

Seventy-Fifth Plenary Session of the Executive Committee of the High-
Commissioner's Programme

Remarks Of the Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees, Ms. Ruvendrini
Menikdiwela

17 October 2024

Madam chair,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here with you today, to introduce the protection agenda item. The June Standing Committee, the *Note on International Protection*, and various papers and [reports](#) have already updated you on protection developments and our responses this last year. You have also heard from the High Commissioner and taken part in a very vibrant debate at this Session of the Executive Committee. So rather than repeating what has already been shared, I would like to offer some reflections, ten months into my current role.

Having visited over 20 UNHCR operations this year, allow me to reflect on a few specific realities on the ground first. These examples illustrate wider protection challenges that UNHCR and our partners are grappling with, across different contexts. I will also speak to where we hope to go from here – and what we are doing and what more we should do - in these turbulent times.

Conflict, violence, persecution, at times compounded by climate factors, have sent more than 122 million people fleeing for their lives. From Myanmar, to Afghanistan, Ukraine, the Sahel, Sudan, Ethiopia, Gaza, Lebanon – the list is endless. Just when we think that a crisis cannot be surpassed in its horrors, another one unfolds. Over the past three years, UNHCR has declared a new emergency every 10 days. That is 26 new emergencies since I took office at the beginning of this year.

Madam Chair,

What we had feared – and warned about – for a year now, is already unfolding before our eyes, with a widening war in the Middle East. In Lebanon, which I visited just days before the strikes in Beirut scenes of the destruction of densely populated areas in Beirut are harrowing. In the span of a few weeks, an estimated 1.2 million people have been displaced.

More than a quarter of a million people have also fled to Syria - a country that is still reeling from its own war - a stark reminder of the painful choices that people are having to make. About 70 per cent of those arriving in Syria were Syrian refugees who had made the journey to Lebanon years earlier, seeking international protection. Meanwhile, in Gaza the population has been repeatedly displaced, and more than 42,000 people killed.

Madam Chair,

The situation on the ground demands leadership, which is sadly lacking. The UN Security Council has met 47 times in the last year on the Middle East crisis, without any decisive outcome. And while humanitarian actors will continue to do their level best to respond, an immediate ceasefire and a political solution are long overdue. All parties – big and small – must respect international humanitarian law.

At the same time, humanitarian assistance must be adequately resourced and scaled up. And aid workers must be protected. One of the two HCR colleagues killed in Lebanon, Dina, was the focal point for child protection and gender-based violence, spearheading programmes supporting 400,000 Syrian refugees in the Bekaa.

Turning to Sudan, where grave violations continue unabated, I was there in August, accompanying the UN Deputy Secretary General and a delegation of other UN officials. Half the population – 25 million people – need protection and assistance. Massacres are being committed along ethnic lines. Gender-based violence is perpetrated at alarming rates. Recent floods have displaced additional tens of thousands. There is an increase in smuggling and trafficking of Sudanese, both in Sudan and neighbouring countries, including children and youth. Many are also en route to the Gulf states, to Europe, and other regions – a trend that is likely to grow, if support is not adequately scaled up.

Across the border in Chad – a country that is facing its own challenges - Sudanese refugees continue to arrive severely traumatized. At the Adré crossing, our delegation observed the humanitarian corridor operation into Darfur. This has been a welcome respite after humanitarian access was sealed off in February, severely hampering efforts to save lives. Since its re-opening, the Adré crossing has been a lifeline. UN agencies including UNHCR are delivering much needed relief items, which have benefitted nearly 600,000 people so far. In this context of constrained access, our civil society partners and community-led protection initiatives continue to be a driving force.

We applaud the host countries, which, despite their own challenges, have generously welcomed Sudanese refugees. We call on others, both in the region and beyond, to support these hosting countries and communities.

Madam Chair,

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, escalating violence in the eastern part of the country has pushed nearly a million people to flee in the first half of this year alone. During a recent mission, I met with men and women in Ituri and North Kivu provinces, who have experienced unimaginable horrors – killings, detention, kidnapping, extortion, and recruitment of their children by armed groups. They told me that even in the places in which they had fled for safety, they continue to face grave violations.

While I was there, the Lushagala displacement site just outside of Goma was ripped apart by violence. Three displaced people were killed in the crossfire and another 21 injured. Regrettably, this is a common occurrence. In North Kivu alone, nearly 20 such security incidents have impacted displacement sites this year.

I was particularly outraged at how war continues to be waged on women and girls. Their bodies are a battlefield. The first half of 2024 showed a significant uptick in reported cases of gender-based violence in North Kivu. Rape, which constitutes 63 per cent of reported GBV incidents, has become a deliberate strategy by various armed actors. Women and girls are attacked at gunpoint as they go in search of food, firewood or work. Even in their shelters – often made of plastic sheeting - they are largely unprotected in the face of armed groups. Mothers and children – some as young as 10 years old - are also trafficked and exploited, including in the more than 1000 brothels in the province. Survival sex is commonplace. All the while, perpetrators are rarely held accountable.

While humanitarian actors have urgently stepped-up services in and around the camps, inadequate funding – and access – and security challenges severely limit their scope.

The protection of civilians and respect for the civilian nature of displacement sites is an obligation for all parties to conflict, and the responsibility to protect, rests first and foremost with States. Impunity must end.

Madam Chair,

With over 60 million forcibly displaced and stateless women and girls facing heightened risks of gender-based violence globally, UNHCR is at the forefront in emergencies, rapidly scaling up services. Funding, however, continues to fall short of needs, causing gaps and delays.

Nowhere are these funding shortfalls felt more than in protracted situations of displacement. Situations where populations have lived for decades, with no solutions in sight, and where we struggle to maintain the focus of donors, who have to contend with a multitude of other crises demanding their attention and support. Places like Uganda, where more than 1.7 million refugees are hosted. Or Afghanistan, where after four decades of turmoil, UNHCR is still working closely with other humanitarian actors to support the forcibly displaced. Or Yemen, where UNHCR leads the Protection cluster in support of 4.5 million IDPs and returnees. Or Tindouf, Algeria, where fifty years on, UNHCR is still providing protection and assistance to the 90,000 most vulnerable Sahrawi refugees.

Madam Chair,

In addition to confronting intractable and protracted conflicts globally, we are also faced with other forms of violence – including those perpetrated by non-state actors. In Latin America and the Caribbean, we see this challenge starkly. Escalating gang and cartel violence, instability, and human rights abuses in the region, have triggered large scale displacements. In Haiti, alarming levels of gang violence have taken a toll on the population – forcing more than 390,000 people to flee this year alone.

In the Americas and elsewhere, asylum-seekers and migrants frequently use the same routes. In the face of stringent policies and difficulty accessing territory, many are embarking on ever-more dangerous irregular journeys, often using smuggling or trafficking networks. The collective failure to put in place effective policy options, places the management of human mobility in the hands of criminal networks.

On Monday, the High Commissioner spoke about the route-based approach. This approach recognizes that mixed and onward movements pose multifaceted challenges, in the Americas, in Asia; in the Arabian Peninsula; in Africa; and in Europe. These movements are often hazardous — and sometimes fatal — for the people who undertake them; and they are challenging for the governments which have to deal with them.

We must think outside the box, but not outside the law, to address these challenges. Together with States and other partners, UNHCR is looking at concrete and rights-based measures to improve our responses to mixed movements. These recognize that a focus on border controls is often too late and too narrow to be effective. We must work together across countries of origin, asylum, transit and destination to address root causes of displacement, to strengthen protection and assistance for those on the move at the earliest stages of their journey, to scale up resettlement and regular pathways, and to expand opportunities for the socio-economic inclusion of refugees where feasible.

Other aspects of the route-based approach have also been presented to you, including fair and effective asylum processing followed by initiatives to return those not in need of international protection; regional cooperation mechanisms in full respect of the right to territorial asylum; regional search, rescue, and disembarkation schemes; as well as multipurpose hubs to expand access to information, counselling, and assistance and to provide options such as legal pathways, inclusion and return.

We would like to thank States and partners for their constructive engagement in consultations on these various elements of the route-based approach. I would like to particularly highlight the positive dialogue with South Africa on addressing mixed movements on the Southern Africa route, the opportunity to work closely with States in the Americas as part of the Safe Mobility Initiative, as well as the ongoing dialogue with European States and other partners.

Madam Chair,

We are in a global election super-cycle, with more than half of the world's population voting, or having voted, in 2024. In this election year, asylum and migration have taken center stage. Though we have welcomed positive developments in some contexts, xenophobic discourse, misinformation, and hate speech against refugees and asylum-seekers continue, putting core protection principles at risk. UNHCR is particularly concerned by attempts by some States to instrumentalize the movement of people for political gains. We are also concerned by restrictive measures, including border closures, reduced access to asylum processes, and detention of asylum-seekers.

Let me be clear – seeking asylum is a fundamental right. It is not a crime nor a security threat. The international refugee protection regime provides safeguards for those fleeing persecution, while also addressing the legitimate national security concerns of States. Experience has shown us that protection and security are two sides of the same coin; they must go hand in hand.

That said, we understand the challenges faced by some States in addressing mixed movements, including when these are instrumentalized. Together with our partners, UNHCR continues to support States and other stakeholders in addressing these complex issues more humanely, and in line with international law, as I have previously outlined.

In this regard, to support States and others in addressing protection concerns in the context of instrumentalization, we have issued much-needed [guidance](#) in relation to admission to territory and access to asylum. This includes lawful measures that States can take to address security concerns relating to specific individuals.

And with detention of asylum-seekers frequently taking place as part of ineffective deterrence policies, UNHCR has also issued an advocacy brief providing concrete recommendations to advance practical [alternatives to detention](#). We also call for an end to juvenile detention, which is never in the best interests of the child. We welcome the efforts of some States, including Colombia among others, in this regard, and stand ready to support further work in this area.

Madam Chair,

On solutions, a few reflections:

First, the urgency of durable solutions cannot be emphasized enough. Of these, peace is the most durable and sustainable of all solutions. And it is most desperately needed, as the precursor to the voluntary return of refugees to their countries of origin, in safety and dignity.

Second, third country solutions are a lifeline and a key protection tool that must be scaled up. We welcome the increase in resettlement this year. And here, I would like to acknowledge the US for its efforts; it has taken the lion's share of resettlement submissions – about 159,000 of the nearly 200,000 submissions. It is vital that other States increase their concrete commitments in this regard.

Family reunification, labour mobility, education schemes, and humanitarian visas also provide additional safe and regulated avenues to access protection and opportunities in third countries. The High Commissioner mentioned already this morning the positive role that Portugal has played in family reunification, and I would like to highlight the Italian labor mobility program, which was launched earlier this year. It offers refugees access to the regular labor migration system, accredited

training in countries of asylum in IT, jewelry making, and ship-making, as well as support in their applications to Italian companies. The project is currently training refugees in Uganda, Egypt and Jordan, and discussions are ongoing to expand this project further in Africa and the Americas.

We must build on such good practices as measures of responsibility sharing with host countries – whose generosity should never be taken for granted.

Madam Chair,

Before I conclude, I would also like to highlight some key areas from our fruitful discussions on statelessness this week.

Since the launch of the #IBelong Campaign, more than half a million people finally belong, after years spent living on the margins. At the High-Level Segment, you heard the powerful testimony of Noor and Nosizi about how life changing it has been for them to receive citizenship - to be able to move freely, to be able to access an education, and realize their dreams.

Since 2010, there have been 77 new accessions to the Statelessness Conventions. Some countries have adopted new laws and policies to better protect stateless persons and have advanced gender equality by granting women the right to pass their nationality to their children. These successes are largely thanks to the collaboration with, and advocacy of, many partners, including women's rights and stateless-led civil society actors.

The launch of the Global Alliance to end Statelessness is a vital next step, and I encourage those of you who have not already done so, to join this alliance. We still have a lot of work to do, as millions of stateless people continue to be deprived of their rights. In the months to come, our task is to accelerate this work. Together, I know we can build the political momentum needed to resolve existing situations of statelessness and to prevent new situations from happening.

The progress that we have already seen is evidence that ending statelessness is not only possible, but it is also within our reach.

Madam Chair,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I conclude, I would like to go back to a conversation that I had with one of the IDP women in the DRC. Her name is Mediatrice. I met with her and her chatty infant, Jibril. She had walked for days with her six children, one cocooned tightly on her back, to reach safety. They had escaped bullets and bombs and faced many men with guns. She spoke to me of the dangerous journey she had had, and the horrors that she and others had faced. But she also spoke of her aspirations to have her own business, to send her children to school, and to become a stronger advocate and leader in her own community. In spite of the immense suffering she had endured, she demanded that the world still keep a place for her dreams and for her children's dreams.

I invite all of us to learn from her. And from the example of all the other men and women like her. To let their courage, their resilience, and their unquenchable hope for a better future be our guide.

Thank you.