

ITEM 3 (a) i

Introductory remarks by Valentin Tapsoba, Director, Regional Bureau
for Africa, for the overview of UNHCR's operations in Africa
68th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Executive Committee
of High Commissioner's Programme

Room XVIII, Palais des Nations, Geneva

Tuesday 14 March 2016

Good morning,

Chairperson,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This time last year, I signaled to you that the African continent had never before hosted such a large number of displaced people. One year on, I regret to stand before you to make the same statement - - that never before in its recent history has the African continent witnessed such a scale of displacement that has grown almost by another two million people compared to this time last year and brings the current population of the displaced to some 20 million people,

among them, some 11 million internally displaced persons and over 5.5 million refugees. The statistics and trends do not do justice to the real stories of the two million men, women and children who have left everything behind in search of safety across borders in the past 12 months.

We are concerned that some of the major crises in Africa are worsening. In July last year, events in Juba triggered a new wave of refugees from South Sudan into neighboring countries. By the end of the year, over half a million people had left South Sudan. The refugee outflow from South Sudan continues unabated with an average of 3,000 people crossing South Sudan's borders into neighbouring countries every day: effectively, two people every minute.

Chairperson,

By the time I conclude this brief statement, 20 more South Sudanese refugees will have been received by Uganda alone, 12 of them will be children, too many of them will be malnourished.

South Sudan's neighbours have continued to extend the traditional hospitality and generosity to people fleeing from South Sudan in need of International Protection. These countries are to be commended, particularly in a world where one of the corner-stones of international protection - - the right to seek asylum, is increasingly tested.

A combination of prolonged conflict and drought have fueled food insecurity and famine which is affecting millions of people in Africa.

Many of these people are now driven from their homes due to an intricate mix of these factors. 2017 has already recorded, in its first three months, the largest number of famines in history. Four countries in the world have declared famine - - three of them are on the African continent and are ravaged by war and conflict. As you may know, some 20 million people living in parts of Northern-Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen are facing famine. At the same time, large areas of the East and Horn of Africa, Central Africa and the West African regions are facing food insecurity. We thank donors for the generous support so far provided to Africa and appeal for further support to ensure that UNHCR and its partners, including WFP, can save lives. No child should go to bed with an empty stomach!

Chairperson,

Today, we are faced with a situation where the humanitarian needs outstrip the available funds. Together with hundreds of my colleagues working in deep field locations, we are increasingly unable to face the refugee mother who walks for days, with hungry children, on an often-dangerous journey towards safety and survival across her country's border only to find that her children, though safe, will continue to experience hunger in the country of asylum. In the last year, ten refugee operations in Africa have experienced food ration cuts affecting approximately two million refugees. Food rations have been dramatically cut – in some cases by half – in large operations including in Cameroon, Chad, Kenya, South Sudan and Uganda. In

many refugee sites in Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Sudan there are reports of acute malnutrition and anaemia is greater than 40 per cent. These are the immediate term effects to funding shortfalls. In the long-term, thousands of children face stunted growth which will have a direct bearing on the development of their communities and countries.

Chairperson,

After describing the complexity and the scale of the tragedies being faced across the region, allow me to highlight how Africa continues to provide a fine example to the world in the way these crises are approached and managed. The commitments made by African governments at the Leader's Summit in New York last September do not only show generosity, but true solidarity. Most importantly, they show political will to enable millions of refugees to live their exile in dignity. The Government of Cameroon, Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia made political commitments for the future of their neighbouring countries and for the region as a whole. Many of these Governments have paid particular attention to the provision of education to refugee children. This is a sign of awareness that a peaceful future for Africa can only be built on education.

It is not a coincidence that all the pilots for the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework are in the Africa Region. In fact, this is

an acknowledgement that the innovative approaches pioneered by some African governments, with support from host communities, donors, as well as UNHCR and partners, have something to teach to the United Nations and to the whole world. We should not forget, however, Chairperson, that these extraordinary, brave examples should not be taken for granted and should instead be supported and nurtured to continue to flourish.

Chairperson,

With life-saving activities and emergency responses taking up to 70 per cent of UNHCR's resources for operations in Africa, it is a real challenge to address the pressing need for solutions. We recognize however that this is a challenge we must overcome, if we want to be strategic and long-sighted. Against the backdrop of diminishing resources, we must do extra work to bring to a definitive closure some of the refugee situations in the region - such as the Angolan and the pre-1998 Rwandan refugee situations- and invest our energies in finding durable solutions for some of the other protracted situations. We are convinced of the need to find medium-term solutions pending durable solutions to some of the more intractable situations.

While we remain strongly optimistic that the outcome of upcoming elections in at least 10 countries will uphold democratic principles, and the will of the people will be respected and will prevail, we at the same time remain cognizant of the need for preparedness for any

eventualities. Although matters of prevention may go outside the immediate remit of UNHCR's mandate, we strongly appeal to those with the voice, the standing and responsibility to do their utmost, to prevent a breakdown of law and order, prevent conflict and ensure that people are not forced to leave their homes due to fear of persecution or human rights abuses. Solutions are so elusive, we must prevent conflict in the first place.

Chairperson,

In the general picture of an otherwise solid protection landscape in the region, we cannot avoid expressing concern for the increase in the cases of threats to asylum and for the episodes of xenophobia that continue to be reported. The threat of terrorism has understandably shaken some of the most solid national asylum systems in Africa. However, I should today acknowledge - and even praise - the remarkable willingness of governments to continue a dialogue with UNHCR on the measures to be put in place to address the challenges that large population movements may bring to national security. It is encouraging to see that even under the most challenging circumstances, African governments remain ready to discuss alternative and improved mechanisms to screen populations at borders, in line with their international obligations, while paying the utmost attention to safety of citizens. I pay tribute to these governments and wish to reassure them once again that UNHCR fully

understands the dilemmas they face - - the need to strike the right balance between international obligations and national security.

Chairperson,

It is again in many countries in Africa that we have seen the genesis of the new shift in assistance that the world discussed at large during the World Humanitarian Summit. Humanitarian and development actors are working together in supporting governments to face the effects of hosting millions of refugees. The engagement of regional multilateral banks in fragile situations and forced displacement is evolving with greater commitment for the allocation of resources. Our cooperation with the World Bank and the Africa Development Bank is being strengthened and we aim to develop appropriate strategies to guide our common engagement.

The partnership with development actors is not the only area UNHCR is working on expanding in the region: close cooperation with regional organizations is not only becoming a priority but a necessity. It must be recognized that the engagement of the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) (among others) in humanitarian issues is significantly pronounced. The upcoming Special Summit on Protection and Durable Solutions for Somali Refugees organized by IGAD in Nairobi at the end of March is a vivid example of a growing sense of responsibility taken by regional organizations with regard to

displacement and, most importantly, protection and solutions. The progress being made by African countries towards the goal of ending Statelessness by 2024 is remarkable and I should mention in particular the exemplary leadership of ECOWAS in this regard. I cannot conclude this reference to regional organizations without congratulating the new Chairperson of the African Union (H.E. Moussa Faki, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Chad) and the new Commissioners for their election. We look forward to working with them on the numerous important initiatives launched by the AU on humanitarian and migration issues.

Chairperson,

Patterns of human mobility have become increasingly complex in recent years, and refugee and migratory movements now intersect in a number of different ways. The movement of refugees and migrants is a complex and difficult phenomenon posing challenges to the world today. We must remember that the overwhelming majority of the mass mixed migration flows from African countries remains within the region and poses additional strain on governments and African communities. We should not forget that a phenomenon that is now being managed in Africa without being called a crisis, needs to be addressed looking at its root causes. It is somehow comforting to see that the world has realized this. It is however distressing to know that this was only realized when crises that have afflicted some regions for decades expanded to other continents. The humanitarian and

development communities are finally working together with donors in supporting regional organizations and institutions on management and, most importantly, on addressing the drivers of these movements. We all know that we need to do more and we need to assess very pragmatically the impact we are having, readjusting our policies until we find effective ways of truly addressing the reasons that push millions of people to leave their families, their homes and their countries, distinguishing carefully those who are forced to flee and those who move in search of a better future.

Chairperson,

A large part of my brief statement today was an attempt to recognize how African leaders, African Organizations, African Communities and African Donors are increasingly taking responsibility and making exceptional efforts to address their own displacement and protection challenges. Many of these efforts are not only useful in Africa but far beyond, simply because they do and should serve as an example to the world. These innovative efforts can however continue and succeed only if supported.

Too often in our everyday life we tend to pay attention to the problems that are most visible, although probably they are not the greatest. My appeal today is for the international community to continue to pay attention to crises that are often invisible and to

continue to reward millions of invisible heroes, who are trying their best to give a better future to Africa.

To know more about some of these heroes and the innovative projects they implement in Africa, I would like to invite you all to visit our Africa Shares Exhibition market place in in front of Room XXVI (26) here at the Palais and to participate in a Side Event on *Innovators in Exile* that will be held in room XI (11) starting at 13h15 today.

Thank you.