

17 OCTOBER 2023 | BANGKOK, THAILAND

Opening Speech of the High-Level Meeting on Rohingya Refugees by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Mr. Filippo Grandi

Good morning, everybody.

Honourable ministers, Ambassadors, Dear Colleagues and Guests.

Let me first of all, really thank the United Kingdom and the United States for convening this meeting alongside UNHCR at this very important juncture.

And welcome the delegates of countries that are hosting Rohingya refugees, particularly Bangladesh. Thank you very much, Minister, for being with us also on the panel, but also India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

Like I said yesterday to government interlocutors, we are happy that you allowed us to convene this meeting in beautiful Bangkok.

Over six years ago, the world watched in horror as hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people, as you all remember, sought safety in Bangladesh in the span of a few months. Actually of a few days, literally.

The unprecedented influx of refugees in such a short period of time was met by the extraordinary generosity of Bangladesh and the world at large.

I remember vividly how Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina opened Bangladesh's borders and welcomed the refugees.

I remember very well I visited literally a few days after this had started. I remember Bangladeshi farmers and fishermen opened up their homes to provide refuge to the Rohingya and share their limited resources with those fleeing violence and discrimination.

It was a significant, exemplary gesture of humanity.

But governments, the United Nations, NGOs, donors must also take credit for saving the lives of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees in subsequent years.

If any of you, as I think, perhaps the majority, have visited Cox's Bazar, Bhasan Char, you will have seen the amazing work that has been done by the government of Bangladesh and by many supporters in the past few years.

But today we are facing new challenges. The refugee situation is becoming very prolonged.

Support is increasingly difficult to mobilize, especially amidst, as we've just discussed, so many other competing crises.

So, we must strengthen the focus on solutions. Difficult as this may be.

That's why I wish to thank Indonesia in particular, for keeping the Rohingya issue on the agenda during their Chairmanship of ASEAN.

And I want to wish all refugee hosting countries and other regional actors who are engaging on this issue in a concrete and principled manner.

The absence of hope, unfortunately, is causing growing desperation among the Rohingya community and forcing them to undertake the threatening onward journeys at the hands of unscrupulous people.

Journeys that have increased by 360% within just one year, and many are reportedly lost at sea and tragically presumed dead.

I am grateful to countries in the region that allow refugees to disembark and seek safety.

I think we just heard of a boat that Indonesia was allowed to disembark in Aceh, so many thanks for that. It's not a solution to the phenomenon, but at least it saves life.

And we know that more collective action and leadership are needed to prevent these tragedies. And I urge states in the region to utilize existing fora like the Bali process, for example, to address such movements, not only from the point of view of interdiction and controls, but also through what I would call a protection lens, including through better rescue at sea arrangements.

We must also continue to ensure that humanitarian needs are met.

The 2023 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh, that's the main humanitarian appeal around this issue remains only 42% funded as of October.

This is abysmally low compared to just two years ago. This used to be a fairly well-funded appeal, but in the last couple of years it has become more difficult to mobilize resources.

We, the humanitarian actors, the government of Bangladesh, have taken immense strides in improving efficiencies, ensuring greater transparency, and enhancing the accountability for the resources that we receive.

And despite the generosity of donors, however, at this juncture, children under the age of five are indeed at risk of reaching emergency levels of malnutrition in the coming months, just to give you a dramatic example.

Similarly, one should not forget that humanitarian and protection needs of Rohingya refugees in India, in Indonesia, in Malaysia, in Thailand itself must not be forgotten.

But humanitarian funding, we all agree, provides only temporary relief.

Educating refugee children, upskilling refugee youth, allowing them to work will permit them eventually to return home and rebuild their lives in a sustainable manner.

Contrary to what some may believe, all of these investments do not encourage refugees to remain in exile indefinitely, but they can ensure that refugees become agents of change.

They can help protect the environment, contribute towards social harmony, and even be tomorrow's leaders in their own community.

I'm therefore delighted that the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, private sector partners have joined us today.

You bring in expertise and perspectives, resources that we can all benefit from as we enter, hopefully a new phase of the response.

Just in this region, Japan and the Philippines have also begun offering Complementary Pathways that allow refugees to study or to work.

And this emerging, still small, but emerging responsibility sharing mechanisms must be expanded.

Third, countries solutions are also a possibility. Limited, but important.

I am very grateful to the United States, not only because it remains by far the largest donor to the humanitarian operation, but also because, together with Australia, Canada and New Zealand, they lead resettling refugees from the region.

Like I said, resettlement is not the solution for most Rohingya refugees, but it does help the most vulnerable.

But the most important point is that Rohingya refugees in the region still tell us that they want to go home when it is safe to do so.

We must therefore and first of all, uphold their right to return and support efforts to create conditions for the safe, voluntary, dignified, sustainable repatriation of the Rohingya refugees.

Sustaining efforts that batter the well-being of all communities in Rakhine State in Myanmar. In line with the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine a few years back. This is ever more critical.

UNDP and UNHCR have implemented almost a hundred quick-impact projects in the last few years through which community infrastructure has been rehabilitated.

Income generation has been supported and to an extent, although it's very difficult, peaceful coexistence has been contributed to. And important as well in such a climate fragile context. Environmental damage has been to an extent mitigated.

These projects, small as they may have been, have already benefited. We estimate about 66,000 people so far from all communities remaining in Rakhine state and together with other partners in Myanmar, we need unimpeded and predictable access to all those in need to expand these and other programs.

Ministers, Ambassador and Dear Guests and Colleagues,

Today we have an opportunity but also a challenge.

No one should feel alone in addressing this crisis, particularly Bangladesh, as the largest host country for Rohingya refugees.

We need a collective effort geared towards sustainable engagement. The Global Compact on Refugees provides a framework for engagement and the means of building political will and internal national solidarity.

The Compact calls on the international community to ease the pressures faced by host countries, to enhance safe refugee self-reliance, to create conditions for return, to expand third countries solutions.

The Global Refugee Forum, which UNHCR and others will convene in Geneva this December in a few weeks, gives us an important multilateral and multi-stakeholder moment.

I urge you all to consider how on the road to this forum we can collectively and imaginatively address the plight of the Rohingya and alleviate the responsibilities borne by those communities that are so generously hosting them.

I hope we can build the political will and pave the way for commitments that will advance solutions and enhance protection and resilience through what we would call a multi-stakeholder pledge for Rohingya refugees.

At the Global Refugee Forum, you are all invited to participate in this pledge.

We owe this to the refugees whose dignity is under assault, and to their hosts, which have been unstinting in providing this global public good.

I wish you all a successful day, and I hope to see all of you in Geneva this December for the Global Refugee Forum, where the outcomes of today will result hopefully in concrete collective action.

Thank you.