

Statement by Sri Lanka at the General Debate of the 71st Annual Session of the Executive Committee (ExCom) of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) programme

Mr. Chairperson,
High Commissioner Mr. Filippo Grandi,
Excellencies, Distinguished delegates,

Sri Lanka takes this opportunity to congratulate the High Commissioner for Refugees and the Bureau for the excellent manner in steering the work of the Executive Committee since assumption of Office in 2019. We wish the High Commissioner a speedy recovery.

We appreciate the presentation by the High Commissioner and his important remarks on how the Global Compact on Refugees has enabled the response to both new and protracted refugee crises, as well as to the COVID-19 emergency. We value his efforts and those of his dedicated staff for their continuous efforts to assist and improve the well-being of over 79.5 million displaced persons worldwide with a view to ensuring sustainable solutions for their concerns. Unfortunately, as per the global trends, the numbers keep on rising, while possibilities for durable solutions become complicated by the day.

Mr. Chair,

As we speak, the world is battling a truly global pandemic, which according to the UNHCR, has affected 134 refugee-hosting nations that have reported local transmission of COVID-19. As rightly said by the High Commissioner, “If ever we needed reminding that we live in an interconnected world, the novel coronavirus has brought that home.”

Needless to say, the pandemic has further exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities of groups such as displaced persons, asylum seekers and refugees, who often live in densely populated or urban spaces, sometimes affected by conflict, and adverse weather and climate conditions. Additionally, displaced populations are particularly at risk of negative social and economic effects of the pandemic such as unemployment¹, loss of livelihood, etc.

Sri Lanka believes that the United Nations system which includes the UNHCR, has a pivotal role in addressing the inequalities and the disproportionate impact of the virus to make sure that no one is actually left behind in the global efforts to overcome the COVID-19 crisis. In this respect, we applaud the commendable work of the UNHCR in addressing the particular needs of displaced persons amidst the COVID outbreak, especially in the areas of access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), support for infection prevention and healthcare, dissemination of information on prevention, and mitigation of the socio economic impact of the pandemic.

Mr. Chair,

Sri Lanka was one of the few countries to take proactive measures and as a result successfully contain the spread of COVID-19 through a balanced, multi-sectoral approach. With a recovery rate of over 90% and 13 deaths, the COVID-19 fatality rate in Sri Lanka stands at 0.4%, which is significantly lower than the global fatality rate.

The free universal healthcare enjoyed by the citizens of Sri Lanka is equally accessible to asylum seekers and refugees hosted by Sri Lanka.

¹ ILO: COVID-19 causes devastating losses in working hours and employment, 07 April 2020

The approach adopted by the Government in containing the pandemic, which has also been commended by the World Health Organisation, has been inclusive, non-discriminatory and holistic, providing foremost importance to safeguarding the health and safety of not only its people but foreign nationals in its territory. PCR testing facilities were provided to Asylum seekers and Refugees.

In addition, the Ministry of Health of Sri Lanka renders a significant service for refugee families who are in the country through medical screening, welfare of refugee children, anti-Malaria, TB etc.

Mr. Chair,

Despite disruptions in aviation facilities, and other restrictions necessitated by the Pandemic, the Government continues to assist the UNHCR in the process of resettlement of refugee persons in host countries.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Sri Lanka accorded high priority towards addressing the concerns of approximately 1.5 million Sri Lankan migrant population who were overseas, providing food and medicines where required, and where possible, working with host countries to regularise their migration status through inter-governmental coordination and utilizing a ‘whole of Government’ approach. Notwithstanding the challenges that it entailed both in terms of logistics and on the capacities at Government quarantine facilities, as of 4th October 2020, 42,667 Sri Lankans from 119 countries have been repatriated.

The efforts led by UNHCR, coupled with effective national responses, are key elements in maintaining a relatively low number of COVID-19 infections among refugees' communities globally. We also appreciate countries and stakeholders who rallied around the UNHCR's emergency appeal in the context of the pandemic. With over 80% of the world's refugees and IDPs being hosted by developing nations, it is vital that we continue to strengthen the capacity of these countries to effectively respond to the needs of their own nationals as well as the refugee populations that they host.

Mr Chair,

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven once again that no one can be guaranteed to be safe until every single person is safe. It is in this context that Sri Lanka wishes to emphasise the need for genuine dialogue and cooperation among the international community to sustain the fight against the pandemic. Sri Lanka stands ready to share its experiences and good practices with fellow nations and work in solidarity with them to this effect. We believe that the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) adopted in 2018 has become all the more relevant in the current context, as we discuss the need for sharing of burden and responsibilities - a key component of the GCR.

Despite not being a party to the Refugee Convention, Sri Lanka has hosted asylum seekers and refugees for decades notwithstanding our own internal challenges, and works in close coordination with the UNHCR in resolving issues, providing protection and sustainable solutions to asylum seekers as well as reintegration of internally displaced persons. Sri Lanka takes this opportunity to commend UNHCR's longstanding partnership with the Government, and looks forward to continuing this constructive engagement.

In closing, Mr. High Commissioner, Sri Lanka reassures its full support for the commendable work carried out by you and your staff in protecting and providing durable solutions to refugees particularly in the current global health emergency.

Thank you.
