



72nd SESSION OF THE UNHCR EXCOM

Item 3: GENERAL DEBATE

Statement by MONTENEGRO as delivered by H.E. Mrs. Ambassador Slavica Milacic, Permanent Representative of Montenegro to the UN and other IOs in Geneva

Madame Chair,

Montenegro aligns itself with the EU statement, and let me therefore stress the matters of particular interest to my country.

The unprecedented COVID-19 crisis has gripped the entire world, revealing structural weaknesses in social, economic and political systems, and putting on the spotlight the inequalities and poverty that affect the most vulnerable. Among those most impacted are more than 80 million refugees, displaced, asylum-seekers and other persons of concern to the UNHCR. [Despite the enormous disruption and halt caused by the pandemic and the UN SG's call for a COVID ceasefire, we have regrettably witnessed the unabated forced displacement because of conflict, violence, discrimination and persecution in many parts of the world.]

The paradigm "No one is safe until everyone is safe" has been widely embraced, but not translated into action. As shown, we have failed to globally make the COVID-19 vaccine a public good, which has exacerbated other inequalities. Pandemic-induced poverty has had a particularly harsh impact on women and girls. As a member of the Geneva Group of Friends to Eliminate Sexual Harassment (GOFESH), Montenegro calls on UNHCR to continue its strong inter-agency engagement, and appeals to all UN organizations to develop a common approach to protection against sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SGBV), including investigations.

Madam Chair, the ongoing pandemic has alarmingly validated the need for a global response to global challenges. Also for a human rights-based approach at the heart of the post-pandemic recovery, and for enhanced international cooperation and solidarity based on the principles of inclusiveness, justice, equality, human dignity, and transparency.

Against this backdrop, we commend UNHCR for its commitment and work. Along with its partner organizations, UNHCR has demonstrated its ability to deliver in increasingly challenging environments. We pay tribute to UNHCR's personnel who work tirelessly, often risking their own safety and well-being.

We also welcome the UNHCR's strong commitment to advocating for the inclusion persons of concern in national vaccination plans, health responses, education and other services to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic, and for combating gender-based violence, stigma and discrimination.

With regard to the Western Balkans region, UNHCR is also active in providing support and expertise for the capacity building to gradually shift countries from offering transit and humanitarian responses to those capable of providing meaningful protection and sustainable solutions for refugees and asylum seekers.

On this note, let me briefly highlight some of the key activities at the national level [towards ensuring effective protection of persons seeking international protection].

Montenegro remains committed to the protection of the rights of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees and to keeping asylum and migration management systems operational. To that end, in partnership with IOM and UNHCR, the EU launched the regional project "Addressing COVID-19 Challenges within the Migrant and Refugee Response in the Western Balkans", in August last year.

As already mentioned, the Montenegrin asylum system has shown its resilience in a very challenging context: the data collection and processing have been further improved; procedures within the existing legislative framework have been simplified and accelerated; reception capacities have been strengthened and increased with the reconstruction of existing facilities and the opening of a new Reception Center for Foreigners and Asylum Seekers; activities have been undertaken to upgrade IT and communication infrastructure to support the process of identification and registration of mixed migration flows in Montenegro, and its connection with the EU information systems; new integration measures have been developed, including financial assistance, language and culture courses, school enrollment and employment.

In addition to the durable solutions that allow refugees to obtain citizenship, the Government has provided support for the voluntary return or reintegration of IDPs from the ex-Yugoslav countries, as well as access to the same rights as citizens for those who opted for integration instead of return to their country of origin. The exception is the right to vote. For individuals who may not qualify as refugees, the Government has also provided subsidiary protection that includes an integration plan tailored to the individual's specific needs.

Madam Chair, Montenegro remains committed to fulfilling the commitments and pledges made at the first Global Refugee Forum (GRF) held in Geneva almost two years ago, reiterating its importance towards strengthening global solidarity and cooperation.

In light of the multifaceted impact of the pandemic on refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR, Montenegro shares views on the high relevance of ExCom conclusions on international protection and durable solutions in the context of a public health emergency.

Lastly, Montenegro remains staunch supporter of UNHCR's work and mandate both politically and financially, and stands ready to further contribute to our solid partnership.

I thank you.