

High Commissioner's opening statement at the 67th session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme

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Mr Chairman,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I returned to UNHCR, last January, I came back with great pride to the organization in which my values and convictions were forged, as a young professional, in many of the major crises of those years.

I found the same commitment to principles, and the same passionate dedication to refugees. But I also realized that profound changes had taken place. When I left UNHCR in 2004, refugee numbers were falling sharply, with many of the conflicts of the 1990s drawing to a close. That year, 1.5 million refugees returned home. Last year, by contrast, only 200,000 were able to do so. And as you have just heard, the number of refugees and internally displaced people has spiraled to more than 65 million.

Making and building peace has become more difficult; and the legal and moral boundaries established to mitigate the impact of war on civilians are crossed every day more deliberately, and with more impunity. It is not a coincidence that the gravest displacement crisis continues to be generated in Syria. We have run out of words to describe the death, destruction and suffering willingly inflicted on civilians by the parties to that conflict; while states with the power to stop the war are simply unable to find the unity of intent required to do so.

Meanwhile, the parties to other conflicts are also killing and terrorizing civilians. In war-affected Yemen more than half of the population is suffering from food insecurity, infrastructure is being destroyed, and the health system is on the verge of collapse. In

South Sudan, five years after the birth of that nation, one million people have crossed its borders seeking refuge in neighbouring countries; and more than 1.5 million are displaced inside. And the list continues.

Future generations, distinguished delegates, will judge with severity our collective incapacity to prevent and solve conflict, and protect people from the consequences of war.

But forced displacement is unfolding within a broader context - in which people are moving more rapidly, over longer distances and for a more complex range of reasons than at any time in history. Food insecurity, environmental degradation, climate change, inequality, exclusion and bad governance are driving mobility today. Statelessness is both a root cause and the result of forced displacement. And conflicts increasingly have regional dimensions, bringing a range of security considerations into play.

Proximity to war seems to be the main factor in how the responsibility to receive refugees is shared. Nine out of ten refugees are hosted in developing countries: the impact on those states and communities is enormous. And as we saw last year in Europe - when more than one million people arrived by sea - inadequate support to host countries and within countries of origin, and a failure to bring about the prospect of solutions, are now driving people to seek protection further afield in increasing numbers.

Against this sobering background, access to protection is all too often compromised. Borders are closed, or entry restricted. People seeking refuge are pushed back into conflict zones. Populations are trapped in besieged areas, unable to leave.

Those who do reach safety are often left on the margins, struggling to survive and to connect to the communities around them. Some long-standing host countries have increased pressure on refugees to return home, in circumstances in which decisions to repatriate may be less than voluntary, and in which their security and ability to rebuild their lives cannot be assured.

The right to asylum - and the values of tolerance and solidarity that are its foundations - are undermined by xenophobia, nationalist rhetoric and political discourse linking refugees with security concerns and terrorism. The arrival of large numbers of refugees and migrants has created panic and political instability in the global North, fueled by irresponsible politicians. Restrictions in the laws governing asylum are being enforced in many countries, even among those with a proud tradition of refugee protection and human rights.

And the principle that refugees are a matter of international concern, requiring a response based on cooperation and solidarity, has been severely tested, everywhere, by the failure of European states to implement an effective, shared response to last year's crisis. In the absence of well-managed approaches, chaos prevailed - with some states - especially Austria, Germany and Sweden - receiving disproportionate numbers of people while others closed their doors. Restrictions inevitably ensued, with a growing and worrying emphasis on keeping people away from European borders, including those with urgent protection needs. Responses to our appeal to receive more refugees through legal

pathways have been modest so far. Relocation within Europe has been very limited. And imbalances remain unresolved, with more barriers rising and Greece and Italy confronted with the brunt of population movements across the Mediterranean.

Mr Chairman,

This stark picture does not capture the entire situation. Most of the states next to conflict zones maintain their borders open to refugees. And the international refugee protection regime still resonates as the foundation of state responses - with many genuinely striving to find a way to reconcile international obligations with domestic social, economic and security concerns.

Extraordinary appreciation is due to host countries and communities that remain resolute in extending hospitality, solidarity and support to millions of asylum seekers and refugees, often providing them with the essentials of life and a path to stability despite tough local conditions.

There is also growing recognition that the response to large displacement crises - resilient as refugee protection has continued to be - has been inadequate. There is an appetite for new approaches, moving beyond traditional humanitarian models, and at long last seriously engaging major development actors.

And the strong focus of the UN General Assembly on refugees and migrants proves that forced displacement has finally taken centre stage as one of today's defining global challenges. The New York Declaration, adopted by the General Assembly two weeks ago, provides a powerful platform for change - clearly articulating that refugee crises cannot be managed by a single state alone, and calling for predictable, collaborative international responses based on solidarity and responsibility-sharing. I was heartened by the strong language on the fundamentals of the international protection regime, notably the enduring value of the 1951 Convention, its 1967 Protocol and relevant regional instruments.

But what does this mean for UNHCR?

In January, I launched a process of reflection that included a wide range of colleagues at headquarters and in the field. We analyzed the current context and discussed the priorities that should shape UNHCR's strategic directions over the coming five years. Particular importance was given to hearing the views of younger staff, and I have also drawn a lot of inspiration and ideas from my field visits.

The process will draw on inputs from various stakeholders, including states, as we move forward. For now, let me share with you the main elements that have emerged in our discussions so far, and which have helped steer my decisions in my first nine months of tenure. We have identified five core directions which - while not constituting the totality of our work - represent key areas of strategic focus.

First, and most fundamentally, we must deepen and make more resolute our voice - and our actions - to embed protection principles and standards at the centre of responses to forced displacement, statelessness and humanitarian crises. Our commitment, even in the most adverse circumstances, must be driven by this fundamental objective - to save and secure lives, and to protect rights. The Assistant High Commissioner for Protection will speak to you in more detail on these matters. I wish to flag some important elements.

Ensuring protection in practice means offering concrete support to countries striving to uphold their responsibilities amidst political and security challenges - as we did in June, when we supported the government of Nigeria in hosting the Lake Chad Regional Protection Dialogue.

It also means forging responses to new protection challenges and causes of displacement, as we are doing with states, civil society and partners as people flee violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America. In this context, I welcome the San José Action Statement adopted in July.

And we are ready to cooperate with European Union institutions and member states in crafting the tools for a shared, organized, humane and principled approach to those seeking asylum in Europe.

In many operations, securing protection also means supporting governments in the delivery of services such as registration and documentation, child protection, legal aid, preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence, and addressing the concerns of older people, people with disabilities and others with specific needs. It also often means providing technical support and engaging directly in sectors such as health, shelter, education and livelihoods. We are also redoubling our efforts to promote gender equality, eliminate gender-based discrimination and empower women and girls, based on the outcomes of a gender equality review.

A strong operational presence - and direct, regular contact with the communities that we serve - are critical to understanding their needs and risks, and to mobilising effective responses. Linked to this is our commitment to participation. We are strengthening accountability mechanisms, including through our age, gender and diversity policy and tools. In this regard, we welcome the strong focus on youth participation and empowerment reflected in the Conclusion that you will formally adopt later this week.

We will continue to contribute to advancing legal, policy and practical solutions for the protection of people displaced as a result of climate change, environmental degradation and natural disasters, recognising that these are significant drivers of global displacement.

Our second core direction may appear counterintuitive in a global context in which conflicts have become more complex and more intractable. But I firmly believe that we have a compelling responsibility - and for UNHCR, a mandated obligation - to seek and leverage possible solutions that enable refugees, internally displaced and stateless people to reclaim or acquire full membership in society and build a stable future.

This means integrating a solutions-oriented approach at the very outset of a crisis, building self-reliance, knowledge and skills, and mobilizing actors who have the capacity and instruments to address the drivers of displacement.

And there is hope. More than a quarter of a million refugees have - for example - returned to Côte d'Ivoire in the last five years.

And despite last night's setback, peace negotiations in Colombia have brought that country substantially closer to ending one of the world's oldest conflicts and finding solutions for almost 7.5 million people uprooted inside and outside their country. I could appreciate such opportunities myself when I visited Colombia and Ecuador a few months ago. We trust that Colombia's leaders will stay the course in what will undoubtedly be a challenging time ahead.

And we have seen substantial progress towards democracy and stability in Myanmar, opening up - to begin with - real possibilities for the return of refugees who fled as a result of political repression and ethnic violence in the South-East of the country.

A bigger challenge will be to solve forced displacement in fragile contexts in which a definitive resolution of conflict has not yet been achieved. But even there, we must do more. This is first and foremost the responsibility of governments. However, appropriately designed international support, aimed at ensuring safe, dignified and sustainable return and at addressing the causes of displacement, can be an important catalyst.

Afghanistan is a case in point: efforts to stabilize the country and promote its institutional and economic development - which will be discussed in Brussels this week - will not be completely successful if they exclude support and solutions for millions of Afghans who remain uprooted. This includes assistance to people who opt to return voluntarily - and truly without external pressure - from countries of asylum, as well as much stronger support to the generous states - especially Iran and Pakistan - hosting those refugees for whom international protection is still required. They also range, inside Afghanistan, from long-term reintegration measures for returnees, to supporting the government to address and resolve internal displacement.

In Somalia, too, the path towards stability and prosperity remains arduous, with some progress occurring; but it must include solutions for hundreds of thousands of Somalis displaced internally, and in exile through the region. We have worked with the governments of Kenya and Somalia in "unpacking" the complex situation of the camps in Dadaab, and it is important that the repatriation component remains voluntary, and is supported by much bolder reintegration efforts in Somalia. But solutions must extend beyond Dadaab. With this in mind, I have appointed Mohamed Abdi Affey as my Special Envoy for the Somali refugee situation, to intensify the search for solutions at national and regional levels.

We will also continue to work with states and other partners to significantly expand access to third country solutions for refugees, including resettlement and complementary pathways for admission, noting the pledges made by states in the course of 2016, including at the Leaders' Summit for Refugees convened by President Obama.

And I am fully committed to pursuing the campaign to end statelessness launched by my predecessor two years ago, recognising that some 10 million people worldwide are still without a nationality. Our efforts have been significantly boosted through regional initiatives such as the Abidjan and Brazil Declarations. Last year, tens of thousands of people acquired a nationality or had their citizenship confirmed through a range of important initiatives. Collective efforts to improve birth and marriage registration have also reduced the risk of statelessness for Syrian children born in exile.

Our third strategic commitment is to continue to reinforce and expand our capacity and expertise in emergency preparedness and response. We have fielded over 700 emergency deployments in 2015 and 2016 - an unprecedented number - and have mobilised stocks from our seven global stockpiles, with two new regional ones established this year through fresh investments.

We continue to address a significant number of large-scale emergency crises. Some are recurring, for example South Sudan - already an emergency following the crisis that broke out at the end of 2013, and now affected by a new escalation of fighting since July. In August, we also strengthened our operation in Nigeria, in recognition that our response to the internal displacement crisis in the North-East required a significant injection of resources. And I would like to draw your attention in particular to Iraq, where hundreds of thousands of people could be displaced in the next days and weeks by military developments in and around Mosul, and where inter-agency preparations are hampered by a dramatic lack of financial resources.

The fourth core direction is a firm commitment to securing the engagement of development actors in addressing forced displacement and statelessness - an area in which we have seen several significant advances.

There is growing consensus - and this, distinguished delegates, could be a true game changer - that development investments must play a central role in addressing displacement and laying the ground for solutions. The principle of universality, enshrined in the 2030 Agenda linked to the Sustainable Development Goals, provides a powerful platform for the inclusion of refugees, the internally displaced and stateless people in development planning.

In this respect, a decisive and visionary path is now being pursued by the World Bank, under the leadership of Dr Jim Kim. We have been scaling up our partnership with the Bank, including through regional studies and country action plans in the Middle East, Great Lakes, Horn of Africa and the Lake Chad Basin.

A new concessional lending instrument developed by the World Bank together with the Islamic Development Bank and the UN is already playing an important role in leveraging development support to Syrian refugees and host countries and communities in the MENA region. And the new global lending facility launched recently in New York, and designed to extend concessional financing arrangements to middle income countries hosting large refugee populations, is ground-breaking.

Collaboration with UNDP has also been strengthened through the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plans for Syrian refugees - implemented in partnership with host countries, and especially Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, whose efforts must be especially commended.

We should not forget that more than half of all school-age refugee children are not in education, and in too many countries, barriers on access to livelihoods and the labour market place refugees in a situation of extended dependency. But given the right policy environment, including through access to education, freedom of movement, and livelihoods opportunities, and with appropriate development investments, refugees and internally displaced people can contribute to the communities that host them, and become socio-economic assets.

Together with development agencies and financial institutions, we are therefore building the evidence base to support the inclusion of refugees in national services and development plans, as I have recently seen in Uganda. Several host countries have already set positive precedents. In this context, we are also actively pursuing partnerships with the International Labour Organisation and the OECD, aimed at expanding refugee access to safe, decent work and economic opportunities.

As our fifth and last strategic direction, we aim to work more systematically across the entire spectrum of displacement. This means, to be clear, that we are strongly committed to a more decisive and predictable engagement with internally displaced people, in collaboration with OCHA and other partners, and within the established coordination mechanisms.

We have already stepped up our capacity - including through new guidelines and the revitalization of the relevant clusters. But more is needed. Our IDP engagement is still uneven across operations; our budget structure and financial processes can lead us to de-prioritise IDP operations; and we are sometimes simply too hesitant to engage. I have therefore asked the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations to lead a review of IDP responses globally, in order to better understand what needs to change to make our engagement more coherent and predictable.

Mr Chairman,

These five core directions will be underpinned by a reinvigorated commitment to partnerships and alliances, shaped by the outcomes of the World Humanitarian Summit. We are leveraging respective strengths and comparative advantages with agencies in the UN system. Partnerships with NGOs remain crucial. They are a key interlocutor in

defining and pursuing strategic priorities. Working with, and supporting national responders (in line with commitments made through the "Grand Bargain" process) continues to be central to our work. Last year we entrusted 38 percent of our budget to 938 partners, of whom more than two thirds were national authorities or national NGOs, and we hope to further accelerate this trend.

There is a growing recognition that forced displacement is now a global challenge for which we must mobilize a much broader range of actors. This allows us - among other things - to engage more decisively than ever before with the private sector. I very much welcome individuals and companies as increasingly prominent and visible partners. They are often well-positioned to drive policy change and influence public opinion. I applaud - among many other efforts - George Soros' recent pledge of half a billion dollars for companies, start-ups and other initiatives by refugees and migrants. It shows that business does not only bring money, but also technical expertise, creativity, and innovation. And this, distinguished delegates, can be another extraordinary factor of change.

Mr Chairman,

My predecessor, António Guterres, left a strong, effective organisation after ten years at its helm. Let me pay tribute to him for having steered UNHCR with exceptional skill and humanity through a period of unprecedented challenges; and for leaving behind an excellent group of senior managers, including Deputy High Commissioner Kelly Clements, and Assistant High Commissioners George Okoth-Obbo and Volker Türk. Let me take this opportunity to thank all Senior Management Committee members - who are here on the podium today - for their dedication, and the patient and effective support they provide to me every day.

Building on my predecessor's work, we have identified a number of areas in which our internal capacities and systems need to be further strengthened to be able to decisively pursue the core directions I have just described. Later this week, the Deputy High Commissioner will speak more extensively about these issues. I will flag only some crucial points.

Our internal processes have become heavy, and compliance with multiple instructions diverts attention from our direct engagement with people. There is a very urgent need to simplify procedures, processes and other management tools, while ensuring that we maintain the highest standards of accountability.

We will review our planning and resource allocation processes, building in a multi-year element based on the pilots already under way, and rewarding investment in solutions. We will soon start an overhaul of our results based management system to provide for a simplified framework. And we are strengthening and improving our oversight arrangements.

At the same time, in line with our "Grand Bargain" commitments, we will also pursue greater efficiencies, working with other agencies in needs assessments, in harmonising and simplifying reporting requirements, and in reducing procurement and logistics costs.

In parallel, we have started streamlining our policy development processes, to minimise the volume of prescriptive guidelines issued to the field. We have commissioned a review of UNHCR's three headquarters locations and regional service centres. This will assess the extent to which their functions align with our strategic directions, and are providing the best possible support to field operations.

I am also particularly keen to continue to invest in our proximity to refugees and other people of concern to us, through our network of 464 offices in 129 countries, often located in remote, inaccessible and insecure places. Please remember that almost half of our field staff live and work in high-risk locations and as such, we will continue to make robust investments in security risk management. In this respect I would like to single out the courage and dedication of our national colleagues, two of whom tragically lost their lives in attacks in Mogadishu in the past year.

We will pursue creativity and innovation, recognising that new technologies, ideas and approaches have a powerful role to play in advancing protection and solutions. We will accelerate the solid work already undertaken, expanding our range of partners - particularly with the private sector - and embedding innovation more prominently within our operations.

I want to highlight two key innovation areas. The first is to expand refugee access to mobile phone technology and the internet. For many refugees, connectivity is a key protection tool, without which their ability to access vital information, communicate with loved ones, develop key skills and stay in touch with the global community is substantially diminished.

The second is to significantly scale up cash-based interventions. Our goal is to fully institutionalise cash by 2020, and to this end, we are building robust support systems. We are already using cash in over 60 countries, ranging from multipurpose grants to sector-based support. Cash is becoming a key element of interface with refugees and displaced people - hence the importance for donors to sustain UNHCR's cash activities, and for UNHCR to carry them out effectively, in close cooperation with other players. We are discussing with our partners - especially WFP and UNICEF - how to enhance common cash transfer arrangements to avoid duplication and reduce costs.

We must also invest in strengthening capacities in data collection, management capacity and analysis, and in registration and biometrics - all critical protection tools, and indispensable to build the evidence base for the engagement of development actors.

And finally - based on our "People Strategy", which sets out a vision for addressing key human resources challenges over the next five years - we will continue to invest in our workforce, which now stands at more than 15,000 people - a 50% increase from five years ago - one third of whom are employed through affiliate workforce arrangements. Staffing

profiles will evolve to incorporate new skills and expertise. We will increase interagency secondments as a way to strengthen partnerships. And we are actively pursuing greater gender equity, diversity and inclusion.

I would of course be remiss if I did not also stress that developing the strategic directions that I have described, and the management tools that support them, require substantial financial contributions. We appreciate and value the strong support that donors provide to UNHCR, which has translated into an increase in our annual budgets to meet the crises of the last five years; and into a significant increase this year, for which I am particularly grateful.

However, UNHCR's funds available for 2016 currently stand at 3.76 billion USD - and this is 50% of our total funding requirements, just marginally better than the 42% reached by global humanitarian appeals. But even more worrying is the big difference in funding levels between operations, with those in Africa very poorly financed. Major displacement situations such as Somalia, South Sudan and the Central African Republic are all resourced at less than 20%, while our Syria and Europe operations - thanks also to the London conference - are both funded at 53%. This is an unacceptable disparity, and I call on donors to redress it as a matter of urgency.

Mr Chairman,

Last month's summit in New York marked a critical recognition that cooperation lies at the heart of the refugee protection regime, and placed the refugee issue at the centre of the international agenda for the first time in decades.

Migrants and refugees are distinct categories - with refugees unable to return home because of conflict or persecution, and holding a particular legal status as a result. In practice, however, the two groups are affected by many of the same factors, including overlapping root causes, exploitation by smugglers and traffickers, life-threatening risks along their journeys, and rising xenophobia.

Beyond its continued commitment to carry out its responsibilities in support of refugees, returnees, displaced and stateless people, UNHCR stands ready to contribute to the work required to address these common challenges. In this respect, I welcome the International Organisation for Migration to the United Nations family, and look forward to strengthening our collaboration.

The New York Declaration provides a powerful platform for change in the way the international community intends to engage in the refugee crises of the future. I wish to thank again Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon for the crucial legacy that he leaves behind with this important result, and for all his support to UNHCR over the years. The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework that accompanies the Declaration, for the first time, sets out a predictable blueprint for how this should happen. I am honoured that you have requested UNHCR to initiate and develop it.

This will be one of our central tasks in the next two years. We are ready to start immediately. I am appointing a dedicated team to take this forward, initially headed by Daniel Endres, Director of the Division of External Relations. We will work closely with states, the UN and other international organizations including the ICRC and the Red Cross movement, NGOs and civil society, academia and the business community, to apply this framework in specific situations, and to draw on this experience in developing a Global Compact on Refugees by 2018.

This is a moment of historic opportunity, which we must collectively grasp and translate into concrete action in support of refugees and the communities and States that host them - recognising that these States deliver a global public good, and that there is an international obligation to help them shoulder this responsibility.

Mr Chairman,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have laid out for you the core directions that UNHCR proposes to pursue during my mandate, and how we plan to build on the opportunity represented by the New York Declaration.

But our ability to do this rests on your engagement, collaboration and determination: to prevent conflicts from rising and spiraling into humanitarian disasters; to use all measures available to stop the terrible attacks on civilians happening every day; to ensure that the right to asylum, and rights in asylum, are respected; and to marshal the determination to find political solutions to the crises that generate so much suffering.

The challenges ahead are extraordinary, but - I am really convinced - can be addressed, if we all share this responsibility. This calls for dedication, commitment and courage even beyond this room. It is therefore time to reach out - to the volunteers who have rallied in solidarity as today's crises have unfolded; to the faith-based organisations and religious leaders setting an example through humility, compassion and practical action; to the small businesses offering donations, jobs and ideas; to the refugees and stateless people who are standing up to tell us their stories; and above all to the political leaders, security actors and development agencies who have the instruments and influence to address the causes of conflict and displacement.

I carry with me the principles, values and passion that brought me to refugee work more than three decades ago. Please know that you can count on my personal commitment and that of my colleagues at UNHCR.

We stand ready to work with you in addressing one of the great challenges of our times.

Thank you.

