

High Commissioner's Opening Statement to the 71st Session of ExCom

Mr Chairman,

Good morning and thank you for taking up the chairmanship so soon in your tenure here as Permanent Representative.

And thank you very much to the Executive Director of UNICEF - thank you, Henrietta. I join the chairman in appreciating you giving us such nice and important words of wisdom at this late hour of night in California.

It is truly a gesture of partnership and if I may say of institutional and personal friendship which I greatly appreciate.

Vice chairs,
Rapporteur,
Distinguished Delegates,
New members of the Executive Committee,

The last time we were together in this room was to celebrate the Global Refugee Forum. We left energized by the unprecedented support for refugees and their host communities expressed by governments, development institutions, the private sector and civil society.

As Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Gillian Triggs, will highlight later this week, an extraordinary number of 1,400 pledges were made, echoing the Global Compact on Refugees - pledges to better protect, support, include, empower and resolve.

It feels such a long time ago. Yet, that solidarity is needed, now more than ever.

The coronavirus pandemic continues to affect us all - as is visible in this very room, where for the first time in 70 years attendance must be limited to ensure social distancing. And among others in fragile situations, it has dramatically impacted the refugees, displaced and stateless, adding vulnerability to vulnerabilities - a crisis on top of multiple other layers of crisis.

This is why it is timely and useful, in opening our meeting, and building on what the Executive Director has told us, to report and reflect on our work and on the situation of people of our concern through the prism of the pandemic - looking at the challenges but also at risks and opportunities ahead, so that - together - we can better prepare for an uncertain future.

UNHCR is used to emergencies. We have been on the frontlines of every displacement crisis for decades – in support of refugees but also the internally displaced, on whose behalf we have continued to step up our engagement even in the past few months. Yet this response was a challenge unlike any other: with every single office involved, in every region; and all at the same time. Many colleagues were personally affected and some, sadly, also lost their lives to the coronavirus. And for an organization whose work depends also on personal contact with the

people we call of our concern, and physical presence where they are, necessary movement restrictions have been frustrating.

However, we stayed and we delivered - adapting our work, but we did.

In support of host governments, with guidance from the World Health Organisation and in cooperation with our UN and NGO partners, we stepped up health, water and sanitation responses – areas which we will strengthen further with UNICEF as we implement the important, joint “Blueprint” which the Executive Director has explained and offer refugee children a fair deal.

We increased communication with displaced and host communities, using technology and partnering with media and refugees themselves, especially in combating stigma, discrimination, mental health issues, gender-based violence.

We supported refugee education to mitigate the impact of school closures, including through distance education programmes.

We created less congested areas of shelter and increased cash transfers.

Major outbreaks have been prevented so far in large refugee settings, though most refugees and displaced people live in communities, not in camps, and are thus exposed to the same risks of contagion as their hosts. But we cannot – and must not - let our guard down. Not now. Nowhere.

Meanwhile – despite the Secretary-General’s call - the pandemic has not stopped wars. Trends which I reported previously have continued: conflict, violence, discrimination, human rights violations, political crises have pushed the number of those forcibly displaced up to almost 80 million - double the figure of just 10 years ago.

The Central Sahel continues to be the theatre of one of the most worrying situations - a political, security and humanitarian crisis which has displaced millions.

Earlier this year I visited the region. Few situations have shocked me as much – the violence, the brutality, including horrifying stories of gruesome murders of parents in front of their children.

In the past year alone more than 600,000 people have been forced from their homes.

More than 3,600 schools in the past few years have been destroyed or closed.

Most abominable of all, thousands of women are raped as part of the dynamics of violence.

While a comprehensive solution addressing all root causes is not easy to pursue, we need to restore a sense of urgency in the Sahel response.

And while massive security problems caused by armed groups prevail, solutions cannot be found only by looking through a security lens. Some of the military action taken by States in the region has also driven people from their homes, caused suffering, and created divisions.

At the same time, we must support the affected States; help strengthen their service delivery; and ensure their ownership of development plans. Governance reforms need to be scaled up with the same urgency as lifesaving interventions and with appropriate resources. Investment is particularly needed in urban areas where many of the displaced have sought safety. And meanwhile humanitarian action needs to be strengthened.

UNHCR – under the leadership of Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, Raouf Mazou - has significantly scaled up its response. Other humanitarians including UNICEF are equally rising to the challenge. But we need financial support. Humanitarian appeals in the region are just 35 per cent funded. The pledging conference later this month is an opportunity for donors to demonstrate commitment before it is too late.

Conflicts have not stopped, as I said.

And first and foremost, we are watching with concern the escalation of tensions and military action between Armenia and Azerbaijan and join the Secretary-General and others in calling for dialogue to resume in order to prevent further impact on civilians and further displacement.

We have seen new displacement elsewhere – in northern Mozambique, for example, where clashes between non-state armed groups and government forces have driven 300,000 people from their homes.

Conflict in Yemen has displaced more than 140,000 people this year alone. Already one of the biggest humanitarian crises with 24 million people in urgent need of aid, the fear of famine now looms large amidst the spread of the pandemic.

And other drivers of displacement are at play. In Central America, for instance, where over 100,000 Nicaraguans have fled a grave crisis resulting in violence and human rights abuses, with Costa Rica bearing the brunt of this emergency.

Mr Chairman,

Governments around the world have taken tough measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus, often closing borders.

Obviously, some restrictions are needed. But I call again on States to ensure that they remain temporary and non-discriminatory, and respect non-derogable international human rights obligations. Border closures must not violate the principle of non-refoulement.

Our expertise is at your disposal to help find practical solutions so you can both safely manage borders, while simultaneously upholding legal obligations to protect those in need of international protection.

Over 110 States have found ways to make asylum systems function while taking necessary health precautions – good practices which we have documented and shared.

We have also worked with States to ensure refugee protection when large influxes occur - in Uganda, for example, which hosts more than 1.4 million refugees, and which nevertheless re-opened its borders, allowing 3,000 people fleeing deadly militia violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo to cross and find refuge. Appropriate measures were quickly taken so new arrivals could undergo an isolation period before their inclusion in refugee settlements.

Stopping the virus and offering protection is not – must not be - a zero-sum equation. Both are possible and lives can be saved.

Meanwhile, and although human displacement continues to be – prevalently – affecting countries with few resources, some refugees have continued to move towards the global north; often alongside migrants seeking opportunities for a better life.

I will not minimise the challenges that this presents, above all to those taking dangerous routes, where they are exposed to smugglers, traffickers, and other criminal gangs preying on the vulnerable – Libya being the most egregious example of the risks refugees and migrants are exposed to.

But the solution cannot be to close the door. We cannot allow xenophobic reactions, only meant to draw facile consensus and electoral votes, to shape responses to challenges that are complex, but manageable. The dangerous lines of thinking emerging in some of the world's richest countries - “externalising” asylum beyond a country's borders - violate international law, put the lives of the most vulnerable in jeopardy and constitute precedents which threaten asylum globally.

Yet, we have already seen mothers and children fleeing gang violence in Northern Central America pushed back or even returned to countries of origin.

We have seen boats loaded with Rohingya refugees wandering between ports in Southeast Asia without being allowed to disembark, with few exceptions. A boat of 300 survivors was recently rescued by the people of Aceh in Indonesia, after it had been at sea for more than six months and 30 had died on board.

A few weeks ago, the vessel “Maersk Etienne” rescued 27 people – 27 people - in the Mediterranean. And yet, for weeks, States failed to live up to their responsibilities. As a European, I find it shameful that it took more than one month to disembark just 27 people.

People will continue to flee unless the root causes of their flight are solved. Reducing search and rescue capacity, or impeding those who engage to save others, or pushing back people without due process, will not stop people from moving; it will only lead to more deaths and the further erosion of refugee protection.

I therefore welcome the fact that - in Europe - the European Commission has proposed to address these challenges through the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, published last month, and which will now be discussed with EU member States.

This is a unique opportunity, and it is not a moment too early, as recent events on the Greek island of Lesbos have shown. There, and along all external EU borders, it will be crucial to set out clearly how responsibilities will be shared in the spirit of solidarity reflected in the proposed Pact, while upholding legal obligations, including respecting the rights and the dignity of all those on the move.

And in addressing mixed movements, asylum processes can be faster and remain fair, based on triaging for referrals to appropriate case processing modalities.

Similarly, as this Executive Committee has recognized in the past, the issue of prompt, safe and dignified returns of people found not to be in need of international protection must be addressed more effectively, as failure to do so will continue to undermine trust in the principles and institution of asylum which UNHCR is mandated to uphold.

Mr Chairman,

Refugees are often informally employed and have little capacity to absorb shocks. COVID- related lockdowns have further, dramatically reduced their income, rapidly exhausted limited savings and increased food insecurity. Demands for assistance have grown everywhere, even in countries like Pakistan and Iran that have generously provided sanctuary and services to Afghan refugees for generations.

The fall-out has had a particular impact on women and girls. There are increasing reports of gender-based and domestic violence. On the rise are forced marriages, exploitation and other examples of what we drily call “negative coping mechanisms” - in reality, deeply disturbing consequences of desperate acts that rob women and girls of safety and dignity.

Poverty forces other difficult decisions. More than 100,000 Venezuelans are estimated to have returned because livelihoods in countries hosting them were wiped out by lockdowns. They face dramatic challenges - and they need help - as they travel back amidst the pandemic, and return to a context of extreme fragility.

Substantial resources were pledged at the Solidarity Conference with States hosting Venezuelan refugees and migrants (recently held with IOM under the leadership of the European Union and Spain). That support to those countries and communities is now more urgent than ever.

However, humanitarian assistance is insufficient, on its own, as a response to the pandemic of poverty emerging from the health crisis. This is why we have continued to insist on the inclusion of refugees and IDPs in national responses, until they can return to their countries or places of origin. And in doing this, we should not forget people who are stateless – whose vulnerabilities have also worsened; and on whose

behalf I would like to encourage all those who pledged at last year's high level event to fulfil their commitments.

States generally included refugees in responding to the health aspects of the pandemic. This must continue, and extend to the next, complex phases of the public health response - systematic testing and especially the availability of a vaccine. WHO and other agencies like GAVI and the Global Fund are aware and supportive.

Inclusion must also apply to social services, safety nets and measures to counter food insecurity. This is crucial to refugees, their hosts, and the stability of regions with large displaced populations – and an important element to prevent backtracking on the Sustainable Development Goals. I fully share Henrietta Fore's focus on education as a key priority in this respect.

I realize that such inclusion has a cost, often difficult to bear for countries with few resources. As I have recently discussed, among others, with Kristalina Georgieva, the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, we must ensure that the presence of large refugee populations is an element of serious consideration as sizeable fiscal stimulus packages are rolled out for countries hosting them. We must ensure that those forcibly displaced and their hosts are included in programmes developed by international financial institutions - of which you are stakeholders - or by bilateral development agencies.

We have made much progress this past year in deepening the partnerships necessary to make this work. The Compact and Forum, fortunately, had prepared the ground.

In response to the pandemic, the World Bank has made up to \$1 billion from the IDA refugee window available on request to refugee hosting countries in the form of grants - not loans.

The African Development Bank has contributed more than \$20 million towards the response to forced displacement in the Central Sahel.

And the InterAmerican Development Bank and the World Bank together pledged \$2 billion in support of Venezuelan refugees and their host communities - 68 percent has already been contracted or disbursed.

These are key efforts that must be expanded and strengthened.

Mr Chairman,

The Venezuelan example is not unique. In other places, the pandemic has prompted refugees and displaced people to make the difficult decision to go home before the stage at which we would promote or even facilitate repatriation.

Syria is a case in point. I visited the country just a few days ago. Conditions remain harsh and will worsen in winter. UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies are rehabilitating shelters, but destruction is widespread in some areas, with ruined buildings as the only housing available, and little access to electricity, clean water,

health services or schools. Security remains critical in the North-West and fragile in the North-East.

It would be therefore premature to promote repatriation. Some Syrian refugees, though, and a larger number of internally displaced people, make the choice to return. Surely, this choice must be free of pressure and their security must be respected, but their humanitarian needs upon return must also be met.

And in the meantime, we must imperatively stay the course in supporting Syrian refugees – almost six million of them - and their hosts in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq. Traditional challenges in all these countries have been compounded by the coronavirus. The situation in Lebanon is of particular concern amidst the political and economic crisis and as Henrietta Fore said, in the aftermath of the Beirut explosion.

Mr Chairman,

The global uncertainty should not deter us from seeking solutions to forced displacement - on the contrary, the vulnerabilities highlighted by the pandemic must be an incentive to pursue solutions even if favourable circumstances are rare. The three regional platforms established at the Forum – related to Afghan refugees, refugees in the East and Horn of Africa, and forced displacement in Central America – offer valuable tools. And we look forward to the recommendations of the Secretary-General's High Level Panel on IDPs, which - we trust - will also focus on solutions to internal displacement.

I welcome in particular the efforts of leaders in Sudan and South Sudan to end conflict, as proven just this weekend by the Juba Peace Agreement. It is positive that – as part of the peace processes – their governments have agreed to pursue comprehensive solutions for displaced populations in and around their countries, within the framework of the IGAD Support Platform.

UNHCR will work with both States – whose foreign ministers I welcome to this meeting - to develop an ambitious yet realistic regional plan.

In the meantime, we have stepped up our support in the two countries, through humanitarian assistance but also beginning to work on solutions for IDPs and refugees, in close coordination with UN and other partners. A generous CERF contribution in Sudan helped us start on solid grounds.

But there are also situations where solutions are more difficult. In those contexts, I cannot stress enough the importance of dialogue and communication and UNHCR stands ready to help facilitate any solution-oriented discussions.

I welcome the cross-border contacts that have taken place between Myanmar officials and refugees in Bangladesh. I encourage Bangladesh and Myanmar to facilitate more exchanges, so that refugees are aware of the conditions in their villages of origin and are assured that they will be able to return there.

Along with UNDP, we have renewed our memorandum of understanding with the Government of Myanmar for one year. Work on 75 quick impact projects in Rakhine State is underway, of the 115 requested – but we must move faster.

While refugees await solutions, they must be provided with opportunities to make the most of their potential. In this regard, I welcome the Government of Bangladesh's approval to facilitate the formal education of Rohingya refugee children. Implementation has been delayed due to COVID, but I hope we can work to move ahead. Bolstering refugee resilience will require renewed donor support and I thank the United States, United Kingdom and European Union for co-hosting a conference in support of Rohingya refugees later this month.

Mr Chairman,

We know that most refugees prefer to return home. But some simply cannot and will not. Integration in countries of asylum is a difficult option in many places though it is an important solution in different parts of the world, deserving to be pursued with adequate resources and innovative strategies.

Resettlement to third countries remains a vital alternative at least for the most vulnerable. I would be remiss though if I did not express deep disappointment with the overall levels of resettlement places available. In 2019, just over 100,000 refugees were resettled; less than one half of one percent of the world's refugees, in a constantly declining trend.

COVID-related travel restrictions have seriously affected resettlement. Despite that, I appreciate that some countries kept an open door for emergency cases. This has saved hundreds of lives. I am especially grateful to Canada, the largest resettlement country in 2019, and a champion of innovative approaches.

But it is not enough, and I appeal to governments to do more to help resettle the most urgent cases, and increase opportunities through complementary pathways. Last year we launched a three-year strategy as envisaged in the Compact. It generated nearly 80 pledges at the Forum, which I encourage stakeholders to honour soon.

Mr Chairman,

One key lesson learnt from the pandemic is the importance of better forecasting risks and preparing responses - not just for health threats, but for others too, especially the one that looms large over us all: the climate emergency.

Last year I updated you on our work on climate action, including protection guidance, operational responses, efforts to reduce the environmental impact of displacement, and lessen our own carbon footprint. Since then we have launched a sustainable energy strategy, and a clean energy challenge to provide access to affordable, reliable and clean energy to displaced settlements by 2030, amongst other initiatives.

We know that climate induced displacement is going to continue and worsen. The question is also how to prevent, mitigate, and prepare before it happens. For example, harnessing the power of artificial intelligence and predictive analytics, we are working together with 20 organisations to forecast climate related displacement in the Central Sahel, enabling targeted responses before displacement occurs.

Mr Chairman,

In 2016 we set an ambitious task of reforming UNHCR in order to devolve decision making authority as close as possible to the point of delivery.

Deputy High Commissioner Kelly Clements updated the Standing Committee extensively just last month. Suffice it here to say that moving the regional bureaux from Geneva proved useful in the coronavirus response. The pandemic, so to speak, stress-tested regionalisation and decentralisation and provided valuable lessons for improvement. And while some delays have occurred due to the crisis, I assure you that we continue to press ahead with all aspects of the change process. The new Results-Based Management tool is a key priority, allowing us to better measure outcomes and impact, how and to what extent we are contributing to improving lives, and where we can reprioritise, with the right balance of predictability and agility.

Yet reforms will not be complete without focusing more urgently on the simplification of business processes, like making transactions with NGO partners more speedy and flexible, or ensuring that relevant authorities are truly delegated while maintaining coherence in the organization's overall approach and of course the absolute integrity of all our activities. This is in line with Global Compact and Grand Bargain commitments to provide greater and flexible support to local partners, essential to stay and deliver even during the pandemic.

And it is also consistent with current efforts by the Secretary-General to make the UN more coherent and effective. In line with the 2030 Agenda, we are committed to the goal of achieving more responsive delivery of better results for people and the planet. Our joint leadership with the World Food Programme of the Business Innovation Group was one contribution to that collective effort.

Mr Chairman,

In spite of this year's challenges, or perhaps because of them, we have witnessed an extraordinary outpouring of solidarity from and between refugees and their hosts; from civil society, religious leaders, faith-based organisations, the private sector; and a level of cooperation within the humanitarian system I have rarely seen.

UNHCR's donors continue to contribute generously to our programmes. Last year's income was \$4.2 billion. In 2020, 52 per cent of our yearly budget has been funded so far. We are also very grateful for the nearly \$460 million received so far in response to our COVID appeal - which we have managed realistically, prioritizing the most urgent needs and taking into account the multiple pressures put on donors by the global crisis.

I single out, with gratitude, the United States of America, whose contribution - the largest of any donor - was once more its most substantial in a long history of generous support.

I also thank the European Commission and Germany, which have again provided extraordinary funding. And among our most generous donors, I mention those which have given the largest unearmarked contributions: Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark, the United Kingdom – and, significantly, España con ACNUR. I have spoken many times of the importance of such contributions, which are regrettably declining in spite of previous commitments. It was unearmarked funds that allowed for the initial, quick coronavirus response, and - no doubt - saved lives.

Particularly heartening has been the exceptional support received from private and individual donors. They are expected to contribute more than half a billion US dollars this year for the first time.

But looking ahead, one cannot avoid being worried. The economic and financial consequences of the pandemic are affecting all countries, including those whose contributions form the backbone of UNHCR's yearly income.

Yet I would like to take this opportunity to make a strong appeal not to decrease aid and especially humanitarian budgets. The months and years ahead will witness - no doubt - increasing poverty and fragilities among those at the margins. Maintaining aid levels will be a relatively inexpensive way to save lives, protect the vulnerable, and help them live in dignity and security. It will mitigate the instability likely to rise from growing pockets of marginalization, which will be much more costly to address later.

And it will be a concrete expression of the visionary, cooperative governance founded in solidarity so painfully rare today, but which the pandemic has proven to be the only effective response to global challenges.

Before I close, let me share some thoughts about another major development in the public discourse: the debate over racism, discrimination and the need for more equality.

The killing of George Floyd sparked outrage. It compelled us as institutions and individuals to look not only at discrimination and racism as external phenomena (which, by the way, and in many places, force people to flee), but to examine within ourselves as well.

Encouraged by many colleagues, I have launched an internal process of reflection which has led to sometimes difficult but necessary discussions. We are an organization mandated to uphold rights and principles. But are we immune from inequality and even discrimination, whether deliberate and abusive, or unconscious but equally damaging? Do we translate our commitment to equal rights into equality in the workplace?

Initial responses indicate that we have work to do to improve practices and culture, but that colleagues are eager to pursue this effort and we will. We are about to

establish a Global Advisory Group on inclusion and diversity. We have commissioned an independent race equity and equality review that will make recommendations next spring. I am encouraging managers to open up safe spaces for dialogue and - crucially - safe channels for concerns and complaints, especially in the case of abuses.

Work done in past years to eliminate and prevent sexual exploitation and abuse, and sexual harassment (of which I currently hold the “championship” in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, succeeding Henrietta Fore in this role) provides good lessons on how to foster internal dialogue, safe spaces, and adequate redress measures, as we continue to actively discourage and sanction the abuse of authority.

Mr Chairman,

As I said, UNHCR is used to dealing with the consequences of crises. Our systems and structures are set for these challenges. We have the institutional reflex to rush to the frontlines to help people in need.

As a result, UNHCR staff (like UNICEF and other partners) are often in distant locations with weak health systems; in places where remote working describes real isolation; not doing one’s job from home.

Yet, when the pandemic took hold, they stayed and delivered. They were in difficult places, often separated from friends, family, and the familiar – things we all longed for during this strange crisis.

They made us proud – they made me proud - and they are what makes us strong.

And if you work with refugees, displaced and stateless people - if you have seen them come together with their host communities to keep each other safe - then you know that it is their courage and their resilience that drive our dedication.

So, as we grapple with the pandemic, the climate emergency, and unrelenting conflict, we draw from them much strength, and even in this bleak year - especially in this bleak year - they inspire hope which echoes the commitments heard a year ago at the Global Refugee Forum.

Strength and hope which prove that together we can – in spite of everything - make a difference.

Thank you.