

Speech by H.E Dr. Jamaher Anwary, Minister of Refugees and Repatriation, Afghanistan.

In the name of Allah, the most merciful and compassionate

Mr. Chairman

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, at the outset, I would very much like to thank Mr. Didier Burkhalter Federal Councillor of the Government of Switzerland, Mr. Antonio Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees and his representatives in the region who worked so hard to help make this conference a success, and finally all of you for attending this very important two day international conference aimed at seeking durable solutions for the protracted situation in which millions of Afghan refugees have spent over three decades in exile, mainly in Pakistan and Iran.

A special thanks to Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi who has kindly agreed to be the key note speaker. His presence today among us, as well as all his hard work and dedication during his tenure in Afghanistan as Special Representative of the Secretary General is so much appreciated.

Excellencies,

The return of nearly six million Afghans to their homeland since 2002, almost 25% of the current population of Afghanistan, has been a remarkable indication of the people's confidence in the country's future. Last year, 70,000 registered refugees repatriated from Pakistan and Iran. These six million returned home with the assistance of UNHCR and the governments in this region, making the Afghan voluntary repatriation programme the largest in the world.

Such a huge increase in the country's population in such a short time has definitely placed great pressure on the country's absorption capacity. We all know very well that the key to encouraging further repatriation, and also to stabilizing population movement, is economic and social development alongside peace and stability in Afghanistan. This concept is at the very heart of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan which was discussed in Dushanbe in March this year when the participants reiterated their determination to promote lasting confidence and partnership for the purpose of securing peace, stability and socio-economic progress in Afghanistan and the region. I am certain that during this conference, here in Geneva, you will reaffirm this determination and thereby reconfirm your support to Afghan refugees.

However, the volume of returns from both Iran and Pakistan has declined markedly in the last three years. This is understandable since the remaining refugees have been living outside their country for more than three decades; reintegrating back into their homeland will require them to face many challenges after such a long period.

Since 2002, my Ministry, together with UNHCR, has built almost 220,000 houses for the most vulnerable returnees. We have constructed more than 10,000 water points and provided cash grants to assist 4.6 million returnees with their immediate needs. However, our joint contributions to the reintegration process have been rather modest to date, and much work remains to be done if the hopes of the remaining 2.7 million refugees still living in Iran and Pakistan are not be disappointed.

Around 60 percent of all returned refugees continue to live below the standard of their fellow countrymen. They are struggling to find work; to provide housing for their families; to get medical care when needed; to enroll their children in school; and to find water that is safe to drink.

The scale and complexity of the challenges ahead require long term engagement. These cannot be addressed by humanitarian agencies and assistance alone. There is a need for a collective and comprehensive effort on the part of the Government which will need strong support for the national priority programmes that impact key reintegration challenges.

As I mentioned, there are more than 2.7 million registered Afghan refugees still living in Pakistan and Iran. My government is committed to helping those who want to return home. We continue to work closely with relevant ministries, UNHCR and other UN agencies to pave the way for returnees to return and successfully reintegrate. We are confident that many of our compatriots still in exile will come back home in future.

But while we continue supporting the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees, we also need to get it right supporting those that have already returned. There are many reasons why repatriation and reintegration in Afghanistan has slowed down - conflicts in some parts of the country, food insecurity, scarcity of land and shelter, limited access to education and healthcare and above all, the need to be able to earn a proper living.

(This is why my government, together with our key partners, in the international community is revising its reintegration strategy to target communities in areas of high return. It reflects a transition from focusing on humanitarian emergency assistance to also providing long-term development assistance in order to ensure sustainable reintegration.

This approach will further enhance our capacity to assist Afghan returnees. It will create conditions conducive for their return - conditions which will help them get back on their feet, so that they don't have to leave the home they return to in search of work.

To help returning refugees reintegrate back into their former communities, the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation and UNHCR have been working the past 10 months to bridge the gap between humanitarian aid and long-term development assistance. Community-based interventions in provinces of high return are being identified. I hope that during today's discussion, you will endorse this regional approach aimed at voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration and support to host countries as the beginning of a multi-year strategy for Afghan refugees in the region.

This strategy is not creating parallel structures, but is firmly in line with the Afghan National Development Strategy embodied in the National Priority Programmes. In February this year, I presented this strategy to the council of ministers which endorsed it. The President then directed them to support its implementation. To date, my Ministry has signed Memorandums of Understanding with several ministries clearly identifying their responsibilities in meeting the needs of returning Afghan refugees. Through this process my Government is positioning itself to discuss

how these needs can be integrated into the National Priority Programs (NPPs) during the upcoming Tokyo Conference.

Excellencies,

The people and Governments of Iran and Pakistan have generously hosted Afghans over the past few decades, and we are very grateful for their hospitality. We also recognize the need for assisting host communities and to continue supporting voluntary repatriation.

We are happy to have worked so closely with the Governments of Iran and Pakistan to establish this -regional strategy, not only for those who have already returned home but also for those Afghans still living in these hosting countries.

My Government is looking forward to another very important conference being held in Ashgabat next week when all three of our countries will join the rest of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to discuss for the very first time enhancing protection of refugees in the Muslim World, and enhancing multi-lateral cooperation in resolving refugee situations. This conference will be looking at intensifying the search for durable solutions, as well as initiatives and conditions necessary for achieving sustainable solutions. The solutions strategy that we are discussing here today and tomorrow is very timely and will be presented at the OIC conference as a way forward.

Excellencies,

Let me conclude my remarks by thanking the international community, the international assistance agencies, and the NGOs for their generous support - support that I and my country hope will continue - support that is enabling my Government to help refugees and returnees rebuild their lives.

Our partnership with you is strong and enduring, and we are confident it will continue.

On behalf of the people of Afghanistan, I thank you.