateless children.

36. As of September 2023, over 74,000 children in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye benefited from specialized child protection services, while over 78,000 participated in child protection and psychosocial support programmes, with close to 15,000 women and men receiving parenting support. In the Central African Republic, over 390 refugee children were given psychosocial support. UNHCR and UNICEF rolled out their strategic collaboration framework to protect children at risk and under the “No Lost Generation” initiative supported children affected by conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. Despite positive developments, economic vulnerability stemming from a lack of livelihoods continued to expose children to risks, such as trafficking and smuggling, child labour, neglect, psychosocial distress, physical and emotional maltreatment, child marriage, family separation, obstructed access to asylum and documentation, and recruitment by armed groups, including in the East and Horn of Africa. In Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, after the value of food vouchers for refugees decreased significantly, increases were reported in child neglect, child labour, gender-based violence, household violence, recruitment of boys in criminal groups, and trafficking, while exacerbating tensions between refugee and host communities.

37. In line with its policy on accountability to affected people, UNHCR provides children with age-appropriate information about their rights and services. It makes space for their voices to be heard and acted upon, with the aim of enabling children to effectively influence decisions affecting them. During the Global Refugee Forum, UNHCR and partners ensured that children were systematically consulted as part of the process and were able to participate in the global event for the first time.

C. Protection from gender-based violence

38. Gender-based violence remains a major global protection concern. Displaced and stateless women and girls are disproportionately affected, with one in five refugee women subjected to sexual violence. Displacement may also increase risks of intimate partner violence. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Sudan, women and girls have been particularly exposed to conflict-related sexual violence, with risks persisting in countries of asylum following displacement across borders. In Chad, many refugees surveyed reported feeling unsafe due to the risk of gender-based violence, especially when fetching firewood or water. Severe underfunding has created gaps in life-saving assistance and service delivery, pushing women and girls, particularly those without household support, into situations of heightened vulnerability, sometimes resorting to harmful coping mechanisms. There is widespread and urgent need for mental health and psychosocial support in these contexts, with a focus on women and girls.

39. Together with partners, UNHCR is working to strengthen national systems for preventing, mitigating and responding to gender-based violence, including through psychosocial support, health and legal assistance. In 2023, it deployed 18 specialists working on addressing and preventing gender-based violence. They helped accelerate the establishment of safe and quality responses for survivors and community-based prevention programmes in Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, the Republic of Moldova, South Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic. UNHCR gender-based violence prevention and response programmes reached over 291,000 displaced Sudanese, primarily women and girls, inside the country and in the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia and South Sudan. Prevention programmes were implemented in 16 operations, including in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Uganda, where 2,000 trained community activists reached approximately 240,000 people. Over 160 gender equality and gender-based violence multi-stakeholder pledges were announced at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, representing a three-fold increase compared to the 2019 Forum.

D. Education

40. Concerning primary education, the policy environment is increasingly positive and access relatively high. The Global Compact on Refugees indicator report showed that 73 per cent of hosting countries had legislation explicitly permitting refugee inclusion in national primary education systems. By contrast, only 41 per cent of refugees are enrolled on average in secondary education. Predictable multi-year financing and programme support is essential to address education gaps, including for host communities, particularly in lower- and middle-income countries. The World Bank estimates that \$9.3 billion a year is required to include all refugees in national educational systems. Several countries aimed to boost access to education. Ethiopia pledged at the Global Refugee Forum to enable refugees to participate in the national secondary education system, while Uganda took steps to advance the inclusion of refugees in its national system.

41. Despite some positive trends, access to education for refugee children remains insufficient, with over half out of school. While the Global Compact on Refugees seeks to minimize the time out of learning to three months from the beginning of displacement, this target is rarely met in emergencies. In many countries, education continues to see a significant gender gap, with enrolment among refugee girls dropping at higher levels. In the Sudan, the escalating conflict caused nation-wide school closures, including because many schools were destroyed and classrooms used for temporary shelter. Such events threaten the educational and future prospects of millions of children. In 2024, refugee children and youth from

Ukraine are facing their third school year of disrupted education. UNHCR released an education policy brief showing that while 30 to 50 per cent of some 5.9 million Ukrainian refugees across Europe are children, only about half were enrolled in school in host countries for the 2022-2023 academic year, although many were able to access remote learning through schools in Ukraine.

42. With respect to tertiary education, 7 per cent of refugees are enrolled on average. While there have been some improvements since 2020, refugees continue to struggle to access higher education on equal footing with nationals, owing to a lack of inclusive educational policies, capacity constraints, prohibitive course fees and other administrative or bureaucratic impediments. With support from the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (known by its German acronym DAFI) and other scholarship programmes, nearly 111,500 refugee students are enrolled in tertiary education in the Middle East and North Africa. Last year, this initiative provided scholarships in 59 States to over 9,000 refugee students from 54 countries. Female students represented 42 per cent of the total number of students. Other scholarship opportunities continue to grow, thanks to the Mastercard Foundation and universities in Africa, Europe and the Americas. Academic institutions, organized through the Global Academic Interdisciplinary Network, pledged scholarships, facilitated admission for refugees and enhanced research led by persons with lived experience of displacement to support evidence-based implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees.

IV. Voluntary repatriation and reintegration

43. Recent decades have seen a reduction in the number of refugees benefiting from UNHCR-facilitated voluntary repatriation, largely linked to the protracted nature of conflicts that account for most of the world's displacement. This is compounded by the fact that most countries of origin are low and lower-middle income countries, where economies are fragile, national services are weak and there is heavy reliance on international assistance.

44. Voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity is firmly anchored in human rights law. In 2023, over 1 million refugees returned to their country of origin. Most people who decide to repatriate do so in a self-organized manner, often involving temporary or pendular movements, outside of formal support frameworks offered by the international community. Returns do not always meet protection standards. For example, in 2023, over 527,000 South Sudanese refugees returned home, although their country remains in crisis. UNHCR is supporting the Government of South Sudan to find solutions for the returnees. Violence in the Sudan prompted almost 5,600 Ethiopian refugees residing in the country to flee back to their home country.

45. Over 26,000 Burundian refugees were assisted by UNHCR to repatriate in 2023, a 21 per cent increase from 2022. Since the start of 2017, some 292,700 Burundian refugees returned home to a relatively stable political and security situation, prompting UNHCR to shift from facilitation to the promotion of voluntary repatriation in 2024. The Burundian Government and UNHCR continue to advocate development support to address reintegration needs. The European Union launched a regional programme to provide sustainable solutions for Burundian refugees in the Great Lakes region, which includes strengthening resilience and self-sufficiency and promoting sustainable reintegration, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence for returnees.

46. In West and Central Africa, UNHCR supported the voluntary repatriation of nearly over 4,100 Central African Republic refugees mainly from Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and over 6,000 Central Africans who returned under adverse circumstances following the eruption of fighting in the Sudan. Additionally, 2,000 Cameroonians voluntarily repatriated from Chad with UNHCR assistance, alongside others returning independently. The Central African Republic solutions support platform, launched in 2023, aims to create an enabling environment for the sustainable return and reintegration of nearly 300,000 Central African refugees who are expected to voluntarily repatriate between 2024 and 2027. In addition, with UNHCR support, the first poverty assessment to include internally displaced persons was carried out in the Central African Republic by the

World Bank, supporting the national authorities and development actors in designing programmes that foster solutions for the displaced and returnees.

47. In 2023, over 57,500 Afghan refugees, mainly in Pakistan, returned home under the UNHCR-assisted voluntary repatriation programme, a substantial increase from 2022. In Pakistan, plans to order undocumented foreigners to leave resulted in nearly 600,000 Afghans having returned to Afghanistan since September 2023. As of mid-June 2024, implementation of the plans have been halted, and the Pakistani Government and UNHCR are discussing approaches to ensure that those in need of international protection are not forcibly returned.

48. UNHCR and partners worked to improve the conditions for sustainable repatriation to Afghanistan through an area-based approach in priority areas of return and reintegration, while providing individual assistance to returnees. This is supported through the UNHCR-World Bank strategic analysis hub, which analyses displacement and return trends as well as challenges and opportunities. To foster resilience and solutions for refugees and affected communities, UNHCR will support the implementation of situational pledges for Afghan and Rohingya refugees and some 160 other pledges made by States and other stakeholders for the Asia and Pacific region at the Global Refugee Forum.

V. Resettlement and complementary pathways

49. Resettlement is a vital refugee protection tool which offers a durable solution while, crucially, relieving pressure on host countries. With heavy reliance on just a few countries, more States are encouraged to offer additional resettlement places. In 2023, UNHCR submitted the files of over 155,500 refugees to 24 States for resettlement, 33 per cent more than in 2022. More than 96,300 refugees departed, an increase of 65 per cent over 2022. Notable increases were seen in the resettlement of Rohingya refugees and various groups from the Americas, for whom submissions more than doubled, as resettlement identification and processing capacities were scaled up. The expansion of resettlement opportunities and lawful pathways benefited from implementation of the Safe Mobility Initiative in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Guatemala. Over 61,000 individuals were resettled to the United States of America in 2023. Over 777,800 Syrian refugees worldwide require urgent resettlement. Other groups with pressing resettlement needs include refugees from Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar and South Sudan.

50. The 2023 departure rate marked good progress towards achieving 1 million resettlement places by 2030, the ambitious target set by the UNHCR 2030 roadmap to third country solutions. Despite this progress, the needs continue to exceed available resettlement places. Restrictive selection criteria applied by some resettlement States limit the impact of resettlement as an international protection and solutions tool and undermine processing efficiencies. Ongoing emergencies, such as displacement from Ukraine, and housing shortages, continued to strain the reception capacities of several States, which reduced, and in some cases suspended, resettlement programmes.

51. Pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum reflected renewed commitments from States and civil society to increasing resettlement in an inclusive and sustainable manner. In 2023, UNHCR released an updated Resettlement Handbook, a comprehensive repository of resettlement standards, procedures and best practices, containing dedicated guidelines for inclusive approaches to address the needs of diverse refugee populations.

52. Beyond resettlement, access to safe and regulated complementary pathways, including labour and education mobility, humanitarian admission and sponsorship pathways, provide important opportunities to find protection and solutions. These pathways also provide life-saving alternatives to irregular and dangerous onward movements, and opportunities for self-reliance and a sustainable future. The rationale and need for migrant and refugee labour are described in the World Bank's 2023 World Development Report on Migrants, Refugees and Societies, while the most recent edition of the Safe Pathways for Refugees report jointly issued by UNHCR and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) noted that 730,000 family, work, study and sponsorship permits were issued by OECD countries and Brazil.

53. Recognizing the need to scale-up efforts, numerous stakeholders, in coordination with UNHCR, the Global Task Force on Refugee Labour Mobility and the Global Task Force on Third Country Education Complementary Pathways, pledged at the Global Refugee Forum to increase skills-based complementary pathways for 200,000 refugees via labour mobility and education pathways over 5 years.

54. Lack of access to travel documents is a key barrier for refugees seeking to take up complementary pathways. An estimated 41 per cent of refugees do not have access to travel documents from their host State. UNHCR presented a working paper on machine-readable travel documents to the International Civil Aviation Organization Facilitation Panel, recommending concrete ways to facilitate access to travel documents for refugees and stateless persons. A multi-stakeholder pledge on the expansion of refugee travel documents involved 15 States and five non-State actors.

55. UNHCR worked with States and partners to advance the use of community sponsorship as a complementary pathway to protection and solutions and a means of integration support for new arrivals. Community sponsorship is particularly valuable in promoting a more inclusive approach to solutions. The Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative launched a global fund at the Global Refugee Forum, broadening the availability of sponsorship through grants that help communities with costs.

56. Preserving and restoring family unity remains not only a key legal principle derived from international human rights law, but also an essential step to ensure protection, integration and responsibility-sharing. Evidence suggests that the desire to reunite with family drives many unsafe and irregular movements. UNHCR worked with the Global Family Reunification Network Advisory Group and others to mobilize stakeholders in support of refugee family reunification. A multi-stakeholder pledge made at the Global Refugee Forum aims to help 1 million refugee families reunite by 2030, aided by State leadership from Brazil and Portugal and the increased engagement of refugee-led organizations and the private sector.

VI. Protecting and assisting internally displaced persons

57. The scale of internal displacement reached a historical high of 75.9 million by the end of 2023. Internally displaced persons face protection risks including attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, gender-based violence, forced recruitment and the association of children with armed forces, the presence of anti-personnel mines and unexploded ordnances, destitution, discrimination and restricted access to rights, often driven by conflict but exacerbated by disasters and climate change. In response, UNHCR has adopted tailored community-based and area-based approaches and localized strategies, capitalizing on its effective relationships with host communities, State authorities and operational partners. In Mozambique, UNHCR scaled up partnerships with development actors to enable internally displaced persons to access energy and services, livelihood opportunities and documentation. UNHCR supported the formation of the first organization led by displaced people in the Sudan, collaborating on a project on economic empowerment for women and social cohesion. In Ukraine, UNHCR expanded its support to community-based organizations, including through small-grant projects, and welcomed the establishment of councils of internally displaced persons that foster their participation in public affairs.

58. UNHCR continued to prioritize protection and strengthen leadership accountability in humanitarian responses, including through protection analysis and collective protection outcomes. Together with the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, UNHCR co-leads the Protection Expert Group for Internally Displaced Persons, providing senior-level support to United Nations and State officials on key protection challenges through country visits, including Ukraine in October 2023.

59. UNHCR prioritized support to States to fulfil their primary responsibility towards internally displaced persons, assisting them in developing, amending, adopting and implementing national and sub-national laws, policies and strategies on internal displacement and solutions for internally displaced persons. Chad and Honduras adopted laws addressing the needs of internally displaced persons in 2023. In the States of Sinaloa and Chiapas in

Mexico, UNHCR supported the development of regulations to implement existing legal frameworks for internally displaced persons, which included consultations with affected communities. UNHCR, together with protection clusters and partners, contributed to reforms aimed at strengthening legislative and policy frameworks for internally displaced persons on protection and solutions in countries such as Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Colombia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Nigeria, the Philippines, Somalia and Ukraine. At the global level, UNHCR launched a new internally displaced persons law and policy dashboard, complementing its refugee treaty and legislation dashboard.

60. The Global Protection Cluster unites members, partners and communities working on a full range of protection activities, including in the specialized areas of child protection; gender-based violence; housing, land and property; and mine action. In 2023, in addition to its global leadership, UNHCR continued to lead the protection cluster in 29 out of 31 activated protection cluster and cluster-like mechanisms. The Global Protection Cluster supported field protection clusters, delivered technical support and guidance, provided dedicated staff to fill critical gaps, and developed the capacity of field coordination teams and partners. As part of these efforts, the Global Protection Cluster provided training on national and local level protection advocacy and, together with Oxfam, the think tank ODI and NEAR, published and rolled out a protection advocacy toolkit. The toolkit includes case studies and a podcast series to enhance collective advocacy on protection outcomes.

61. Constraints to humanitarian access continued to pose challenges to principled, effective, humanitarian action in numerous crises worldwide, limiting the ability of humanitarian actors to reach affected communities and provide protection and assistance. Recognizing the need to reinforce the critical link between access and protection, the Global Protection Cluster and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs published a report on 'Access that protects'. The recommendations from this report, which included building the capacity of protection partners to negotiate access and protection with parties to conflict, were taken forward in collaboration with the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation. Workshops on this form of negotiation were delivered to protection cluster members, UNHCR staff and partners working on the frontlines of crisis situations, including in Colombia, Ethiopia and Mali.

62. In 2023 and 2024, protection clusters addressed protection risks and advanced on advocacy priorities in situations of armed conflict, including in light of the withdrawal of United Nations peacekeeping missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali and the Sudan. They sought to uphold and support the continuity of protection during and after the withdrawal of these missions, working to identify protection risks and implement mitigation measures and alternative approaches to protect civilians impacted by conflict. Throughout the year, protection clusters and the Global Protection Cluster reported on protection considerations and recommendations to United Nations Security Council Members ahead of key decisions on these and other mission mandates through the Informal Expert Group on the Protection of Civilians.

VII. Preventing and responding to statelessness

63. Globally, statelessness affects millions of people, approximately one-third of whom are children. Statelessness denies official recognition of existence, which most people take for granted. Stateless people face barriers to human rights related to education, healthcare, marriage and work. Nearly 4.4 million people in 95 countries are estimated to be stateless or of undetermined nationality. The true number is likely much higher, as approximately half of all countries do not report data on statelessness, including many with known stateless populations, and provide numbers for only a portion of the known stateless population.

64. The past year saw many positive legal and policy developments for stateless people. As awareness of statelessness and its impact has increased, several States intensified efforts to combat the problem. The Republic of Moldova introduced legislative safeguards to help prevent statelessness at birth, and North Macedonia amended its laws to allow stateless people to acquire nationality and ensure birth registration for all children born in the country, regardless of whether their parents are undocumented or stateless. Mali, Portugal and the

United States of America took steps to better identify stateless persons and regulate their status. Brazil, Colombia and Peru endeavoured to regulate the acquisition and loss of nationality to help prevent statelessness. The United Republic of Tanzania granted nationality to over 3,000 persons at risk of statelessness in Zanzibar. The Congo (Republic of) and Sao Tome and Principe acceded to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

65. The African Union Assembly of States adopted a Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights Relating to the Specific Aspects of the Right to a Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa. The Protocol addresses legal barriers that prevent stateless people and those at risk of statelessness from exercising their right to nationality. The Inter-Parliamentary Union called upon all members to accede to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. In the Americas, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights issued resolution 2/23 on the right to nationality, prohibition of arbitrary deprivation of nationality, and statelessness. This resolution, drafted with UNHCR support, seeks to provide guidance for States, civil society, international organizations and other stakeholders to comply with applicable international obligations.

66. The range of legal and policy developments are promising, though significant work remains to be done to end statelessness and meet the target of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal of a legal identity for all by 2030. An estimated 85 per cent of reported stateless people live in just 10 countries where the situation is not improving, and children continue to be born without a nationality. People without nationality or proof of it are being left behind and are unable to access the same services and opportunities as nationals. Twenty-four countries retain nationality laws that deny women the right to pass their citizenship on to their children on an equal basis with men, while almost 50 countries prevent women from conferring nationality on their spouse in the same way as men.

67. In 2023, progress was made on the launch of a new multi-stakeholder platform, the Global Alliance to End Statelessness, bringing together States, regional organizations, United Nations entities, stateless-led organizations and other civil society actors. The Alliance aims to advance action and solutions at the country level and to accelerate change on thematic issues, such as gender discrimination and childhood statelessness. The Alliance will be launched at the high-level segment during the seventy-fifth plenary session of the UNHCR Executive Committee in October 2024.

VIII. Conclusion

68. At a time in which conflict and other humanitarian challenges are manifest in all regions, driving displacement to historically high levels, the UNHCR mandate, alongside other elements of international law, is more important than ever. Recognizing the wide scope of refugee definitions and human rights-based concepts underpinning international protection is vital, alongside standards to prevent and reduce statelessness and protect displaced and stateless persons. UNHCR remains committed to reinforcing and expanding protection space in challenging environments and aims, through its leadership on law and policy, humanitarian assistance and development cooperation; to work more effectively with States and other partners to ensure protection and solutions, and address challenges including around mixed and onward movements. This requires concerted efforts with all stakeholders, including to promote application of international legal principles and standards for the protection of displaced and stateless persons and further efforts to achieve the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees.
