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Summary record of the 744th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Friday, 8 October 2021, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Mr. Barros Figueirôa (Brazil)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

In the absence of Ms. Farani Azevêdo (Brazil), Mr. Barros Figueirôa (Brazil) took the Chair.

Other statements

1. **Ms. Meynet** (Staff Council) said that she wished to share the main concerns of staff of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) around the world and the objectives that would guide the work of the Staff Council over the coming years. Humanitarian work continued to be complicated by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, extreme weather patterns and political strife. Despite the challenges, however, the UNHCR workforce had delivered in some of the most difficult and remote field locations in the service of their main objective: to serve and protect persons of concern. Such dedication took a toll on physical and mental well-being, however. Special tribute should be paid to colleagues in Afghanistan, in particular national staff; the Staff Council would continue to advocate at all levels for the application of the duty of care. With respect to the return to the office in locations where teleworking had become the norm, managers had been called on to exercise flexibility and understanding, to protect the welfare of staff.

2. The priority for UNHCR staff remained the granting of longer-term contracts that extended beyond the current maximum of three years. Some 75 per cent of staff held fixed-term appointments and 13 per cent temporary appointments, which meant that nearly 90 per cent of UNHCR staff had contracts for limited periods and many lived precariously on rolling annual contracts, not to mention staff who had served for five or more years as affiliate workforce. The last permanent contracts had been awarded in 2008.

3. The lack of longer-term contracts made it difficult for colleagues to make personal and professional plans. Staff felt obliged to make significant personal sacrifices, for fear of losing their jobs, or found that they could not benefit from arrangements such as special leave without pay in order to pursue external studies. Abuse of all kinds against staff took place in a context of fear of reprisals for making complaints, including the non-extension of contracts. Such cases abounded within UNHCR.

4. Longer-term contracts would provide a sense of stability and belonging and enable the workforce to speak up on harassment, racism and abuse of authority. The lack of longer-term contracts had become a risk to the organization and undermined staff trust in UNHCR, which was needed to protect refugees, and the organization's operations and reputation. The high level of integrity expected of the staff, in order to prevent abuse, corruption and sexual misconduct, called for a strong foundation, built on diversity within the staff – including with reference to gender, race and sexual orientation – and their ability to speak up without fear and have confidence in their role within UNHCR.

5. Another key objective was the fight against all forms of abuse and discrimination. Abuse of authority undermined the work of the organization. When a pattern of abusive behaviour was repeated, despite training efforts, and the responsible staff member remained at the organization and was even promoted, the perceived level of impunity became unacceptable. The mental and physical well-being of staff should be prioritized over the organization's so-called operational needs.

6. Diversity and inclusion were needed at all levels and within decision-making bodies to render them fully representative and to be true to the spirit of the United Nations. Silos should be avoided at every level of the organization and diversity in nationalities and origins encouraged. Proper consideration should be given to the career progression of staff of diverse origins, who could be assigned to higher functions in place of external recruitment. Such an approach could place national staff members in international positions to help address gaps in geographical representation among the professional staff. Unfettered external hiring was liable to lead to demotivation. There was a growing sense that senior colleagues were no longer valued, despite their extensive professional experience. Long-serving staff were the lifeblood of UNHCR.

7. Attention should be focused on the initial results of the regionalization and decentralization of the organization that had taken place since 2019. The Staff Council had been transformed into a global council composed of 15 members, half of whom were the

chairs of recently established regional staff associations. The Staff Council was particularly pleased that the High Commissioner was releasing an administrative instruction on staff representation to support recognition of the official role of staff representatives throughout the organization. The Staff Council sought to bring the concerns of staff to the table and work with pragmatism to make UNHCR a better place to work for all colleagues.

8. **Ms. Clements** (United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees) said that she wished to congratulate the new Chair of the global Staff Council on her appointment. There was much to tackle together, as an organization, in particular the issues that directly affected the workforce, on whom the work of UNHCR depended. On her recent trip to Lebanon, she had enjoyed frank exchanges with the staff association, including on the situation of colleagues in Afghanistan. Discussions would continue to be lively but the channels of communication would remain fully open. She looked to the Staff Council to bring issues to the table, as would the senior executive team, and participate in inter-agency discussions on live issues, including the future of work and the period to come once the COVID-19 pandemic was over, and how best to support colleagues in the coming months and years.

9. **The Chair** said that the work of UNHCR could not be achieved without its staff. The Executive Committee applauded their courage and dedication and counted on the Staff Council to keep it informed of developments affecting staff.

Meetings of the Standing Committee in 2022

Consideration of the provisional agenda of the seventy-third plenary session of the Executive Committee

10. **The Chair** said that the two agenda items under consideration related to the work of the Executive Committee and the Standing Committee in 2022 and included a number of draft decisions.

11. **Mr. Schotten** (Rapporteur) said that, before turning to draft decisions 3 to 6 on the work of the Standing Committee, he wished to draw the attention of the Executive Committee to decision 2, requesting UNHCR to develop its own financial regulations, a revised version of which had been circulated under silence procedure. The version of the decision tabled for adoption endorsed the proposal to request the United Nations General Assembly to authorize the High Commissioner to promulgate, following approval by the Executive Committee, the financial regulations for the use of all funds received by the High Commissioner. It requested the High Commissioner to present a proposal for consideration and approval by the Executive Committee and prepare a draft for promulgation of the financial rules of UNHCR complementing the draft financial regulations for the use of all funds received by the UNHCR and appropriate to its needs.

12. Decisions 3 to 6 concerned the Standing Committee's work in the coming year. Decision 3 reaffirmed the traditional framework for the programme of work of the Standing Committee in 2022, as established in the 2004 decision on working methods. It authorized the Committee to add or delete items, as appropriate, and requested member States to meet in December 2021 to prepare a detailed workplan. It also called on UNHCR to be explicit and analytical in its reports to the Standing Committee and to submit documentation in a timely manner. The importance of a substantive and interactive debate in meetings, and the need to respect the purely humanitarian and non-political nature of the Executive Committee's work was emphasized.

13. The following three decisions were also 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 addressed the participation of intergovernmental organizations in private meetings of the Executive Committee.

14. **The Chair** said that Angola, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Iraq, Libya, 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.

15. *It was so decided.*

16. **Ms. Díaz Mendoza** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that her delegation wished to place on record its concerns about the way in which the technical secretariat of the Standing Committee prepared the summaries of that Committee's deliberations for publication in its reports.

17. She recalled that the secretariat's procedure was to circulate a preliminary draft of its report to participants and invite comments and corrections to the language relating to delegations' statements. For each of the past three meetings (the 80th, 81st and 82nd), her delegation had accordingly submitted a paragraph encapsulating its position on the relevant topic but in no case had her delegation's submission been incorporated in the final version of the report (A/AC.96/1210, A/AC.96/1217 and A/AC.96/1218 respectively).

18. She recognized that the summaries were intended only as an overview of the discussions and her delegation did not expect a verbatim rendering of its statements. However, it did expect its comments and opinions to be reflected accurately.

19. She wished to draw particular attention to the use of the expression "one delegation" in summarizing specific comments by a specific State. It was not clear what criteria or technical considerations guided the secretariat in its decision to use a given expression. She was concerned that some delegations were being treated differently from others. All members of the Executive Committee should be treated equally.

20. The language in Standing Committee reports was not negotiated by the member States, but it was not up to the technical secretariat to paraphrase or interpret the comments of a State, or to decide what to include, suppress or omit, especially when that State had requested that its position be specifically reflected.

21. It was regrettable that the documents referred to did not objectively reflect the Standing Committee's deliberations, much less the positions of her own delegation. She hoped the same shortcomings would not recur the following year.

22. She invited UNHCR, the members of the Executive Committee and the Standing Committee secretariat to take the necessary steps to ensure that the summaries of Standing Committee discussions correctly reflected the facts, positions and opinions put forward by member States.

23. She also invited member States to identify any other concrete measures that might improve transparency in the Standing Committee's decision-making process.

24. **The Chair** said that he took it that the Executive Committee wished to adopt the draft decisions.

25. *It was so decided.*

Election of Officers

26. **Mr. Sougouri** (Burkina Faso) nominated Ms. Ahmed Hassan (Djibouti) for the office of first Vice-Chair of the Executive Committee.

27. **Mr. Banzet** (Canada) seconded the nomination.

28. *Ms. Ahmed Hassan (Djibouti) was elected first Vice-Chair of the Executive Committee by acclamation.*

29. **Ms. Stasch** (Germany) nominated Ms. Batistić Kos (Croatia) for the office of second Vice-Chair of the Executive Committee.

30. **Ms. Devandas Aguilar** (Costa Rica) seconded the nomination.

31. *Ms. Batistić Kos (Croatia) was elected second Vice-Chair of the Executive Committee by acclamation.*

32. **Ms. Devandas Aguilar** (Costa Rica) nominated Mr. González Mayagoitia (Mexico) for the office of Rapporteur.

33. **Ms. Díaz-Rato Revuelta** (Spain) seconded the nomination.

34. *Mr. González Mayagoitia (Mexico) was elected Rapporteur by acclamation.*
35. **Mr. Hashmi** (Pakistan) nominated Mr. Baddoura (Lebanon) for the office of Chair of the Executive Committee.
36. **Mr. Gamaleldin** (Egypt) seconded the nomination.
37. *Mr. Baddoura (Lebanon) was elected Chair of the Executive Committee by acclamation.*
38. **Mr. Baddoura** (Lebanon) thanked the members of the Executive Committee for their confidence. He looked forward to working with the High Commissioner and the staff of UNHCR. He had witnessed at first hand their hard work and extensive knowledge and expertise and would be counting on their assistance.
39. Lastly, he wished to pay tribute to the outgoing Chair, Ms. Farani Azevêdo of Brazil, for her skill and dedication. Her presence had been sorely missed at the current session.

Any other business

40. **Ms. Díaz Mendoza** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela), referring to the draft general decision on administrative, financial and programme matters (A/AC.96/1213, annex V) previously adopted, said that, although her delegation had joined the consensus, it had certain reservations about the budget requirements for the programmes for 2020.

41. Referring to the document entitled “Update on UNHCR’s operations in the Americas” (document without a symbol circulated in the meeting room) she drew attention to the statement in the second paragraph to the effect that “Refugees and migrants from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) totalled 5.7 million persons globally by September 2021”.

42. Referring to the report on the annual programme budget 2022 of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (A/AC.96/1213), she drew attention to table I.1, Number of persons of concern for 2020–2022, which put the number of “Venezuelans displaced abroad” for 2021 at 4,337,000, 1,363,000 fewer persons than the number cited in the update on UNHCR operations in the Americas. Such a discrepancy indicated a degree of imprecision that, in addition to raising serious methodological questions, risked creating misconceptions regarding the budget for that group of persons.

43. In addition, it was surprising that the number of “Venezuelans displaced abroad” should have gone up by some 500,000 in a year when nearly all air, sea and land borders had been closed because of the pandemic.

44. The same table posited a projected increase in the number of “Venezuelans displaced abroad” to 4,859,000 in 2022. That would presumably have an impact on the future budget for UNHCR, yet there were no grounds whatsoever for that projection. She wished to reiterate her delegation’s request for clarification of the methodology used in establishing those estimates.

45. As to the category “Venezuelans displaced abroad”, she said that it was striking that table I.1 made no mention of any other country or nationality. Only Venezuelans were categorized as persons of concern to UNHCR. Her delegation found it extremely troubling that the Venezuelan migration, which was economic in nature, should be defined using a specially created, sui generis category that did not correspond to the UNHCR mandate and was different from and exclusive of the other persons of concern. Her delegation had requested a clear explanation from UNHCR of the technical underpinning for the new category and the reason why Venezuelan nationals had been singled out.

46. She drew attention to an explanatory note published by UNHCR entitled “‘Refugees’ and ‘Migrants’: Frequently Asked Questions”. According to the note:

Confusing [‘refugees’ and ‘migrants’] can lead to problems for refugees and asylum-seekers, and for States seeking to respond to mixed movements, as well as to misunderstandings in discussions of asylum and migration.

...

Blurring the terms ‘refugees’ and ‘migrants’ takes attention away from the specific legal protections refugees require, such as protection from refoulement and from being penalized for crossing borders without authorization in order to seek safety... Conflating ‘refugees’ and ‘migrants’ can undermine public support for refugees and the institution of asylum at a time when more refugees need such protection than ever before.

47. In the light of that note, she failed to understand why UNHCR had created a special category for nationals of her country or why, despite the obvious discrepancies in its own reports, it insisted on including figures on economic migrants, who did not depend on UNHCR, and requesting a special budget for them. Such a lack of transparency showed the importance of having the correct information when defining and adopting the Office’s budget.

48. Migrants, who were seeking help, and refugees, who needed international protection, were covered by different legal frameworks and should be dealt with differently. As UNHCR had been created to address the needs of people seeking international protection, her delegation was concerned about the methodology that had been used to gather the data. The information was often spurious, as it was provided by Governments that had a politically motivated agenda against her country, a fact that her delegation had mentioned on numerous occasions. It was vital to work together in solidarity and in a concerted manner, through sincere, transparent bilateral dialogue.

Closing of the session

49. **Mr. Grandi** (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that the Executive Committee had heard about the grave effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on lives and livelihoods, the climate emergency and the devastating consequences of conflict. He appealed to States to rise above short-sighted national interest and seek solutions for the good of humanity. Vaccines urgently needed to be shared, in particular with major host countries, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, Uganda and Bangladesh. There was also an urgent need to bolster socioeconomic packages for the most vulnerable countries and populations and to ensure that refugees and displaced and stateless persons were included in national recovery policies.

50. Highlighting the potentially tragic displacement consequences of climate change, he urged States to ensure that climate displacement was high on the agenda of the upcoming twenty-sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Since conflicts remained the major driver of forced displacement, he appealed for more concerted efforts to prevent and resolve conflict.

51. He was encouraged by the number of delegations that had focused on internal displacement; UNHCR would strive to follow up on the recommendations of the High-level Panel on Internal Displacement concerning protection, humanitarian relief and especially work with Governments to pursue solutions.

52. He appreciated and echoed the statements of support for the work of the staff and partners of UNHCR around the world. Many delegations had mentioned improvements in areas of UNHCR operations, such as prevention of and response to gender-based violence, efforts to improve refugee education and support for persons with disabilities. He noted the importance delegations had placed on improved risk management and oversight, and on UNHCR efforts to prevent and eliminate sexual exploitation and abuse, and sexual harassment.

53. Although one delegation had chosen to engage in xenophobic rhetoric, he had been heartened by the outpouring of solidarity during the course of the Executive Committee. Some Governments had made efforts to ensure access to asylum, despite the pandemic; others had sought to naturalize refugees in their territory. Many delegations had mentioned steps being taken to eliminate statelessness. He had been encouraged to hear several States make or renew commitments to resettlement, in particular several Latin American countries; he hoped that others would follow that example, in order to increase resettlement around the world.

54. He shared the deep concern expressed by the African Union about the plans and actions of some Governments aimed at externalizing asylum and protection obligations. He also shared the concerns of many States about the instrumentalization of refugees and migrants in the context of coerced or incited onward movements but added that their instrumentalization for domestic political purposes was also a worrisome trend. While it would be inappropriate for him to comment on the political aspects of sanctions, he said that it was important to ensure that their application had no humanitarian consequences.

55. He agreed with the World Bank that its cooperation with UNHCR represented one of the most advanced practical realizations of the humanitarian-development nexus.

56. Referring to the situation of Ivorian refugees in West Africa, he said that he hoped that other countries and regions would, through peace, be able to find similar solutions to displacement.

57. The support for the Afghan people, while encouraging, must be translated into more concrete action; he had asked European Union member States to resettle, over the following five years, half of the 85,000 Afghans awaiting resettlement. More expedited, unconditional humanitarian assistance for Afghans was also needed, in particular before winter. Despite the big pledges made at the pledging conference in September 2021, just 35 per cent of the appeal for activities inside Afghanistan and 18 per cent of the appeal for work in its neighbouring countries were funded.

58. Other displacement crises should not be neglected, including those of the Venezuelans, the Syrians, the South Sudanese, the Somalis and the Rohingya. He also echoed host countries' calls for more direct development aid, preferably in the form of grants, to support refugees and host communities.

59. The many mentions of the Global Refugee Forum were encouraging. He called on all delegations to participate in and make meaningful contributions to the High-level Officials Meeting in December 2021.

60. **The Chair**, reading a brief statement from the outgoing Chair, Ms. Farani Azevêdo, said that she wished to express her sadness at the fact that she had been unable to attend the Executive Committee and her admiration for and gratitude to all those who had been involved.

The meeting rose at 11.30 a.m.