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Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Seventy-first session

Summary record of the 735th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Friday, 9 October 2020, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve..... (Belgium)
later: Ms. Farani Azevêdo..... (Brazil)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Meetings of the Standing Committee in 2021

Consideration of the provisional agenda of the seventy-second session of the Executive Committee

1. **Ms. Keah** (Rapporteur) said that she wished to draw delegations' attention to draft decisions 2 to 7. Decision 2 on the revision 11 of the financial rules for voluntary funds administered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees endorsed a review of the impact of the proposed changes to the rules on the budgetary structure and the ability of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to deliver on its mandate, to be presented to the Executive Committee no later than 2025.
2. Decision 3 on the programme of work of the Standing Committee in 2021 reaffirmed the traditional framework for the programme of work as established in the 2004 decision on working methods. It also authorized the Committee to add or delete items, as appropriate, and requested member States to meet in December 2020 to prepare a detailed workplan.
3. The following three decisions were procedural. Decision 4 addressed observer participation in meetings of the Standing Committee and decision 5 adopted the standard provisional agenda for the seventy-second session of the Executive Committee. Decision 6 dealt with the participation of intergovernmental organizations in private meetings of the Executive Committee.
4. **The Chair** said that Guatemala, Honduras, Iraq, Malawi, Panama and Ukraine had made official requests to participate in the meetings of the Standing Committee as observers. He suggested that the names of those States should be added to the agreed text of draft decision 4.
5. *It was so decided.*
6. **Ms. Keah** (Rapporteur) said that she had several takeaways from her work on the Executive Committee's process of negotiating conclusions: persons of concern to UNHCR were the reason for the process, whose aim was to provide policy guidance on international protection and solutions; the age-old adage "where there is a will, there is a way" held true, especially when the lockdown had scuttled plans for consultations on the multi-year workplan, which had then needed to be conducted virtually; the 2020 process had reaffirmed the importance of the rules-based international system; and its successful completion, despite the difficulties posed by the pandemic, was an immense victory for multilateralism.
7. Decision 7 on the multi-year workplan for the Executive Committee's conclusions in 2021–2022 reaffirmed the important role played by the Committee in forging consensus on issues, policies and strategies related to international protection and durable solutions. Under the decision, it had been agreed to explore the following themes with a view to negotiating Executive Committee conclusions: international protection and durable solutions in the context of a public health emergency; and mental health and psychosocial support.
8. **The Chair** said that he took it that the Executive Committee wished to adopt the draft decisions.
9. *It was so decided.*

Election of officers

10. **Ms. Mendoza Agudelo** (Colombia) nominated Ms. Farani Azevêdo (Brazil) for the office of Chair of the Executive Committee.
11. **Mr. Macieira** (Portugal) seconded the nomination.
12. *Ms. Farani Azevêdo (Brazil) was elected Chair of the Executive Committee by acclamation.*
13. **Mr. Mehboob Sultan** (Pakistan) nominated Mr. Baddoura (Lebanon) for the office of first Vice-Chair of the Executive Committee.

14. **Ms. Moussa** (Egypt) seconded the nomination.
15. *Mr. Baddoura (Lebanon) was elected first Vice-Chair of the Executive Committee by acclamation.*
16. **Mr. Chemakh** (Algeria) nominated Ms. Ahmed Hassan (Djibouti) for the office of second Vice-Chair of the Executive Committee.
17. **Ms. Farani Azevêdo** (Brazil) seconded the nomination.
18. *Ms. Ahmed Hassan (Djibouti) was elected second Vice-Chair of the Executive Committee by acclamation.*
19. **Mr. Andersen** (Norway) nominated Mr. Schotten (Germany) for the office of Rapporteur.
20. **Ms. Keah** (Kenya) seconded the nomination.
21. *Mr. Schotten (Germany) was elected Rapporteur by acclamation.*
22. **Ms. Farani Azevêdo** (Brazil) said that staff members of the Office had delivered on its mandate throughout the pandemic, sometimes at great cost to themselves. The people of concern to UNHCR could not be in better hands.
23. As Chair-elect, she wished to assure members of the Executive Committee of her commitment to facilitating constructive discussion. Such discussion should be informed by the knowledge that, as the High Commissioner had noted, a pandemic of poverty was emerging from the ongoing public health crisis.

Adoption of the report of the seventy-first session of the Executive Committee

(document without a symbol, distributed in the meeting room)

24. **Ms. Keah** (Rapporteur), introducing the draft report of the seventy-first session of the Executive Committee, said that sections I and II of the report provided an overview of the session. A paragraph in section I would be amended to reflect the election of the Executive Committee's new officers.
25. The seven decisions that had been made during the session could be found in section III. Annexed to the draft report was the Chair's summary of the general debate. Once the report was adopted, it would be submitted to the Third Committee of the General Assembly for consideration.
26. **The Chair** asked whether there were any comments on the text of the draft report.
27. **Mr. Baghaei Hamaneh** (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that he wished to know what actions were being referred to in the passage from the Chair's summary of the general debate in which it was noted that concern had been expressed about the actions taken by some States that hampered the humanitarian efforts of host countries.
28. **The Chair** said that the summary, for which he alone was responsible, was an account of general issues that had been raised during the general debate. The passage in question referred in general terms to concerns that had been expressed. Further detail was unnecessary. In any event, all statements that had been made during the general debate would be posted in full online.
29. **Mr. Baghaei Hamaneh** (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that the meaning of the passage should be clear. His delegation would welcome the opportunity to suggest wording that would help avoid ambiguity in the report.
30. **The Chair** said that he had read out the summary two days earlier and that it was not a negotiated document that could be amended.
31. **Mr. Baghaei Hamaneh** (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that delegations had every right to expect that their main concerns would be reflected in the summary. It seemed, however, that there was some reluctance to broach the issue that the Iranian delegation, echoed by other delegations, had raised, namely the problems unilateral sanctions and economic embargoes posed for countries that hosted refugee populations and for

humanitarian operations in those countries. A clear reference should be made to the seriousness of that issue.

32. **Mr. Damiani Pellegrini** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that, like the Iranian delegation, his delegation found it astonishing that the Chair's summary of the general debate made no mention of the issue of unilateral coercive measures, which had been raised by several delegations. That omission should be rectified.

33. **Ms. Hansen** (Secretary of the Executive Committee) said that the Chair's summary was an annex to the report and that it was only a part of the official record of the meetings held during the session. There would also be summary records of the meetings, and, as had been noted, the statements made by delegations would be posted online. Delegations were simply being asked to endorse by consensus a procedural report.

34. **The Chair** said he hoped that, with that explanation, the report could be adopted.

35. **Mr. Baghaei Hamaneh** (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that he struggled to understand how the explanation addressed his delegation's request. His delegation, which represented a country that was dealing with one of the world's most protracted refugee situations, had voiced a serious concern that should be reflected in the Chair's summary no less clearly than the concerns voiced by other delegations.

36. **The Chair** proposed that the annex should be withdrawn and that the report should be adopted without it.

37. **Mr. Baghaei Hamaneh** (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that, if no other solution could be found, his delegation would support the Chair's proposal for the Executive Committee to adopt the report of the seventy-first session without the annex. However, he wished to point out that sanctions represented a grave injustice in which UNHCR should not be complicit. Only the previous day, a further round of sanctions had been levied against the Islamic Republic of Iran. It was important to bear in mind that sanctions were not merely empty gestures but measures that resulted in death. The refugee crisis in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, for instance, was clearly being driven by the unilateral coercive measures imposed on that country by the United States of America.

38. **The Chair**, speaking through Ms. Hansen (Secretary of the Executive Committee), owing to technical problems, said he took it that the Executive Committee wished to adopt the report of the seventy-first session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme without the annex.

39. *The report of the seventy-first session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme, as amended, was adopted.*

Closing of the session

40. **Mr. Grandi** (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), speaking via video link, said that he wished to thank the outgoing Chair, Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve; the new Chair, Ms. Farani Azevêdo of Brazil; the first Vice-Chair, Mr. Baddoura of Lebanon, the second Vice-Chair, Ms. Ahmed Hassan of Djibouti; the new rapporteur, Mr. Schotten of Germany; and the Secretary, Ms. Hansen. He also wished to pay tribute to all UNHCR staff and humanitarian colleagues who had died of coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

41. On 4 October 2020, the day before the first meeting of the current session, an act of brutal violence had taken place in Burkina Faso, where an armed group had attacked a convoy carrying 46 displaced persons, killing 25 of the men and leaving 1 for dead. While the Executive Committee had been debating every day, people around the world had been killed, children had been displaced and basic human rights had been violated.

42. The Executive Committee had heard how the COVID-19 pandemic had adversely affected the mental health of displaced persons and the education of refugee children. It had heard that the economic consequences of the pandemic were worsening and that food insecurity was spreading and affecting displaced persons. In that regard, it was hoped that the Norwegian Nobel Committee's decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize to the World Food Programme would draw more attention and resources to the issue of food security.

43. Noting that many delegations had spoken about the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls, he said that it was necessary to act urgently to protect women and girls and ensure that they could exercise all their rights. It was also essential to heed the call made by the Prime Minister of Fiji for urgent action to tackle the climate crisis.

44. It was heartening to note that many delegations had referred positively to the global compact on refugees and the pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum. Many States had delivered on their pledges or were in the process of delivering on them. Frequent mention had been made of the European Commission's proposal for a new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which European Union member States were encouraged to use as an opportunity to enhance responsibility-sharing within and by the European Union.

45. Many countries had continued to ensure access to asylum while protecting their populations against the spread of COVID-19. A number of delegations had spoken of the usefulness of technology in achieving those goals and of the importance of including refugees and displaced persons in health-care measures adopted in response to the pandemic.

46. Many host countries had rightly called for greater humanitarian resources. In that regard, donors were urged to continue providing support, not only for the rest of 2020 but also in 2021 and beyond. Unprecedented levels of financial support had been provided by development actors and international financial institutions such as the World Bank Group, whose COVID-19 support programmes were benefiting 111 countries. It was gratifying to note the number of countries that had announced plans to make greater use of resettlement and complementary pathways, which provided a vital lifeline to refugees. However, such measures should not be seen as a substitute for States' international legal obligations to ensure the right to apply for asylum on their territory.

47. UNHCR was firmly opposed to calls for the externalization of asylum procedures as such a measure would be contrary to the law and offer no practical solutions to the problems that forced people to flee their countries. Rather than focusing their efforts on managing displacement, States were urged to place greater emphasis on preventing and resolving conflicts.

48. As a number of delegations had pointed out, the preferred option of many refugees was to be repatriated. However, decisions to return refugees must be voluntary and should be implemented only when the situation in their home countries made repatriation feasible as a long-term solution. Several delegations had referred to voluntary repatriation within the framework of a tripartite agreement supported by UNHCR. In such contexts, UNHCR should be seen, not as a blind guardian of absolute principles, bent on blocking repatriation, but as a partner in the search for the most just, sustainable and effective solutions. States were urged to depoliticize the issue of refugees and forced displacement. Refugees were already the victims of political failure and should not be used by States to settle scores between them.

49. In coordination with its partners, UNHCR would continue to lead efforts to protect internally displaced persons and would engage with the High-level Panel on Internal Displacement to find solutions to their plight. UNHCR would also strive to support States' efforts to end statelessness in line with the objectives of the global campaign to end statelessness within a decade.

50. *Ms. Farani Azevêdo (Brazil) took the Chair.*

51. Following an exchange of courtesies, the Chair declared closed the seventy-first session of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

The meeting rose at 11.35 a.m.