

Opening statement at the 72nd session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme

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Mr Vice-Chairperson, dear Selim,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Also on behalf of the Deputy High Commissioner, the Assistant High Commissioners, our directors and colleagues, welcome to the Executive Committee.

And I would be remiss if I didn't start by sending wishes of prompt recovery to our Chair, Ambassador Farani Azevêdo, so that she can be well and up and running as soon as possible.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we live in a difficult period. One where multiple crises erupt or worsen every day.

We see this with COVID-19, which has left no corner of the world untouched, showing, starkly, the interconnectedness of individuals. Where the health of someone on the other side of the earth affects mine. Yet in spite of knowing that it is in our own self-interest, we have failed to truly share vaccines.

We see it in the climate emergency, where our personal choices, our habits as individuals, as communities; where our consumption and production to feed an insatiable appetite for more is destroying the one planet we share. Yet, despite the urgency, we see insufficient action.

And all of us – and we at UNHCR in particular -- see it in a world where men fight men: and at what cost, in particular to women and children? How do we accept that every day children are maimed; women are raped; families are forced to flee; not by an act of God, but by the barrel of a gun? A conscious decision to shoot; to bomb; to destroy; to displace - with effects that shatter communities, countries, and regions.

Any one of us can see that we are heading in the wrong direction. All indicators are telling us to cooperate to prevent it. And yet we seem unable – or unwilling – to step off the paths we are currently on. Egoistic politics prevail. The approach based on 'me first; my country first' has been phenomenal in helping win elections, and catastrophic in forging effective and global responses to global threats - - and today it undermines the very ideals espoused in the United Nations Charter that seek to improve the lives of 'we the peoples'.

From our vantage point – that of forced displacement, of humanitarian and refugee crises – every day we see and feel the human consequences of these actions – or inactions – on millions of uprooted people and the communities hosting them: those which the “me first, my country first” slogans marginalize, stigmatize and exclude.

We see -- from our very specific perspective -- how the failure to deal equitably with the pandemic has left us in a world divided between inoculated and exposed, with disastrous consequences for people on the margins of society. Those working in informal sectors, as refugees do, were the first to lose their jobs, and poverty rates skyrocketed. Women suffer the most with increased reports of gender-based violence and countless girls unable to return to school. In Lebanon, for example, around 55 per cent of refugees were living below the extreme poverty line before the pandemic. Today around 90 per cent are – and 45 per cent of their Lebanese hosts have also fallen into poverty.

From our perspective we also see some of the dramatic consequences of decades of inaction to address the climate emergency, and the growing, multiple overlap between climate change and forced displacement. Some 90 per cent of refugees under UNHCR’s mandate and 70 per cent of internally displaced people are from countries most vulnerable to the climate emergency.

And of course we see how unchecked and unresolved conflicts drive a devastating rise in the global number of forcibly displaced – a number that has doubled in the last decade. One million children as we heard in the video have been born into exile in the past three years alone and countless others on the other end of life’s journey are denied the simple dignity of dying at home.

If these trends are not reversed by robust conflict resolution efforts, I fear the question will not be “if” we will reach 100 million forcibly displaced; but rather “when”.

Mr Vice-Chairperson,

Let me stay with conflicts for a moment, since this continues to be our greatest problem. The failure to make peace and find solutions aggravates the plight of the displaced.

Millions of Afghans have been uprooted for more than 40 years, and recent developments have created new challenges. I visited Afghanistan just last month. You have heard me (and many others in the aid communities) say that large-scale, unconditional humanitarian assistance must be mobilized now, immediately; and that meanwhile solutions need to be found quickly to prevent an implosion of public services and of the economy, while engaging constructively with the Taliban on key issues of rights, including women and minority rights. Failure to urgently implement these solutions – and we’re talking of weeks, not much longer – will aggravate the crisis. And though I am always very prudent in making predictions regarding population movements, I believe that such a deterioration will almost inevitably cause large internal and possibly external displacement.

I share the deep concern of neighbouring countries in this respect – especially Iran and Pakistan, whose hospitality of generations of Afghans is stretched to the limits after more than four decades, and of countries further afield, especially Turkey, which already hosts more than 300,000 Afghan refugees in addition to well over 3.5 million Syrian refugees. While I continue to count on these countries' generosity and support in case of fresh population movements, I join them in their plea that everything possible be done to prevent another massive Afghan refugee crisis from happening -- and to ensure that they – the host countries – receive more international assistance to strengthen their responses and preparedness.

Two other examples show how unresolved conflicts magnify situations of forced displacement and challenge the capacity of humanitarian organizations.

If the complex links between development, good governance, climate action and security are not addressed simultaneously, along with increased humanitarian assistance, people in the Central Sahel will continue to suffer the harsh consequences of a growing crisis, including forced displacement.

If the parties to the conflict in Ethiopia do not abandon a useless, devastating military confrontation in favour of political negotiations, the humanitarian crisis in Tigray and other regions will spiral out of control, with more forced displacement occurring inside and outside the country, in a context in which aid personnel face increasing obstacles and unacceptable difficulties, as proven by recent expulsions.

And in other places the absence of avenues towards solutions trap civilians in conflict, in desperate situations which humanitarian aid can alleviate but not solve - like in Yemen, or in the Democratic Republic of Congo's eastern provinces.

Mr Vice-Chairperson,

Instead of giving refuge to those fleeing wars caused by no fault of their own, we have – in some parts of the world – seen rejection: in the form of walls and violent pushbacks; in the refusal of powerful countries to rescue people at sea; in increasingly restrictive laws; in more detention, including of children; and in dangerous xenophobic rhetoric. I am very troubled, in this respect, by proposals to externalise or outsource asylum obligations to other countries, in fundamental breach of basic responsibility-sharing commitments. And we observe other worrying trends that put innocent lives at risk, including instances where States encourage refugees and migrants to move to other countries through dangerous means for purely political purposes, unrelated to their need for protection.

Don't get me wrong. I appreciate that so-called "mixed movements" are highly complex phenomena (we see it first-hand in places like Libya or Central America), and that States can - and must - manage their borders. Yet, the indiscriminate rejection of people crossing borders, including on public health or security grounds, is incompatible with the 1951 Refugee Convention and international norms. Well managed borders and access to asylum are not incompatible – quite the contrary. Good management does not preclude asylum claims from being heard in a fair and fast system; or those in need of

international protection from being admitted and helped. And those found not in need of international protection or deserving of other humanitarian considerations can be returned in full compliance with their human rights and dignity.

It is complicated, but not impossible. There are good options on the table. The Pact proposed by the European Commission presents a framework for European Union member states on how to address refugee flows and mixed movements. Certainly it is not perfect and will need constructive compromise, but it is possibly Europe's last chance to agree on a common system.

It is equally important to pursue that discussion concerning movements from and within Central America and Mexico. Our regional platform, MIRPS, offers one forum to craft responses and seek solutions and I thank States that participate and support it, while we continue our strong engagement with countries in the region, including the United States, on strengthening (and facilitating access to) asylum systems, stabilizing displacement flows, creating legal pathways and ensuring that international protection is granted to those who need it.

Mr Vice-Chairperson,

In previous years, I have reported on our efforts to seek solutions even when peacemaking may still be work in progress. The quest is also important in consideration of the heavy responsibility that hosts continue to bear in protecting and assisting refugees; this is the case for example with the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, the Burundian refugees in Tanzania and other countries, or the Somali refugees in Kenya and elsewhere. Stronger support to host countries must be coupled with redoubled efforts to find just, dignified and durable solutions at their source – in Myanmar, Burundi and Somalia in these cases.

Another example is provided by the Syrian refugee crisis. Many Syrian refugees tell us they are not yet ready to return, but some -- and a large number of displaced people -- have returned or are returning to their areas of origin in Syria, where the support they receive is minimal. Others hesitate to return because they do not wish to bring back their families to situations of poverty and deprivation. I appreciate the political complexity, but I would like to reiterate my plea for more humanitarian assistance and greater support to critical services and infrastructure like health and education to be provided inside Syria to those returning and to their communities. And we will continue to work with the Syrian Government to help remove other obstacles to return, including in the vital areas of safety, security and rights. In the meantime, I cannot overstate the importance of donors staying the course in supporting refugees and host communities in order to improve their lives and enable the continued generosity of countries that have protected and hosted Syrians for more than a decade, especially Turkey, Jordan Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt.

In some contexts, we have made progress. This is the case in South Sudan and Sudan where -- even if the situation remains fragile -- under the leadership of the two governments and IGAD, along with the support of the World Bank, the European Union and others, we are stepping up our response to enable

solutions for more than seven million refugees and displaced people in and from these two countries – voluntary return but also, in some cases, local integration. I recently visited Juba and Khartoum and was happy to observe the two governments' commitment to make progress on solutions, as enshrined in respective peace agreements – commitment that has already translated into national strategy and which must now extend to States in the region and to other partners and donors.

In other places, we have pursued temporary solutions in countries of asylum, pending voluntary repatriation or other permanent outcomes. They may be time-limited but they allow for protection and dignified lives in exile, strengthen social cohesion with host communities, and provide stability and opportunities.

That is what has been so exemplary about Colombia's decision to grant temporary protection status to over 1.7 million Venezuelans. While the benefits – right to stay, right to work, right to access social services like education and health – are obvious for Venezuelans in Colombia, the Colombian government has also highlighted the benefits to the State in terms of security and positive contributions to the national economy. And it is extremely encouraging that other countries in the region are now working to regularize or offer temporary protection to Venezuelan refugees and migrants – Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Peru, the United States and Uruguay. Meanwhile, IOM and UNHCR will continue to support them and other host States through a platform which now includes more than 300 partners, and in growing cooperation with international financial institutions.

It may sound like a paradox – but I do not believe it is – that I am advocating strongly for solutions to forced displacement at a time of multiple crises. In fact, I was happy that the report of the Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Internal Displacement has a strong focus on solutions. There are opportunities in places like Colombia, Mozambique and Iraq. UNHCR stands ready to provide its expertise and resources to pursue this important goal.

And we should not forget resettlement -- another solution which has been at painfully low levels in past years. For this reason, I welcome the US Administration's intention to further raise their resettlement quota to 125,000 refugees from next year. I am also grateful to those that have stayed the course, and maintained or increased lifesaving resettlement programmes, including Canada, Sweden, and Norway. I encourage all States to increase quotas and expedite departures, also as a gesture of responsibility sharing.

Many States have implemented other third country solutions or 'complementary pathways'. For example, Mexico and Italy (amongst others) welcome students, and Canada athletes. Australia, the United Kingdom and others enable skilled refugee workers to be paired with employers to access work permits. And the Dutch government pioneers remote processing of family reunification applications, enhancing the ability of refugees to integrate and thrive in their new communities. Much more is needed and possible. We are at the disposal of States to scale up these and other win-win opportunities for refugees and host countries.

I would be remiss, in speaking of solutions, if I did not note progress in the elimination of statelessness, as we mark 60 years of the 1961 Convention. I warmly welcome both Iceland and Togo's accession to the conventions and the work recently undertaken by other States like Chile, Kenya, Namibia and Uzbekistan to eradicate this preventable problem that continues to plague millions of people.

Ultimately, however, Mr Vice-Chairperson, the greatest opportunity for solutions comes when peace is achieved and countries of origin and asylum work together to find solutions for the displaced.

I am therefore grateful for the example set by the government of Côte d'Ivoire as well as those of Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania and Togo, which have demonstrated political will to implement a comprehensive roadmap for solutions for Ivorian refugees, some of whom have been displaced for decades. The aim is to promote further voluntary repatriation and reintegration of Ivorian refugees, and support the acquisition of permanent residency by (or naturalisation of) those wishing to stay in host countries.

This regional effort deserves the applause of the entire international community. And in light of the fundamental and durable changes in Côte d'Ivoire, Mr Vice-Chairperson, I am pleased to recommend a general cessation of refugee status for Ivorian refugees to take effect on 30 June 2022. *Et merci à la Côte d'Ivoire.*

Meanwhile, of course, UNHCR will continue to stand with Ivorians, and strengthen our support to States in the region as they implement the solutions strategy and cessation clauses, including helping them ensure that the required documentation is made available. I recommend strong donor support, including by development actors, for all countries concerned.

Mr Vice-Chairperson,

The Global Compact on Refugees was a critical moment in galvanising more and different help for refugees and their hosts. Since then we have seen the "whole of society" approach come to fruition in a number of areas, including in the more than 1,400 pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum in 2019, of which we will take stock at the High Level Officials Meeting in December.

Many outcomes of the Forum have been positive. The three regional platforms, for example – the MIRPS, which I have mentioned; the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees; and the IGAD Support Platform in the East and Horn of Africa – have proven useful in taking a regional approach to refugee responses and the search for solutions (including in times of crisis, such as in Afghanistan). They will be joined soon by a fourth platform which we are setting up to address the displacement situation related to the Central African Republic.

Most importantly, and no doubt also as a result of the Global Compact on Refugees, displacement is more firmly featured on the development agenda. The inclusion of refugees in the programmes and

interventions of development organizations has become increasingly relevant to realizing their own mandates for economic growth and poverty reduction. This has important consequences for our work because development actors, more and more, play an important role in meeting the medium and longer-term needs of refugees and host communities, which humanitarian assistance alone is ill-suited to address. It has also helped us improve data collection and evidence-based analysis of trends in forced displacement through the Joint Data Centre established in partnership with the World Bank.

This cooperation has helped the inclusion agenda – a centrepiece of the Global Compact and a key driver of pledges at the Forum. Governments which have accepted to receive displacement-related development assistance have been able to better include refugees in national programmes and services until durable solutions are found. These investments, in turn, have lifted the living conditions not just of refugees, especially in protracted crises, but also of host communities, often helping develop remote areas and invest in infrastructure that will remain once refugees return home.

The World Bank alone has committed more than \$4 billion in its IDA-18 and 19 rounds. The InterAmerican Development Bank has brought sizeable resources in support of countries hosting Venezuelans. The African and Asian Development Banks are engaged in supporting countries hosting refugees in their respective geographical areas.

And it should be clear that these are additional resources, which complement humanitarian assistance and the important interventions of our UN partners in strengthening the resilience of displaced populations (like WFP's food aid for refugees, or the "Blueprint" joint project with UNICEF). Neither do they detract from development aid destined for any specific country. And here I make a special plea to development actors – please increase (as the World Bank has done) the share of grants made available to refugee hosting countries so that both host communities and refugees can be included in socio-economic support packages. All have suffered the consequences of COVID-19 and require support to help them and protect social cohesion.

Another remarkable feature – also stemming in several ways from efforts made through the Compact and the Forum – is the unprecedented growth in support from the private sector and private individuals, in spite of COVID-related challenges. Not only do we increasingly benefit from the expertise and know-how of businesses, but around 11 per cent of our income last year came from private donors, exceeding US\$535 million. The number of private individuals who gave to UNHCR has doubled since 2015 and now stands at nearly three million donors. This is a remarkable demonstration of solidarity and a clear message to governments as well – you do have, among your citizens and voters, many who care for refugees!

This important funding complements that of governments who have continued to provide support to UNHCR. Last year, we reached close to an unprecedented US\$5 billion in total income, for which I am grateful, especially to our largest donors, first of all the United States of America, as well as the European Commission and Germany, and to donors who continue faithfully to provide unearmarked donations.

And there are other, significant examples of Forum-related successes. For instance, States, development actors, educational institutions and other partners have come together to support the access of refugees to tertiary education. I am particularly pleased to report that -- in spite of the pandemic -- we have seen an increase from one per cent – only one per cent – of young refugees enrolled in higher education just a few years ago to five per cent in 2021. While we are far from our goal of 15 per cent enrollment, this rapid increase shows not only what can be quickly achieved through partnerships but also why we must not lose momentum in investing in refugee education.

Mr Vice-Chairperson,

While we have been responding to COVID-19 and the consequences of conflict, we have not relented in better responding to -- and preparing for what will inevitably cause increased displacement: the climate emergency.

For years we have been witness to climate displacement. Not only due to extreme weather events like floods or cyclones, but also desertification, reduced or erratic agricultural production and other events which lead to tensions -- and often conflict -- over scarce resources, with predictable consequences for those who have done the least to harm the planet and yet pay the biggest price.

To better structure our engagement, UNHCR published its first Strategic Framework on Climate Action in April, articulated in three pillars:

First, support States with law and policy on climate related displacement.

Second, strengthen operations – both to respond to adverse effects of climate change, and to do so through more environmentally friendly responses that at the same time help the displaced and their hosts resist climate shocks, and ensure that we better anticipate and prepare for future, climate-induced population movements.

And third, reduce our own carbon footprint.

Work is already underway. For example, we contribute to reforestation in Cameroon, Ethiopia and Bangladesh. We use new shelter products that are better for the environment and more appropriate for local preferences (and local procurement): like in Yemen – a project we have worked on with this year's Nansen Award winner - and in Bangladesh. We have expanded solar solutions and found that, for example, initial costs for solarizing boreholes in Chad will be recouped in savings on diesel costs in just one and a half years. And we use new predictive technologies to better prepare us and the broader aid system for future displacement, like in the Sahel.

We are also taking innovative steps to reduce our own emissions and are working with the private sector to supply clean and cheap energy to offices. Thanks to Sweden's SIDA and Germany's BMZ, we

have established the innovative Green Financing Facility -- 60 per cent more efficient than traditional grants in enabling a transition to renewable energy. This will allow us to meet our ambitious goal of moving all our 530 field offices to clean energy by 2030. We will also transition much of our global fleet of 6,000 vehicles to electric cars by the same year. I strongly encourage other donors to join this effort.

Mr Vice-Chairperson,

We have continued to focus as well on internal matters, including -- as a priority -- those concerning integrity. Fighting sexual exploitation and abuse remains critical for UNHCR and for me personally, as does stamping out sexual harassment. They are part of a larger discussion inside UNHCR regarding other, important dynamics surrounding our efforts to achieve gender parity, promote diversity and inclusion in our workforce, and avoid any form of racism and discrimination.

And while regionalization was a very visible component of our transformation, with geographical bureaux moving to their respective regions just before the pandemic, much work also has been done on reforming processes and systems, which are key to efficient decentralization and effective operations.

Decision making is being therefore decentralized as close to the points of delivery as possible, while being coupled with better risk management and oversight.

A suite of improved interfaces will link human resources, finance and other systems together to better support operations. Other reforms are gradually lessening the time UNHCR personnel and partners -- especially NGOs -- spend on paperwork so they can focus on substantive work.

The UNHCR data and digital transformation is a "whole of organization" effort, helping inform decision making, including as part of the improved planning and budgeting processes, which are now driven from the ground up in order to ensure better linkages between resource allocation and impact.

Which brings to me to my last point.

Nearly five years ago, I launched UNHCR's five Strategic Directions: protect, respond, empower, include, solve. They helped spell out more clearly how we deliver on our mandate.

Their original span extends until the end of 2021. They remain effective in defining the implementation of the mandate, so we will renew them for another five years in a document which we plan to issue before the end of year. The evolution of current challenges, however, calls for greater investments in a number of specific areas, which we will describe in the same document and which will help us better guide our planning, budgeting, monitoring and reporting. We will reach out to you and other partners for further discussions in this respect.

Mr Vice-Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen,

As you know, UNHCR is used to working in crises. Throughout our 70 years, we have been on the frontlines of many emergencies, standing with refugees, the displaced, the stateless. We have always strived to protect and assist them, and find solutions to their plight.

I would like to pay tribute to UNHCR colleagues – past and present – who have given so much in this service. This has often come at great sacrifice -- in recent months, tragically, we have had to mourn the loss of 18 colleagues to COVID-19 alone. And I would be remiss, of course, if this tribute did not include our close partners working for UN agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, national and international NGOs, and especially an increasing cadre of community-based and often women-led and refugee-led organizations. In spite of today's challenges, and with your support, we will not be deterred from our mission and the ultimate goal of preventing displacement and helping the displaced return to their homes or build new ones.

As I said at the start, we face terrifying challenges. We sometimes feel powerless and besieged. But we must not lose heart, and take inspiration instead from the courage and resilience which uprooted people continue to show -- think of the refugee athletes who triumphed over every adversity and competed at the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games; think of the sacrifices that parents in exile make to give an education to their children; think of the displaced mothers who often risk their lives to protect their babies during flight.

They are living examples of why we must not give up. Of why we must address the challenge of forced displacement -- and all other global challenges -- patiently, persistently, systematically: as the UN Charter says, "by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods".

None of us can do this alone. But if we work together -- together! -- with courage and humility, and in a true spirit of solidarity, putting the common good before individual and national considerations, then we have a chance to succeed.

Thank you.