

Opening statement at the 70th session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme

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Mr. Chairman,
Deputy Secretary-General,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The modern concept of refugee protection was born in the middle of last century, as the world emerged from two devastating global conflicts and was preparing to enter the Cold War. Millions had been uprooted from their homes, as wars cast people adrift, empires disintegrated, borders were redrawn, and minorities and political opponents were persecuted and expelled. Ensuring the safety of those displaced, and resolving displacement, were among the earliest priorities of the United Nations.

Seven decades on, forced human displacement remains a global concern. The context is different, but the complexity remains immense. Today's refugee crises are part of a growing flow of human mobility, driven by many overlapping elements.

Resource-based conflicts that transcend borders, shaped by a mosaic of local, regional and international interests; fueled by extremism, criminal networks and urban gangs.

Loss of hope, as global advances in prosperity, education and the fight against hunger and disease fail to reach those most in need.

Conflicts premised on ethnic and religious differences, stoked by others for political and financial gain.

Collapsing eco-systems and weather-related disasters that destroy homes and livelihoods, forcing millions further into poverty.

Damaging forms of nationalism, and hate speech that - often through cyberspace - have found a new legitimacy in public discourse.

Refugees emerge from these widening fault-lines – a warning of things going wrong. This is why tackling forced displacement calls again for a bigger, broader ambition than we have managed to muster in the recent past.

This was the vision that drove the development of the Global Compact on Refugees. Addressing refugee crises cannot be done in isolation from larger global challenges, and from effective migration policies. The two compacts – on refugees, and on safe,

orderly and regular migration – were designed to complement each other, and for good reason.

Look at the Sahel – a situation of enormous complexity, where insecurity, poverty and loss of traditional livelihoods are fracturing and uprooting entire communities, across the region and beyond. Protecting refugees and the internally displaced is vital. But this must be accompanied by a deeper and wider scope of action that cuts across the political, security, migration and development spheres.

Two aspects of the Global Compact on Refugees stand out.

One is its comprehensive approach. It accelerates a long-awaited shift in responses - from a traditional humanitarian angle to one that preserves the humanitarian imperative, but matches it with a broader set of tools more adapted to the dynamics of today's refugee flows.

This means peacemaking and peacebuilding, development action and private sector investment. It means sustained, strategic support to address the root causes of refugee movements and mixed population flows. The Deputy Secretary-General has just highlighted how this dovetails with the work towards a UN system that can best catalyze progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Synergies between the compact and UN reforms are relevant and strong.

Also, the compact makes tangible the commitment to international solidarity that underpins the refugee protection regime, but has never been fully realised. You will hear more about this from our new Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Gillian Triggs, whom I am happy to introduce to you today.

Securing the refugee compact - a practical, concrete tool - proved that beyond the damaging, unilateral approaches that sometimes surface, a commitment to addressing refugee flows through international solidarity still prevails. At UNHCR, we are fully committed to this effort, and we count on you all – our closest partners – to do the same. It is possible! The Global Refugee Forum, to be convened in December in this building, will be the opportunity to showcase what has been achieved, and make fresh commitments to further progress.

Mr Chairman,

The last year has underscored why the compact is needed, and how it is starting to re-shape our collective response. Let me share my thoughts on seven related challenges.

First, while much of the discussion on forced displacement has focused on arrivals in the global North, the most profound consequences by far are on host countries in the global South. Preserving asylum there, and helping host communities, requires more substantial and sustained international support. More than four million Venezuelans, for example, have left the country, the majority taking refuge in 14 nations in Latin America and the Caribbean. Most of these states have shown commendable solidarity, despite immense pressures. Colombia's recent decision to grant citizenship at birth to the children of Venezuelans in the country is an example, and the Quito Process is helping shape a regional approach.

Sustaining this solidarity is vital, including through support to the services, infrastructure and economy of impacted countries. I welcome the engagement of the Inter-American Development Bank, and the World Bank's decision to extend support to Colombia - and potentially also Ecuador - through its Global Concessional Financing Facility. I urge them to accelerate their contributions. The forthcoming Solidarity Conference convened by the European Union, together with UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration, will be an opportunity to take stock and commit more.

Second, responses to 'mixed flows' of refugees and migrants continue to generate very divisive debates. Widespread political rhetoric exploits the anxieties prevailing among those excluded from the benefits of globalization, and directs those fears towards refugees and migrants - themselves among the most disenfranchised people on the planet. Pitting exclusion against exclusion is not only cynical and immoral - it rarely offers practical solutions to either. And measures taken or invoked to reduce flows - pushbacks, externalization of asylum processing, policies of deterrence - all erode refugee protection without really addressing root causes of mixed flows, or the challenges of integration.

These situations are enormously complex; I saw this last week in Mexico, where impressive examples of refugee integration are coupled with increasing migratory pressures from the region but also from Africa. A range of actions is undoubtedly needed to address "mixed" flows. Several are included under the MIRPS, a regional framework for protection and solutions which we have promoted; and we will contribute to UN efforts to support initiatives such as a regional development plan for Mexico and Central America, currently being discussed. In this context, saving lives and safeguarding the dignity and rights of all those on the move must remain central, together with access to international protection for those with valid claims. There and elsewhere, legal migration pathways would help prevent the abuse of asylum systems as substitutes of migration channels.

We observe these challenges not only in northern Central America and at the southern border of the United States, but also in southern Africa, and south-east Asia. In Europe, public confidence in asylum and migration management has been diminished, and must be restored through fast and fair procedures, good migration management that avoids overloading asylum systems, and investments in integration for those with a right to stay. Cooperation between governments is needed – including on the return of those who do not qualify for international protection or other stay arrangements.

I welcome the recent decision of four EU States to establish a temporary cooperation mechanism for disembarking those rescued in the Mediterranean, and hope that this will galvanise broader EU engagement and revitalize rescue at sea arrangements. But this must also be matched by a broader ambition - investments in addressing the root causes of refugee flows, and supporting the efforts of refugee-hosting and transit countries. UNHCR continues to evacuate the most vulnerable from Libya - efforts for which Niger and now Rwanda are providing life-saving channels. Hopefully, others will join. We work closely with the International Organisation for Migration in these efforts, as elsewhere. But these operations pose enormous dilemmas, and can only be sustained as part of a comprehensive, responsibility-sharing approach that has the

preservation of life, and access to international protection as central imperatives. There, as in several other operations, UNHCR colleagues and our partners are working under extremely dangerous conditions.

Third, long-standing and recurring displacement crises continue to persist, in the absence of political solutions. And other major crises are now becoming protracted too. In this context, the compact's emphasis on inclusion, resilience and development action - pending solutions - is critical. This year marked the fortieth anniversary of the start of the Afghan refugee crisis. Regrettably, peace efforts seem once again to have stalled. I welcome Afghanistan's decision to apply the comprehensive refugee response model in support of its initiatives to solve displacement, but solutions remain compromised by drought, insecurity and governance failures. Just 15,000 refugees returned home last year. The hospitality displayed by Pakistan and Iran, and their work on refugee inclusion and self-reliance, as well as on legal migration and stay options, are ground-breaking, but must receive more international support while the Afghan crisis continues.

In Somalia, too, while the commitment of the government to reduce forced displacement is evident and commendable, conflict and drought are still inhibiting solutions and driving new displacement. In this context, the regional application of the comprehensive response model by IGAD helps strengthen asylum, access to rights, and refugee inclusion in health, education and national economies.

Governments in the East and Horn of Africa have been in the forefront of the application of the comprehensive refugee response model. Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya and Uganda, among others, have made enormous strides with the support of the World Bank's expertise and financing, bilateral development support and private sector investments. These are already transforming the lives of many refugees, as well as refugee-hosting communities across the region, and proving the validity of the model enshrined in the compact. They are giving concrete meaning to the African Union's decision to declare 2019 the year of refugees, displaced people and returnees in Africa.

Fourth, the issue of repatriation continues to be the subject of much attention. A question we are increasingly asked is - how to advance solutions, when security in countries of origin remains fragile, and there is no end of hostilities? Can people return to their home countries in the absence of political settlements?

The answer is that returns must be driven by people, not politics. Across UNHCR's operations, we have an ongoing dialogue with refugees on return, and the complex factors that influence their decisions. We work with governments to help create the conditions paving the way for returns. These must be voluntary and sustainable.

Take the example of Syria. Some 200,000 Syrian refugees have returned since 2016, and over three quarters of the almost six million refugees say they hope to return one day. We must continue to be guided by their views and decisions, and provide support to those who choose to return to avoid exposing them to further hardship.

Our policy is not to stand back and wait. We work with the Government of Syria to help address barriers to return and support confidence-building measures; hoping of

course that recent political advances are consolidated; and that further humanitarian crises - especially in Idlib - can be avoided through concerted action by all parties.

In the meantime, international support to asylum countries must be sustained. Their outstanding generosity, and continuous donor support have helped Syrian refugees contend with long years in exile, even in places like Lebanon where the ratio of refugees to nationals continues to be the highest in the world. The achievements are significant: last year, 1.3 million Syrian refugee children were attending school, and 110,000 work permits were issued in Jordan and Turkey. However, acute poverty and vulnerability are weighing on people's lives, and inevitably influencing their decisions.

In Myanmar, too, the Government has recognised the right of refugees in Bangladesh to return, and has started an important dialogue with them, to build confidence and enable informed decisions. UNHCR and UNDP are working on social cohesion projects in northern Rakhine State to help pave the way for eventual returns. These are important steps, but need to be accompanied by more visible changes on key issues of refugee concern - freedom of movement, solutions for the internally displaced, clear information on a pathway to citizenship.

A second bilateral initiative to commence repatriation in August did not result in any refugees coming forward. But it sent important messages: the door is open, and voluntariness was respected. My hope is that this can now pave the way for a more strategic approach, in which refugee voices and choices are central. UNHCR stands ready to advise and support. There, and in other places, for example with Burundian refugees in Tanzania, and Nigerian refugees in the Lake Chad region, we are available to facilitate dialogue and solutions through tripartite approaches which include UNHCR.

Fifth, and closely linked to my previous point, we need to seize opportunities to accelerate solutions. Conflicts moving towards peace are rare, but when there is a chance, we have to pursue it. In this respect, we are closely following events in Sudan and South Sudan. The political transition in Sudan and the new Government's commitment to a peace process have important implications for hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees, and for the internally displaced. The renewed momentum in the South Sudan peace process is also encouraging. Spontaneous refugee returns to South Sudan have already surpassed 200,000, and IDP returns are also under way.

Over the last two years, UNHCR and IGAD have been promoting the inclusion of refugees and internally displaced people in the South Sudan peace process. I hope that these recent developments will pave the way to a definitive end of the cycle of violence and displacement that has blighted the lives of generations of Sudanese and South Sudanese people.

Resettlement is another solution - albeit for very few. While some countries are stepping up their programmes, the overall number of places has plummeted. I am very disappointed by this. Resettlement saves lives and offers stability to refugees who are most vulnerable and at risk. I propose that we use more deliberately our new three-

year strategy to intensify resettlement efforts, and expand private sector and community involvement.

The sixth major challenge relates to our engagement with the internally displaced. At the end of 2018, over 41 million people were living in displacement in their own countries around the world. Major IDP operations, in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, the Lake Chad Basin, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ukraine, remain among our most politically and operationally complex - but all are among our priorities. I wish to flag in particular that together with our partners, we are responding with more resources to the Ethiopian government's call for support to address recent large-scale internal displacement in the country.

In sum, we are trying to better align our efforts to advance solutions for refugees and IDPs, and to design our operations more effectively, in the context of inter-agency efforts. Our new policy on internal displacement reflects our firm, revitalized commitment. This places particular emphasis on protection leadership, and aligning our interventions with those of our partners.

Mr. Chairman,

A few days ago, at the start of the 74th session of the General Assembly in New York, we heard calls to accelerate our responses to the climate emergency, before it is too late. Greta Thunberg, speaking for the next generations, and António Guterres, speaking as the world's conscience, were adamant in asking all of us to take action - now.

These calls concern us, too, as we gather here to discuss issues of forced displacement. I have just presented six key displacement-related challenges. The seventh intersects and underpins them all.

Climate-related causes are a growing driver of new internal displacement, surpassing those related to conflict and violence by more than 50%. Climate is often also a pervasive factor in cross-border displacement.

The term "climate refugee" is not based in international law, and does not reflect the more complicated ways in which climate interacts with human mobility. But the image it conveys - of people driven from their homes as an outcome of the climate emergency - has rightly captured public attention.

I am often asked how the UN refugee organization can help respond to this challenge. I wish to take this opportunity to share a few thoughts for your consideration.

For some years, UNHCR has worked to highlight relevant legal frameworks and the protection gaps resulting from cross-border displacement in the context of climate change. We will continue to help steer international discussions and the legal and normative debate in this area, including through engagement with the Platform on Disaster Displacement, and other multilateral platforms.

Forced displacement across borders can stem from the interaction between climate change and disasters with conflict and violence - or it can arise from natural or man-made disasters alone. Either situation can trigger international protection needs.

In the first case, these would normally be met through recognition as a refugee under the 1951 Convention or regional refugee frameworks. In the second, temporary protection or stay arrangements, on which UNHCR has expertise, can provide flexible and speedy responses.

Even more specifically, where disaster-related displacement occurs, a strong operational response, guided by protection considerations, is often needed. Here too, UNHCR will continue to work in inter-agency contexts to support governments - building on our strong expertise in emergency response. The Global Compact on Refugees by the way calls for preparedness measures and evidence-based forecasting, and the inclusion of refugees in disaster risk reduction strategies.

There are other considerations. Climate factors drive people out of their homes - but large-scale refugee movements - whether or not climate-induced - have themselves in turn an environmental impact, and refugees are frequently located in climate hotspots. I am determined to make these considerations more relevant to the way we prepare for and respond to refugee crises.

At UNHCR, we have worked for years to reduce the environmental impact of refugee crises through renewable energy options, reforestation activities, and access to clean fuels and technology for cooking. We have now launched a revitalized energy strategy and are improving our tools to address these challenges - private sector partners such as the IKEA Foundation have been invaluable in helping us develop new approaches.

And finally like other organizations, we recognise that our own operational footprint has an environmental impact, and are taking action accordingly. We are working, for example, to increase energy efficiency and renewable energy use.

Mr. Chairman,

Work to respond to these challenges is made possible by the strong confidence that UNHCR continues to receive from donor partners. We expect funds available this year to reach an estimated 4.82 billion US dollars. The United States' contribution has continued to be the most substantial, and has been decisive in many challenging situations, and for this I am grateful. I wish to thank the European Commission and Germany for their particularly strong support; Sweden, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands for providing critical, substantive unearmarked funding; and of course all other donors as well.

The gap between requirements and available resources nonetheless continues to grow in absolute terms and will reach around 3.82 billion US dollars this year. Private sector income is projected to increase by 11% over last year's figure, to 470 million US dollars. We continue to work to diversify our funding base, in the spirit of responsibility-sharing and to ensure a stable platform for our work. Most importantly, our partnership with development organizations is becoming much stronger, and is

helping us find ways to target our resources in ways that leverage those bigger programmes.

I am aware that donor generosity must be matched by constant improvements in how we manage the organization. In late 2016, I initiated a reform process to ensure an agile and effective UNHCR, with country operations equipped to pursue context-driven strategies, innovate, and respond to local and regional dynamics. This was the rationale for our regionalisation and decentralization process, which is giving greater authority and flexibility to country offices, helping us get closer to refugees, and front-loading support through Regional Bureaux located in their regions.

We are entering the last phase of structural changes, which will involve adjustments to Headquarters Divisions and other entities in line with the new rebalanced authorities.

Of course, transformation is not only about structures and accountabilities, and is not a one-time exercise – it is also about transforming our organisational culture, investing in the quality of work, improving and streamlining systems and processes, and creating space for innovation.

We are working on evidence-based planning, on how we describe impact, and on increasing efficiency, in line with our Grand Bargain commitments and as an active participant in broader UN reforms. I recently endorsed a Data Transformation Strategy, and the new UNHCR/World Bank Joint Data Centre will be inaugurated this week in Copenhagen by the Secretary-General - a milestone of humanitarian/development cooperation.

We also continue to embed a strong risk management culture across the organisation, and to strengthen systems and tools for preventing and responding to misconduct. This includes sexual exploitation and abuse, and sexual harassment, for which we have implemented a broad range of measures and to which I am personally committed. There is no place in the organization for perpetrators, and we will keep survivors and victims at the center of our response.

Mr. Chairman,

In 2011, my predecessor convened a ministerial meeting on the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the 50th of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. It is fair to say that until then, the statelessness mandate had been a rather peripheral aspect of UNHCR's work. Clearly, you didn't see it that way. More than 60 states and regional entities came forward with pledges aimed at reducing statelessness, and that groundswell of political will and commitment became the catalyst for the #IBelong campaign, launched in 2014. Spurred on by the energy that had emerged, we decided to fix a time limit - ten years - to bring statelessness to an end.

Now, as we mark the halfway point, it's time to take stock and renew the commitment that set us on the path towards this bold ambition. This is the aim of the High-Level Segment that will follow in a few moments, as part of this Executive Committee meeting.

When we talk about statelessness, we often find ourselves speaking of laws, documents and other technicalities. These are critical, and are where the hard work has to happen, but when we frame statelessness purely in legal terms, we lose sight of the all-encompassing blight it casts on people's lives, pushing them to the margins of society, denying them basic rights and a sense of identity. This is an area in which - for relatively little investment - wide-reaching impact is within our reach.

Some of you, last year, were present at an EXCOM side event at which a young woman who had grown up stateless became the citizen of a country for the first time. It was a deeply emotional experience for everyone present - and that moment, more than any speech or list of pledges, captured what it means to finally belong, after years spent living on the margins. She and a number of formerly stateless people are present here today, and I encourage you to talk to them and understand what citizenship has meant to them. Their stories are what will inspire us as we move ahead.

There have been important achievements in the first half of the campaign - tackling gender discrimination in nationality laws, introducing laws to avoid childhood statelessness, and developing procedures to find solutions for people who would otherwise be stateless. Certain protracted situations were finally resolved. Fifteen states acceded to one or both of the Statelessness Conventions. Kyrgyzstan became the first State to formally announce that all known cases of statelessness on its territory had been resolved – an achievement that should inspire others. I look forward to honouring a Kyrgyz champion of this campaign, Azizbek Ashurov, at the Nansen Award ceremony this evening.

I also wish to acknowledge the work of UNICEF, UNFPA, the World Bank, and civil society and academic networks - and especially the Geneva-based 'Friends' of the campaign, who have been persistent in their advocacy and support. The regional preparatory meetings have been characterized by energy and commitment. I am pleased to share that we have received 171 pledges ahead of today's event, which has also galvanised other initiatives that may become concrete pledges later.

This is particularly commendable at a time when we are asking a lot of you. At UNHCR, we will also step up our efforts even more to achieve the ambitious collective goal of ending statelessness once and for all.

Mr Chairman,

The first Global Refugee Forum will be convened in this building in just over two months. It comes at the end of a turbulent decade, in which people and communities have been uprooted across all regions. Nobody foresaw, ten years ago, the convergence of trends and events that would lead to a doubling in the number of people forcibly displaced, and the prominence that refugee and migrant flows would assume in domestic and international politics. Addressing and resolving forced displacement has rightly emerged as an urgent priority intertwined with other 21st-century global challenges, including climate change.

The big question now is - what are we going to make of the next decade? Will it be one that sees us in retreat - turning our backs on the hard-learned lessons of the twentieth century - or one in which we will have the courage of joining forces in spite of our different perspectives and interests, embracing the challenges and opportunities of international cooperation to address the plight of exile? These are the fundamental questions that the Forum will have to tackle. I hope - of course - that it will respond by clearly showing the second way. I encourage all of you to ensure high-level representation from States, share positive experiences, and make significant and impactful commitments that will greatly improve the future of refugees and host communities.

I believe that in the Global Compact for Refugees, we have grounds for optimism. The momentum is there. We have a powerful tool that was born of a narrative of possibility. The Forum will be the occasion, I hope, to show that we do not shy away from the enormous responsibility placed on all of us - one that stems not only from the refugees and host communities looking to us for action, but also from the opportunity that we have to inspire new generations, and demonstrate, in so many practical, concrete ways, why international cooperation matters, and how it can be made to work.

Thank you.