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**Executive Committee of the  
High Commissioner's Programme**

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**Standing Committee**

**Eighty-sixth meeting**  
**7-9 March 2023**

Held at the International Conference Centre Geneva (CICG), Geneva  
**Summary record,\* Tuesday, 7 March 2023, at 10.10 a.m.**

*Chairperson: Ms. Katharina Stasch ..... (Germany)*

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

### **Opening of the meeting**

1. The **Chairperson** of the meeting – the First Vice-Chairperson of the Executive Committee – declared open the eighty-sixth meeting of the Standing Committee and said that she took it that the Committee wished to approve the requests of the Central African Republic, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, the Gambia, Liberia, the Niger and Sierra Leone to participate as observers.

2. *It was so agreed.*

The **Chairperson** of the meeting invited the Committee to observe one minute of silence for the victims of the recent earthquakes and aftershocks that had struck Türkiye and the Syrian Arab Republic, and extended the Committee's condolences to the families and friends of those – including UNHCR staff – who had lost their lives.

3. *The members of the Committee observed one minute of silence.*

### **Adoption of the agenda (EC/74/SC/CRP.1)**

4. The agenda (EC/74/SC/CRP.1) was adopted.

### **Adoption of the Standing Committee work programme for 2023**

5. The Standing Committee work programme (EC/74/SC/CRP.2) was adopted.

### **Opening remarks by the Deputy High Commissioner, UNHCR**

6. The Deputy High Commissioner (UNHCR), extending her condolences to those that had lost family members and friends in the recent earthquakes in Türkiye and the Syrian Arab Republic, said that she had just arrived in Baghdad on a mission to Iraq, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic to reassess the Office's prioritization of activities and its strategic planning to support internally displaced persons and their hosts in a changing financial and political landscape when the earthquakes had struck. The scale of the devastation had become all too clear a few days later, on her team's arrival in Aleppo. Nobody close to the epicentres, be they internally displaced persons, hosts or responders, had been spared. While UNHCR, too, was mourning the loss of three colleagues, with another still counted as missing, it had nonetheless mobilized immediately and contributed to the humanitarian relief effort, ensuring that tents, blankets, health-care and sanitation support and technical expertise were redirected to those in need. The question that had come to mind at the sight of families living in the open in front of the remains of their homes was how to help them find hope in the rubble, how to find solutions for people that, in the Syrian Arab Republic in particular, had already been displaced so many times over the previous decade. The answer, as UNHCR had shown, was by being there on the ground and working with partners, governments to assist the victims as they began to rebuild their lives. UNHCR was grateful to Member States for the support that had made that possible.

7. Having proven its capacity to respond to more than 35 unforeseen emergencies in 2022 alone, UNHCR had already declared new emergencies in Burkina Faso, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and now Türkiye and the Syrian Arab Republic. The Assistant High Commissioner for Operations and regional bureau directors would be providing an overview at the current meeting of the UNHCR operations worldwide and how it prepared for the unknown by monitoring drivers of displacement, anticipating needs and planning for emergencies. That work, however, must not detract from the importance of continuing to deliver in Bangladesh, Chad and the many other known displacement situations that were so protracted, familiar and deadlocked that interest in them had waned and financial commitments had dwindled. UNHCR must seize on the least opportunity for peace and redouble its efforts to foster the conditions for refugees and other displaced persons to return home.

8. 2023 would be a pivotal year for the continued transformation of UNHCR and many milestones would be reached. The newly decentralized and regionalized organizational structure that had made it possible to stay and deliver in the context of the earthquakes – and, before that, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic – had brought the organization closer to those that it served and the reduced bureaucracy, the quicker, more efficient, decision-making by regional bureau directors, and the greater involvement of specialized bureau teams and local expertise had enabled more rapid responses to initial needs.

9. UNHCR would also continue to modernize its systems in line with the business transformation programme (BTP). The cloud-based Workday digital human resources system launched the previous October had been used for over 2 million transactions and, with more users connecting to the system from mobile devices than computers, it was expected to deliver greater insights into recruitment, employment and working practices. Meanwhile, the cloud-based enterprise resource planning (Cloud ERP) system that was being introduced in the summer would provide a real-time view of UNHCR finance and procurement activities, and add greater clarity to the supply chain and logistics processes underpinning its ability to respond; and the remaining systems of the business transformation programme, namely the project reporting, oversight and monitoring solution (PROMS) for partner management, the Synergy project for external relations and the Link project for systems integration, would be rolled out by the end of the year.

10. Modernizing UNHCR, however, was a matter of embracing change not only in the organization's structure and systems but also in its mindset and organizational culture. The most challenging aspect of that was to ensure that the relentless effort to build an inclusive, diverse organization did not result in UNHCR losing its identity or compromising its values. An unwavering commitment to strengthening its integrity and oversight frameworks was crucial and third-line oversight entities, such as the Inspector General's Office (IGO) and the Ethics Office, were working together, supported by management, to bring greater coherence to the UNHCR formal and informal integrity mechanisms. Every available tool would be used to tackle any misconduct, especially sexual misconduct, which was not tolerated in the organization and would invariably lead to termination of employment.

11. Accountability to those that it served was another core value to which UNHCR was committed. Projects led by forcibly displaced persons to develop solutions to their communities' challenges had received hundreds of thousands of dollars in investment through the Refugee-led Innovation Fund in 2023, together with other forms of support, such as expertise and mentorship; and UNHCR remained in close contact with the communities to explore ways to strengthen their participation in the decisions that affected their lives through specific projects and representation in regional and global events.

12. One such event was the UNHCR flagship Global Refugee Forum, the second edition of which would be held in December, providing an opportunity to mark the fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees and take stock of the progress made since the United Nations General Assembly reaffirmed its collective commitment to finding sustainable solutions for refugees. It would also be taking place following the completion of a 10-year strategic review of the state of displacement to be included in the High Commissioner's report to the General Assembly, as well as the 2023 Sustainable Development Goals Summit in September.

13. Coherence and complementarity with the wider United Nations system was firmly embedded in the strategic vision of UNHCR. The agency was at the forefront of system-wide initiatives to improve efficiency, such as the establishment of a United Nations common fleet of vehicles for cost-effective transport services; it actively reported on the implementation of the United Nations development system reform through its annual contributions to the Secretary-General's quadrennial comprehensive policy review; and it had a lead role in system-wide efforts to prevent and combat sexual misconduct. The Office's many strategic partnerships with United Nations entities across all the pillars of peace and security, human rights and development, as well as with civil society organizations, international financial institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith-based organizations and, increasingly, the private sector, had enabled it to learn from best practices and enhance its own flexibility and expertise.

14. Flexible financial support, in allowing resources to be shifted between from one activity, operation and region to another, was crucial to the Office's ability to save lives and it appealed once again to Member States to ensure the flexibility that would enable it to meet the needs, both foreseen and unforeseen. Their support had made it possible to respond to the large numbers of emergencies in 2022, with private sector partners having provided an unprecedented amount of over \$1 billion. Faced with a budget for 2023 that already stood at \$10.6 billion, the organization was tirelessly striving to find new ways to raise the funding to meet its considerable needs; one example that had great potential was the Global Islamic Fund for Refugees that it had just been established in partnership with the Islamic Development Bank to mobilize Islamic philanthropy. UNHCR counted on the continued generous of Member States to help it stay and deliver for those seeking safety from conflict or waiting to restart their lives in the aftermath of earthquakes.

**Regional activities and global programmes**

15. The **Assistant High Commissioner for Operations** (UNHCR), introducing the item, said that the reality of the state of global displacement, as reflected in the figures for 2022, was grim, with over 100 million persons forcibly displaced, 35 emergencies declared in 25 countries, several of them triggered by climate change and natural disasters, such as the recent earthquakes in Türkiye and the Syrian Arab Republic, and a significant increase in mixed movements of people risking their lives on perilous journeys in search of safety, as he himself had witnessed in Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico; such movements could not be described as emergencies but they had contributed to a dramatic increase in the numbers of asylum claims – 119,000 in Mexico and 130,000 in Costa Rica. The increase in displacement and statelessness had not always been matched by an increase in resources, with regions other than Europe and Asia having seen a combined decrease in spending of over \$320 million between 2021 and 2022, and while overall funding had increased, it had not kept pace with the needs of the forcibly displaced, leaving the mostly low- and middle-income countries granting access to asylum to bear a greater burden. Meanwhile, displaced populations had been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and shortfalls in funding had had an impact on the food assistance that was crucial to the well-being of refugees in around 40 food-insecure countries.

16. The many crises around the world, such as the flight of close to 100,000 refugees from Somaliland to Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa – a region also experiencing its worst drought in recent history – had underscored the need for more sustainable responses that promoted the self-reliance of the persons served and that contributed to their inclusion in existing social protection systems, thereby reducing the need for parallel humanitarian assistance. Feedback from an informal briefing on the Global Compact on Refugees the previous day had highlighted significant progress since the adoption of the Compact and the first Global Refugee Forum in terms of enhancing socioeconomic inclusion, strengthening regional approaches and ensuring more effective collaboration among the multilateral and bilateral actors seeking solutions. It was also encouraging to see that more governments, following the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, were adopting policies giving refugees access to social services, such as education, health care and social protection; that there regional strategies in place, underpinned by regional support platforms, to facilitate dialogue on protection and solutions between countries of origin and countries granting access to asylum; and that all the regional bureaux were developing strong partnerships with local, regional and global actors to address common emerging priorities. In addition, the 2022 High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges, which had convened over 500 stakeholders, including refugee-led organizations, on the theme of development cooperation, had highlighted the commitment of the various development actors to include forced displacement in their strategies.

17. UNHCR had broadened its collaboration with international financial institutions in its work, alongside bilateral and multilateral development actors, on responses to forced displacement. Its relationship with the World Bank, for instance, had produced refugee assessments, refugee policy reviews and support for low-income refugee-hosting countries in Africa and Asia through the International Development Association (IDA) Window for Host Communities and Refugees financing mechanism; that support had amounted to an unprecedented \$3.6 billion and the principle of responsibility-sharing had been embedded in the twentieth replenishment of the window (IDA20), under which a further \$2.4 billion had been made available. Other examples included the secondment of a UNHCR colleague to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to foster engagement and synergies to address the needs of forcibly displaced persons and affected communities and, under a partnership with the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a 12-person joint implementation team was currently pooling the two organization’s knowledge and skills to support the design of innovative, private sector-oriented, projects in forced displacement contexts.

18. Cooperation with sister United Nations agencies in providing protection and assistance and in the search for durable solutions for displaced populations remained strong, as reflected in the global collaboration frameworks established with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as well as in the work of the steering group chaired by the Secretary-General’s Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement, of which UNHCR was an active member.

19. On the growing number of displacement situations linked directly or indirectly to climate change or natural disasters, millions across the globe had been displaced by extreme weather conditions: from flooding in Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Sahel through drought in Afghanistan, Madagascar and the Horn of Africa to devastating storms that had caused the onward movement of Syrian refugees in Lebanon in January 2022 and the destruction of 80 per

cent of the refugee shelters in Mozambique in April 2022. UNHCR, in line with its Operational Strategy for Climate Resilience and Environmental Sustainability Strategy 2022-2025, was increasing the focus on climate action activities in its multi-year country plans, and fundraising capacity would be further strengthened to adequately address the impacts of climate-related events on displaced populations.

20. The funding cuts experienced by some large-scale operations in 2022, however, together with those foreseen for 2023, were undermining the Office's capacity to address urgent humanitarian needs. To preserve the gains made in the protection of refugees and other displaced persons, it was essential to maintain support for more sustainable responses that focused on their inclusion in host communities. Colleagues around the world, especially those working in a difficult security context, were grateful to Member States for their continued commitment to the search for durable solutions.

**a. Regional updates**

**i. Asia and the Pacific**

21. The **Director of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific** (UNHCR) said that 2022 had been a challenging and sobering year for his region, with the humanitarian crises in Afghanistan and Myanmar having shown little sign of abating.

22. In Afghanistan, the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance was likely to rise to 28 million in 2023, twice as many as two years before, and UNHCR had stayed and delivered such assistance to some 6 million; he was proud of the colleagues, particularly the women, that had dedicated themselves to helping others in spite of the turmoil and uncertainty.

23. UNHCR continued to take an area-based approach to supporting displaced Afghans seeking to return home and reintegrate themselves into their communities; more than 1.3 million had done so since the end of the large-scale conflict. That work was crucial to the stability of the country. The restrictions placed on the population in that country, especially on women and girls, however, were deeply troubling and could have a significant impact on economic and social development, thereby depriving Afghans of hope for the future and ultimately driving more of them across the border into neighbouring countries. The Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan had received 1.7 million new arrivals since mid-2021, in addition to the several million refugees that they had already been hosting. Both those countries had remained steadfast in their support, in spite of the challenging economic and security conditions, but it could not be taken for granted. UNHCR was preparing to assist them and the other, smaller scale, hosting countries in Central Asia with their regional refugee response plan (RRP) for 2023, which would complement the United Nations Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan, and strongly urged the international community to redouble its support in securing the \$613 million needed to reach a population of just under 8 million. It was important to bear in mind the life-changing impact of providing refugees with educational opportunities and building their self-reliance, their ability to help others and their hopes for a brighter future.

24. Regarding the Myanmar crisis, the humanitarian assistance and protection provided to some 1 million Rohingya had enabled refugees to live in dignity in the camps in Bangladesh, to support their communities as volunteers and to prepare for their return home; the people and Government of Bangladesh were to be commended for their continued humanitarian leadership. UNHCR counted on the continued support of the international community in raising the \$876 million required under the 2023 joint response plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis to support refugees and their hosts, bearing in mind that the previous year's underfunding, with a shortfall of more than \$120 million, had resulted in a reduction in food assistance, a growing sense of hopelessness and a dramatic increase in maritime movements – some 3,500 Rohingya had embarked on perilous boat journeys and over 350 had lost their lives. The recent reactivation of the consultation mechanism of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime would hopefully deliver concrete results in terms of ensuring safe and predictable disembarkation arrangements.

25. A comprehensive regional approach was crucial to expanding the scope of solutions for Rohingya refugees and sustaining support for host countries. Positive progress had been made in 2022 on a robust resettlement programme that had led to more than 21,000 resettlement submissions from Bangladesh and other countries in the region. Most Rohingya still wanted to return home to Myanmar, but the situation there remained challenging, with over 1.5 million internally displaced persons, tens of thousands fleeing to neighbouring countries and millions in need of humanitarian assistance in hard-to-reach areas. The Office's continued efforts to improve the humanitarian situation must be coupled with concerted political action, and meaningful dialogue was needed to

ensure the refugees' right to a safe, dignified and sustainable return, to which end the leadership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was critical. The same was true with respect to Afghan refugees, and UNHCR was grateful to the Islamic Republic of Iran for hosting a meeting of the Quadripartite Steering Committee of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) in December 2022, bringing together representatives of the country of origin, the main host countries and UNHCR to look into ways of ensuring a sustainable environment for a safe return. That work would continue with the assistance of the Core Group for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees Support Platform, chaired by the European Union, which had helped to garner over \$500 million since its launch in 2020.

26. While the current year would inevitably bring still more challenges for the region, the Bureau for Asia and the Pacific would continue tirelessly to strive to protect and assist refugees; reduce statelessness; mitigate and respond to the impacts of climate emergencies; build the resilience of communities; and find lasting solutions that allowed people to live decent lives. It looked forward to working with all Member States in the lead-up to the next Global Refugee Forum, which would be a unique opportunity to secure concrete pledges and pave the way for a world free from the scourge of displacement and exile.

27. The representative of the **European Union** (group statement of the European Union and its member States) expressed concern about the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan in the light of the poverty and food insecurity rates and the recent Taliban edict preventing female staff from working for NGOs. The European Union and its member States, steadfast in their support for the Afghan people, had recently formalized a unified donor position to ensure a coordinated response to the unacceptable consequences of the restrictive measures, which not only violated the principles of fundamental human rights but also impeded the effective delivery of humanitarian and basic needs assistance to the population. The European Union and its member States strongly condemned the edict and called on the Taliban to reverse it immediately, together with every other decision infringing on women's rights and fundamental freedoms. UNHCR and its partners must continue to deliver humanitarian aid in Afghanistan; to prepare and plan for the likelihood of a further deterioration in the humanitarian situation; and to ensure transparency in – and the regular monitoring of – all its operations so as to remain accountable both to donors and to the Afghan people. Specific information on how UNHCR and its partners would ensure the meaningful participation of women in humanitarian aid work at the local level would be welcome. The European Union and its member States were grateful to Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran for generously continuing to host millions of forcibly displaced Afghans in spite of having to contend with significant challenges of their own; the decision by the Islamic Republic of Iran to grant Afghan refugees access to its national health care and education systems was particularly laudable. The European Union and its member States continued to support the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees.

28. On the situation in Myanmar, the European Union and its member States called once again on the military authorities to immediately halt their indiscriminate use of force, to respect international humanitarian law and to ensure rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access to all displaced persons and persons in need across the country. They would continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Myanmar through UNHCR and fully supported the efforts of ASEAN to help Myanmar to find a peaceful solution, in line with the United Nations Security Council resolution 2669. More information on how UNHCR intended to further strengthen its engagement with host countries, ASEAN and other regional actors to promote cross-border assistance in the meantime would be welcome.

29. The European Union and its member States expressed appreciation to the Government of Bangladesh for its crucial role in hosting and assisting Rohingya refugees and reiterated their support for the 2023 joint response plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis. More timely reporting and prioritization could help to attract much-needed additional funding and clarification would be appreciated as to how UNHCR planned to pursue its streamlining and rationalization work. Deploring the tragic loss of Rohingya lives in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, the European Union and its member States supported the call by UNHCR for search and rescue operations and safe disembarkation solutions, and commended the Governments of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand for their efforts to expand access to basic services and protection.

30. The representative of **Australia**, acknowledging that climate change was a driver of displacement, welcomed the Office's engagement in climate adaptation, resilience-building and disaster risk reduction policy development in the Asia and the Pacific region.

31. On the situation in Bangladesh, Australia continued to work with UNHCR in advancing humanitarian response, recovery and development solutions to address the underfunded Rohingya refugee situation and had demonstrated its commitment with a contribution of 70 million Australian dollars to the 2023 joint response plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis; other Member States were encouraged to follow suit and provide the vital support needed to address the recent food ration cuts and fire in Cox's Bazar. Australia had also pledged to provide 17 million Australian dollars over three years to support the UNHCR humanitarian operations in Myanmar, which had recently been expanded to include a comprehensive regional approach.

32. Australia reiterated the need for continued consultation, openness and transparency with donors on UNHCR operations in Afghanistan.

33. Following the transition of all UNHCR country operations in the Asia and the Pacific region to multi-year planning, Australia encouraged greater coherence between humanitarian and development actors to ensure more resources to meet the needs in terms of providing protection, finding solutions and tackling the root causes and drivers of displacement. UNHCR and the international community were urged to maintain a focus on addressing the significant and escalating crises in the region.

34. The representative of **Pakistan**, drawing attention to the factors in danger of undermining the hard-earned development gains of low- and middle-income countries as a result of disproportionate burden- and responsibility-sharing in the face of underfunding for protracted refugee crises, said that a sound international protection system called for a strategic focus on durable solutions and the removal of the root causes of displacement. Pakistan, in spite of its own economic challenges, had continued to protect Afghan refugees for more than four decades. Almost 70 per cent of them lived in urban areas and benefited from the same quality health care and education services as the local population; access to basic services was facilitated by smart "proof of registration" cards that were compatible with the national identification system; and a scholarship programme was being introduced to provide young Afghans with access to education in the fields of, inter alia, medicine, engineering, agriculture and management.

35. Although concerned by the slow pace of progress in operationalizing burden- and responsibility-sharing arrangements, including resettlement and other complementary pathways, Pakistan appreciated the area-based approach adopted by UNHCR in Afghanistan. Some 1.3 million displaced persons had gradually returned home following improvements in the security situation, and Pakistan urged the international community to continue to assist in addressing urgent humanitarian needs and provide a road map for Afghanistan's prosperity and development, which was crucial to the sustainable reintegration of returnees.

36. Sharing the international community's concerns about the ban on girls' education in Afghanistan, Pakistan continued to engage with the country's de facto authorities in an endeavour to encourage them to reconsider their decisions on that and on the employment of women.

37. The financial restrictions placed on Afghanistan hindered both humanitarian work and economic growth in a country where 97 per cent of the population was living in extreme poverty, and over 20 million faced acute hunger. As such, they were an inadvertent deterrent to the safe and dignified return of Afghan refugees and were adversely affecting host communities in Pakistan through market distortions. Pakistan encouraged international partners and stakeholders to consider additional pledges to ease the pressure on host countries and achieve solutions for refugees, including through expanded resettlement programmes, improved access to complementary pathways and investment in peacebuilding and stabilization efforts in the country of origin; the Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees had had a positive impact in that regard.

38. Pakistan was grateful to UNHCR for its appeal for resources to address the immediate needs of the communities affected by the flooding in 2022, which, thanks to the generous support of international partners, had raised \$65 million in funding; the work to rebuild those communities was already under way.

39. The representative of the **Philippines**, underscoring the importance of sustained international support for the UNHCR response in Afghanistan, said that all aid workers, regardless of gender, must have unimpeded access to those in need, with a particular focus on the protection and welfare of women and children. The Philippines paid tribute to the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan for their key role in hosting Afghan refugees in spite of their own economic challenges.

40. On the continuing political crisis in Myanmar, the Philippines remained concerned about the increasing numbers of internally displaced and stateless Rohingya. At the regional level, ASEAN was supporting Myanmar through the provision of humanitarian assistance, the facilitation of repatriation programmes and the promotion of sustainable development. The Philippines, for its part, had contributed to the joint response plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis and had launched a pilot programme on complementary pathways for Rohingya students that could be scaled up through potential partnerships.

41. In view of the modest progress on third country solutions, including programmes for the resettlement of refugees from Bangladesh, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan, it was important to remain focused on finding durable solutions, such as capacity-building programmes to support governments in building resilient humanitarian institutions and robust governance mechanisms.

42. With only one year remaining to achieve the #IBelong Campaign's goal of ending statelessness by 2024, the Philippines appreciated its partnership with UNHCR to improve statelessness determination procedures and launch campaigns to address documentation issues, particularly for the indigenous Sama-Bajau communities in the south of the country. The Philippines had acceded to the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness in 2022 and, recognizing the need for a whole-of-society approach, had established a national statelessness network comprising 18 civil society organizations.

43. On the issue of climate displacement, Member States must realize that climate action and climate justice could not be divorced from human rights and humanitarian principles and, in view of the devastating scale of displacement attributable to natural disasters and climate events, as witnessed in the Asia and the Pacific region, governments must commit to addressing the root causes by meeting their international obligations to combat climate change.

44. The representative of **Japan** said that his country supported the use of the priority areas of return and reintegration approach in Afghanistan and hoped to see it extended to Afghan refugee-hosting countries, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. As a member of the Core Group for the Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, Japan appreciated the progress made in promoting multi-stakeholder collaboration through close cooperation with UNHCR. His Government had contributed \$12.5 billion for the provision of humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons, returnees and host communities in southern Afghanistan in December 2022, followed by an additional \$6 billion in March 2023 and a further \$1.2 million to support Afghan refugees in neighbouring host countries.

45. Japan had maintained a presence in Kabul and his Government had directly relayed to the Taliban the concerns of the international community over the significant impact that barring women from working for NGOs would have on the delivery of humanitarian assistance. It would continue to urge them to address that and other pressing matters, such as the need to build an inclusive political system and combat terrorism.

46. On the situation in Myanmar, the further extension of the country's state of emergency was a matter of serious concern. His Government had urged the military authorities to work in good faith towards a peaceful resolution that was acceptable to the people of Myanmar and the international community by implementing ASEAN's "five-point consensus" plan. Having contributed over \$47 million in humanitarian assistance since the coup d'état, Japan was providing additional assistance of \$60 million in response to the deterioration in the humanitarian situation. It was grateful to Bangladesh for its continued generosity in hosting and protecting displaced persons from Myanmar and remained committed to supporting it in its efforts.

47. The representative of **Norway**, expressing support for the concept of operations (CONOPS) mechanism developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the general consensus on a principled approach to humanitarian work in Afghanistan, said that her delegation would welcome more information on the crucial monitoring system to be developed by the humanitarian country team for that work. It was also keen to know about the prospects for further exemptions from the Taliban edict barring women from working for NGOs, which seriously undermined the Office's ability to reach Afghan women and girls in need, and the options for creative, gender-responsive, programming that prioritized efforts to address sexual and gender-based violence. UNHCR must continue to strive to provide protection and support for internally displaced women and girls, who were particularly at risk in the current situation.



48. Norway was concerned about the deteriorating situation in Myanmar, in particular the new NGO registration requirements, which could result in a more risky operating environment and a substantial funding gap. It supported the joint response plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis, noting that its strategic objectives of strengthening disaster risk management and combating the effects of climate change had been thrown into sharp relief by the tragic fire in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar. More information on how UNHCR intended to prioritize climate action across the Asia and the Pacific region would be welcome.

49. The representative of **Thailand** welcomed the Office's prioritization of climate action in the Asia and the Pacific region and its efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change, reduce gender-based violence and promote respect for women and girls.

50. Thailand would continue to work closely with UNHCR to support refugees, including through the development and operationalization of a fair and transparent national screening mechanism and the continued provision of temporary protection along its border with Myanmar. At the regional level, Thailand had contributed to the work of monitoring maritime movements and ensuring the safety of those in distress in the Andaman Sea and its own territorial waters. His Government had provided more than \$4 million in funding, together with in-kind assistance, for the Office's efforts to support Bangladesh and Myanmar and stood ready to contribute to the UNHCR implementation of quick impact projects with UNDP.

51. On the issue of statelessness, Thailand would continue to promote the #IBelong Campaign through to its conclusion in 2024, following which it might be useful to organize an exchange of best practices and lessons learned with a view to developing a new initiative aimed at its eradication.

52. The representative of **Sweden**, aligning her delegation with the European Union statement, stressed that the ramifications of the recent Taliban edict barring female staff from working for NGOs could be devastating for the delivery of essential humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. The international community must continue to push for exemptions from – and ultimately a full reversal of – the ban, to which end the continued leadership of the United Nations, including through high-level missions, was key. With respect to the humanitarian operation in the country, it was important to give the implementing organizations the flexibility that they needed on the ground and to have a monitoring mechanism in place to ensure that the assistance was delivered without discrimination, especially to women and girls.

53. On the Rohingya crisis, efforts to pave the way for the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of refugees to Myanmar must continue, including through the Office's advocacy to improve living conditions and generate more income-generating and educational opportunities. Regarding the situation on the island of Bhasan Char, it was important to ensure that the refugees had access to adequate services and food, livelihoods and regular family visits.

54. As to the importance of minimizing the increasingly significant impacts of natural disasters in aggravating humanitarian needs, disaster preparedness, disaster risk reduction and resilience-building must be regarded as key priority areas throughout the region.

55. The representative of the **Islamic Republic of Iran**, calling for further discussion of the term "refugee-like situation", the definition of which should ultimately be determined by Member States, said that the Islamic Republic of Iran, in spite of the inhibiting effects of the unilateral coercive measures imposed on the country, had continued to do its utmost to provide Afghan refugees with access to livelihoods, health care and education for four decades. Following the decision by the Taliban to ban female students from higher education, Iranian universities had opened their doors to thousands of young Afghan women and Tehran University's budget for Afghan student scholarships had increased fivefold. His Government expected the international community to revisit its views and adhere to the principle of fair and equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing to support the countries hosting the refugees in adequately meeting their needs.

56. The representative of the **Netherlands**, aligning his delegation with the European Union statement, commended UNHCR for continuing to deliver humanitarian aid in Afghanistan in spite of the recent ban on women working for NGOs, and called for the "do no harm" approach of upholding humanitarian principles without exacerbating discrimination to be considered a core value in all its work. His delegation would appreciate clarification as to how UNHCR intended to ensure that women not only had access to the aid but also a meaningful role in the needs assessments, monitoring and delivery. It also expected UNHCR to refrain from sanctioning or prematurely terminating contracts with implementing partners that decided to pause their activities. Seriously concerned about the impacts of the ban on protection activities such as mental health and

psychosocial support, which were not currently covered by any sector-specific exemptions, the Netherlands encouraged UNHCR to continue to seek creative ways to deliver that support to those in need and to pay special attention to the well-being of its staff.

57. The representative of **Switzerland** said that the situation of forcibly displaced persons in Afghanistan and Myanmar was deeply troubling and expressed appreciation to UNHCR for its tireless efforts to find durable solutions, the importance of which was made all the greater by the protracted nature of the crises and the limited prospects for improvement in the medium term. A focus on peacebuilding was needed, in line with the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, together with additional measures to support the main host countries, to which end the role of regional support platforms, such as the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, was key.

58. The representative of **Bulgaria**, aligning her delegation with the European Union statement, expressed concern about the deteriorating humanitarian and security situation in Afghanistan and the resulting increase in the number of Afghan asylum-seekers and refugees and commended Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran for their continued generosity in hosting many millions of them in spite of their own national challenges. Bulgaria had contributed financially through the Team Europe initiative on the Afghan displacement situation to the UNHCR activities to support the Islamic Republic of Iran in providing health care and education to Afghan refugees, and it encouraged the organization to further prioritize its work to create the conditions for the safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return and reintegration of Afghan internally displaced persons.

59. Bulgaria strongly condemned – and called for the immediate reversal of – the decision by the de facto authorities of Afghanistan to prohibit female staff from working for NGOs and encouraged UNHCR to continue its advocacy for the uninterrupted delivery of humanitarian assistance and basic services to women and girls. Bulgaria supported the right of women to participate in humanitarian action and in all spheres of public, social, economic and political life.

60. The representative of **Denmark**, aligning her delegation with the European Union statement, said that Denmark remained committed to supporting the people of Afghanistan and condemned the recent Taliban directive banning female staff from working for NGOs. Access for female humanitarian workers was crucial to ensuring the non-discriminatory delivery of humanitarian assistance and basic services, including health care and education, so that everyone, regardless of gender, ethnicity or religion, had access them. That called for close coordination between UNHCR and its partners and robust, transparent, monitoring mechanisms to ensure accountability. Further information would be appreciated on how the current situation was affecting UNHCR operations in the country and the measures that it was taking in response, including in collaboration with the wider humanitarian community. Donors should be kept informed of developments. Denmark appreciated and would continue to support the UNHCR work to support Afghan refugees and host governments in the region, including through the provision of unearmarked funding.

61. On the situation in Myanmar, the lack of prospects for Rohingya refugees was concerning. The recent massive fire at the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh had only worsened the situation and the Rohingya were in need of urgent attention.

62. The representative of the **Republic of Korea**, expressing appreciation to the governments of Bangladesh, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan for their contributions as the leading refugee-hosting countries in the Asia and the Pacific region, said that the continuing deterioration of the situations in Myanmar and Afghanistan, which were the main sources of displacement and instability in the region, was concerning and that stronger political support was required to address the root causes and find durable solutions.

63. On the Afghanistan situation, his Government had contributed some \$29 million to the collective efforts undertaken in 2022 and advocated strongly for unhindered, equitable, access to humanitarian assistance for the most vulnerable, especially women and girls.

64. As to the Myanmar situation, the Republic of Korea had continued to support the joint response plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis but was concerned by the lack of progress in resolving the fundamental issues. It was particularly important to address the increase in statelessness, on which more information about the Office's plans would be welcome; to continue to provide life-saving support for the refugees, with a greater focus on future-oriented activities in the areas of education, capacity-building and improving livelihoods; and to make further collective efforts to create conditions conducive to the safe, voluntary and dignified return of displaced Rohingya.

65. The Republic of Korea called on relevant national authorities to adhere to the principle of non-refoulement and to prevent and address gender-based violence, human trafficking and other violations against vulnerable groups.

66. The representative of the **United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland** said that his Government continued to support the Rohingya population in Bangladesh, including in response to the recent fire in Cox's Bazar, and that it remained concerned by the worsening situation in Myanmar, which indicated that the conditions were not yet in place to enable the safe return of the refugees. The United Kingdom had led efforts to secure the adoption of United Nations Security Council resolution 2669 (2022) on Myanmar and intended to intervene in the case brought by the Gambia before the International Court of Justice to determine whether Myanmar had violated its obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Given the challenges faced by Bangladesh in managing the protracted crisis, as reflected in the recent reduction in food assistance, refugees might not receive the basic care that they needed. His Government would continue to work with others to address the root causes of the crisis and support the host communities.

67. On the situation in Afghanistan, his Government welcomed the Office's strong response to the directive banning female staff from working for NGOs, including its withdrawal from a partnership agreement with its de facto authorities, and encouraged the organization to maintain that stance in the face of unacceptable discrimination. In view of the risk of the forced return of displaced Afghans, the UNHCR continued engagement with the World Bank and other development actors on the issue was to be welcomed. The United Kingdom encouraged it to continue to fulfil its protection responsibilities in ensuring that returns were informed and voluntary and the returnees were protected, and to work with neighbouring countries and donors to prepare for the potential increase in population movements from Afghanistan. UNHCR should also work with host governments and donors to provide durable solutions to long-term refugee situations in line with the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees.

68. The representative of **Germany**, aligning his delegation with the European Union statement, commended the countries and communities hosting large numbers of refugees and displaced persons for their solidarity.

69. On the unacceptable situation in Myanmar, Germany called on the military authorities to grant national and international humanitarian actors free, unimpeded, access to those in need so as to allow for the delivery of assistance in accordance with humanitarian principles. His Government would continue to support UNHCR in its efforts to ensure the voluntary, safe and dignified return of Rohingya refugees to their home communities in Myanmar and encouraged the wider international community to do likewise. The Government of Myanmar must immediately put an end to the serious human rights violations against the Rohingya and ensure that all, including those detained in camps in Rakhine State, enjoyed the right to free movement, education and equality. There should be no further camp closures in Rakhine or elsewhere without meaningful consultations, the provision of better accommodation and the guarantee that fundamental rights would be respected.

70. On the situation in Afghanistan, Germany welcomed the Office's continued commitment to its role as secretariat for the Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees. The Taliban were responsible for one of the world's most catastrophic humanitarian crises and the international community must unite and take a strong and principled stand. His Government remained committed to the Afghan people but believed that aid should be delivered only in the sectors Afghan women were able to work and the regions where they and their children could be reached; adherence to the note of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Principals on the issue was of the utmost importance. Further details on the current operating environment in Afghanistan would be appreciated, in particular on the working conditions for UNHCR and its partners' female staff, on the potential impacts on programming and progress and on advances in the system-wide approach to delivering humanitarian assistance. Member States should be kept informed of all developments.

71. The representative of the **United States of America** said that his Government, as a major donor of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, would maintain a strong and principled position on the Taliban directive banning female staff from working for NGOs. Afghans in need of international protection, particularly women and girls, needed access to assistance and to be able to seek asylum in neighbouring countries and the United States urged those countries to respect the principle of non-refoulement. Pakistan's efforts to host large numbers of refugees for over 40 years

were commendable and donors were urged to support the regional refugee response plan once it was launched.

72. The United States commiserated with those injured and left without shelter following the recent fire in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazaar. It commended the responders and condemned the military authorities for their persecution of the people of Myanmar, calling on them to cease the violence, allow unhindered humanitarian access and rebuild an inclusive federal democracy. His Government had contributed significant amounts of funding to the response to the crisis in the region and remained committed to working with others to meet the humanitarian needs and find durable solutions for displaced persons in and from Myanmar, including the Rohingya refugees hosted by Bangladesh. UNHCR should redouble its efforts to work with the international community towards a more sustainable long-term solution for the refugees and the Government of Bangladesh should further develop opportunities to enhance their self-reliance.

73. The United States supported a comprehensive regional approach in order to expand solutions for protracted situations, such as third country resettlement, and to strengthen the Office's engagement with host countries, ASEAN and other regional actors to promote responsibility-sharing, including in relation to the rescue of refugees in distress at sea. UNHCR should continue to engage with the Government of Nepal on the integration and documentation of Bhutanese refugees and work with the Government of Bhutan on voluntary returns. It should also redouble its advocacy on behalf of the Tibetan refugees in Nepal and encourage the Government of that country to resume the registration of those refugees and issue identity documents that enabled them to have access to formal employment and education. His Government was committed to working with the international community to ensure that asylum-seekers from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and ethnic and religious minorities from China had access to assistance, protection and other solutions. He encouraged UNHCR to work with China and other governments to ensure that the principle of non-refoulement was respected.

74. Thailand's efforts to ensure the effective implementation of a national screening mechanism and find alternatives to immigration detention were commendable, as was the progress made in the Philippines on refugee status and statelessness determination procedures. The UNHCR regional approach to reducing statelessness, too, was to be commended, in particular its prioritization of universal civil registration, and governments should continue to strive to tackle the issue by eliminating discrimination in their nationality laws and procedures.

75. The representative of **Canada** said that his Government would continue to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan in places where women had equal access to the assistance and were permitted to participate in its delivery. Canada supported the United Nations and the humanitarian community in their efforts to develop a coordinated response to seek additional exemptions from – and ultimately reverse – the recent edict banning female staff from working for NGOs. A common approach of the kind taken by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Principals on the issue was paramount, and more information would be appreciated on how UNHCR was ensuring that local women were consulted in the development of mitigation measures at the operational level.

76. On the Rohingya situation, Canada supported – and would continue to work alongside other donors and partners on a principled, gender-sensitive, humanitarian response for Rohingya refugees and their host communities in Bangladesh. His Government appreciated the Office's efforts to ensure that the refugees had greater access both to education, through the continued roll-out of the Myanmar curriculum, and to skills development and livelihood opportunities, as well as its prioritization of their needs in terms of gender-based violence and child protection.

77. The representative of **China**, drawing attention to her Government's contributions to humanitarian assistance in South Sudan and the United Republic of Tanzania, among others, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, said that her delegation took exception to the remarks by the representative of the United States of America ascribing refugee status to Tibetan people that had been coerced by separatists into leaving the country illegally and trained to commit acts of terrorism against China. Her Government strongly objected to the politicization of refugee issues and any interference in its domestic affairs, whereas the United States persisted in interfering in the affairs of other nations, thereby fostering war and unrest, while building walls along its own borders. The United States should stop meddling and assume its international responsibilities with respect to refugee issues.

78. The representative of the **Asia Displacement Solutions Platform** (NGO group statement) called for increased support for the Afghan population to respond to the rapidly deteriorating

situation in their country and for the de facto authorities to reverse the recent ban on female staff working for NGOs; the rights of all Afghans, including women and children, must be respected. Humanitarian assistance alone was not enough, and UNHCR and States must immediately increase development funding for initiatives to build resilience, enhance livelihood opportunities and pave the way for socioeconomic recovery. It was essential also to enhance protection for displaced Afghans in neighbouring countries. While Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran were to be commended for having generously hosted Afghan refugees for more than four decades, displaced persons arriving in Pakistan after 15 August 2021, for instance, had been unable to register for international protection through UNHCR or gain access to the services available to earlier arrivals, which made them more vulnerable to labour exploitation, trafficking and detention. Further, deportations to Afghanistan from both those countries, in spite of the UNHCR non-return advisory, were concerning and engagement on the issue needed to be renewed through the primary regional vehicle for addressing Afghan displacement, namely the Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees.

79. The **Director of the Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific** (UNHCR), responding to the various comments and questions on the situation in Afghanistan, assured the Committee that UNHCR continued to adhere to Inter-Agency Stranding Committee guidelines in a coherent approach to the principled, non-discriminatory, delivery of humanitarian aid. He himself had discussed the way forward with the United Nations Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator in Afghanistan and his team on a recent visit to the country with the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, and he had raised the issue of the ban on female staff working for NGOs with the de facto authorities. Many NGOs still had women on their staff, often working from home and the authorities permitted some Afghan women to continue to work as volunteers, mainly in the fields of education and health care, as long as they were accompanied by a male escort. UNHCR, having responded to requests from female volunteers and entrepreneurs and supported their engagement wherever possible, would continue its advocacy for additional exemptions from the ban. It was encouraging that other Islamic countries in the region were speaking out against it, but more advocacy with Islamic scholars was required to ensure that the message was shared. With the monitoring and reporting systems that it had established in the field, UNHCR would have regular updates on access to assistance and the effectiveness of the resources provided in helping the many millions of Afghans in need of support. Principled, pragmatic engagement was the way forward in enhancing access to education, health care services and livelihood opportunities, which was key to preventing the situation from further deteriorating and adding to the risk of the onward movement of Afghan refugees, hence to the strain on host country coping mechanisms.

80. On the Bangladesh situation, since Rohingya refugees were stateless and unable to return home, it was vital to ensure access to services, freedom of movement and pathways to citizenship, and invest in the conditions for voluntary repatriation, as recommended by the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State. The joint UNHCR-UNDP quick impact projects were key to building trust in the Rohingya communities, and education, skills development and livelihood opportunities would remain important focus areas. Meanwhile, steps had been taken to address the environmental conditions in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar, for instance, including through transitioning to the use of liquefied petroleum gas, which had reduced deforestation in the area; introducing solar power, which had helped to reduce the Office's carbon footprint as well as that of its partners; and improving water supply, sanitation and hygiene facilities. All that work had been carried out in coordination with partners on the ground, supported by advocacy and awareness-raising.

81. On the situation in Myanmar, the new organization registration law had placed severe restrictions on the civic space and donors should do their utmost to ensure that the funding of NGOs and their capacity to deliver were not compromised as a result, including through the application of procedural waivers, flexible funding and simplified compliance requirements. Given the increasing numbers of Rohingya embarking on dangerous sea journeys, urgent action was needed to raise awareness of the risks. States in the region should follow the lead of the Indonesian authorities and allow the disembarkation of the Rohingya making those journeys, coordinate their search and rescue operations, and work under the Bali Process to strengthen the associated governance structures, regional engagement efforts and early warning capacity.

82. While welcome steps had been taken to introduce alternatives to the detention of refugees, asylum-seekers and displaced and stateless persons, there was some concern over the implementation gaps, especially in the case of vulnerable groups such as the Rohingya and Uyghurs. Detention caused physical and psychological harm, and all States should favour non-custodial measures and community-based care arrangements. In terms of general support for refugees, States

in the region needed to fulfil the pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum and work towards new, adequately resourced pledges that ensured equitable and predictable responses.

83. On the statelessness issue, which had been exacerbated by the limited ratification of the relevant international conventions, States in the region were encouraged to follow the example of the Philippines and Malaysia in protecting the right to nationality; the Philippines' national statelessness network, for example, attested to the positive progress made to date, and UNHCR continued to support civil registration and work with governments to identify undocumented and potentially stateless populations. Concrete action in line with the humanitarian-development-peace nexus in complex environments was essential, and examples of good development cooperation practices had been provided by, inter alia, the Global Refugee Forum, the Core Group of the Support Platform for the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees and UNDP's flagship "ABADEI" programme.

84. On climate change, which was a particular concern for a region as disaster-prone as Asia and the Pacific, there was an urgent need to understand, prevent and address the issue of climate displacement. The Secretary General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement had effectively highlighted the importance of developing durable solutions, and NGOs were committed to contributing to that work, bearing in mind that the primary responsibility for addressing internal displacement lay with States.

85. The **Chairperson** of the meeting took it that the Committee wished to approve a request from the Dominican Republic to participate as an observer.

86. *It was so agreed.*

## ii. Europe

87. The **Director of the Regional Bureau for Europe** (UNHCR) said that in the aftermath of the recent earthquakes in Türkiye, UNHCR had contributed to the humanitarian response by distributing tents and core relief items and would continue to work with sister agencies and local partners as part of the coordinated, government-led, international effort to help those left homeless. The solidarity and generosity of the international community would be crucial to recovery efforts and the resettlement of refugees in the difficult months ahead.

88. On the situation in Ukraine, the war had continued to cause human suffering, loss of life and destruction on an immeasurable scale, as outlined in the situational analysis of the Bureau's regional update, and the deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure had compounded the challenges facing humanitarian actors. UNHCR strongly condemned those unlawful acts and, as part of the government-led response, was working with the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator and sister agencies to deliver life-saving assistance and protection to millions of internally displaced persons and others in need, providing multipurpose cash assistance and core relief items and ensuring access to emergency services, including psychosocial care. The refugee response had benefited from solidarity and cooperation at every level, with neighbouring countries keeping their borders open to millions of uprooted Ukrainians; mayors and local organizations serving as first responders, mobilizing volunteers and distributing food and relief items; municipalities elsewhere in Europe sending funds to sister cities on the frontline and supporting relocations to places of safety; the private sector providing financial and in-kind support as well as innovative ideas on responding to a humanitarian crisis; and hundreds of thousands of people opening their homes to – and continuing to host – refugee families. Any prospect of return and early recovery would depend on the continuation of such collaboration, and the continued generosity of donors and courage of local partners and officials.

89. Regarding the risk of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and abuse to which women and children – 90 per cent of the refugees – were exposed, UNHCR and its partners had launched a "stay safe" campaign to advise them on how to protect themselves; protection from sexual exploitation and abuse networks had been established in host countries; a toll free regional call centre had been set up; and there were now 41 UNHCR-UNICEF Blue Dot safe space, protection and support hubs in place in seven countries, with an online digital Blue Dot providing information, such as the location of the hubs.

90. At the institutional level, the European Union had taken the unprecedented step of triggering its Temporary Protection Directive, creating a common legal framework for the inclusion of Ukrainian refugees in the socioeconomic fabric of host communities across 27 member States, thereby allowing them to re-establish themselves, with a sense of dignity, self-reliance and independence, until they could return home. That temporary solution, however, had proved

challenging to implement. According to the Office's protection monitoring, the refugees' ability to enjoy basic rights had been undermined by administrative and legal barriers that could, when compounded by information gaps and language challenges, result in their de facto exclusion; and since the rights were often interdependent, an inability to access one often had a subsequent effect on the realization of others. UNHCR had also identified a tendency in a number of States to apply a more restrictive interpretation that prevented the refugees from entering their territory, registering for temporary protection or retaining their status if they went to visit family in Ukraine. As the war in Ukraine continued and the displacement situation extended into a second year, UNHCR cautioned against allowing that tendency to grow. Such challenges, although inevitable, could be addressed with the right resources, continued collaboration among States and the political will.

91. Appropriate care and protection for unaccompanied children was another key concern. Respecting the rights and best interests of each child was paramount in all decision-making on optimal temporary care arrangements in host States. That included maintaining their civil status and identity, preserving the integrity of family relations for separated children and ensuring that they were reunited with their families as promptly as possible. The continued protection and well-being of children was a core consideration in the Office's technical advice and advocacy.

92. Beyond the Ukraine situation, UNHCR remained concerned about developments in the Lachin Corridor between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and called on all sides to de-escalate tensions and ensure freedom of movement in line with previously reached agreements. It was no surprise that Ukrainian refugees, like refugees all the world over, had fled first to neighbouring countries with long-standing ties. The welcome and expressions of solidarity extended to them, however, had contrasted sharply at times with the response of many European States to new arrivals from other parts of the world. While asylum applications in the European Union had increased in recent months, it remained a manageable challenge and an issue of solidarity. Yet often violent pushbacks had continued at many of Europe's land and sea borders; countless lives continued to be lost as desperate asylum-seekers risked dangerous journeys in the hands of people smugglers; reports of cruelty and the humiliating treatment of persons seeking access to Europe regularly featured in the mainstream media; while the conditions in some reception facilities had improved, they had remained well below acceptable standards in others; and frontline NGOs often found it difficult to operate for want of the full government support that they needed to save lives or help to manage new arrivals, instead of which they were sometimes criminalized. Europe should be capable of far better.

93. The objective of protecting refugees and finding solutions was fully compatible with that of sound border management by sovereign States. It called for high-level political commitment and close cooperation between European States, among regional institutions and with transit countries, countries of origin and host countries. UNHCR had welcomed the declaration of solidarity by European member States in June 2022 and the European Union's action plan for the Central Mediterranean the following November. While renewed collaboration and partnership were central to both, there was an urgent need to put the agreements into action, particularly in terms of search and rescue, safe disembarkation and, above all, predictable solidarity with frontline States. Alternatives must be found to dangerous journeys and reliance on people smuggling networks. UNHCR welcomed the interest generated by the European Commission's High-level Forum on Legal Pathways to Protection and the many concrete pledges to resettle refugees or facilitate humanitarian admissions. States in Europe, however, should strive to increase their resettlement pledges in the coming years and do more to ensure flexible, efficient procedures to enable rapid processing and departures so that targets were respected and people were not left to languish in a state of uncertainty.

94. UNHCR renewed its call on the European Union and its member States to adopt and implement the reform proposals outlined in the new pact on migration and asylum, with a particular focus on improved reception arrangements, better care and protection for the most vulnerable, swift and efficient registration and screening processes and a fair and expeditious adjudication of asylum claims. UNHCR would continue to engage with the institutions and member States of the European Union to develop innovative approaches to enhancing responsibility-sharing, fostering greater solidarity, supporting the return and reintegration of those not in need of international protection and providing more assistance to host countries. Any proposals aimed at ensuring that responsibility for the protection of refugees was shared rather than shifted to States beyond Europe's borders were welcome and worthy of consideration.

95. While the overall picture appeared mixed, it was simply a reflection of the breadth and complexity of the challenges faced in Europe, and UNHCR was encouraged by the renewed engagement and collaboration among European States and their willingness to think boldly and act

collectively, as demonstrated in the case of the Temporary Protection Directive. That political will could and should be mobilized to ensure that States better managed access to their territory, and procedures for all in need of international protection continued to make progress towards the eradication of statelessness, including through accessions, the establishment of statelessness determination procedures and legislative reform.

96. The second Global Refugee Forum, which will be an opportunity to take stock of the many achievements, new partnerships and innovations that had emerged since the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees and the first Forum, would provide a window to the future, and a chance to renew the shared commitment to protect refugees and find solutions through concrete, impactful pledges.

97. The representative of the **European Union**, reiterating her delegation's strong condemnation of the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine, said that it constituted an unacceptable violation of the Charter of the United Nations, as reaffirmed in several General Assembly resolutions, and that it had had far-reaching negative impacts not only on the Ukrainian population but also on vulnerable people across the globe. The Russian Federation must stop the war immediately, withdraw its troops and respect Ukraine's internationally recognized borders.

98. The European Union and its member States would remain steadfast in their support for Ukraine and the Ukrainian people for as long as it took the Russian Federation to cease its deadly, indiscriminate and criminal strikes against civilians and civilian infrastructure. International humanitarian law, including on the treatment of prisoners of war, must be respected.

99. The European Union and its member States were particularly concerned about reports of Ukrainian children being abducted, taken to the Russian Federation and then forcibly naturalized and adopted, which was a violation of their rights and against their best interests. Such practices must cease and the abducted children be returned and reunited with their families without delay. The principles of child protection must be upheld at all times, and the Russian Federation must facilitate the Office's immediate and unimpeded access to all Ukrainian refugees, in particular children.

100. The European Union and its member States took pride in the outpouring of support from the European countries and communities that had welcomed millions of forcibly displaced Ukrainians – mostly women and children – since the start of the Russian Federation's war, giving them access to housing, health care, education and the labour market under the Temporary Protection Directive. Moldova in particular was to be commended for its remarkable solidarity and its Government's decision to activate temporary protection status for the refugees. The continued support provided, both bilaterally and through UNHCR, to that country and others, such as Georgia, in order to ensure the coordinated implementation of the refugee response should be accompanied by investments in more sustainable long-term solutions, such as furthering the transition from cash assistance to inclusion in national social protection mechanisms.

101. The European Union and its member States appreciated the courage and tireless efforts of UNHCR and other international, national and local actors to support the Government of Ukraine in providing protection, shelter and other forms of assistance to those directly affected by the war inside the country. UNHCR should strive to improve that protection through a comprehensive strategy underpinned by needs assessment and flexible contingency planning to respond to the realities and latest developments on the ground.

102. The European Union and its member States, deeply concerned about the global impacts of the war against Ukraine on fragile countries and the most vulnerable, had reacted swiftly to – and remained fully engaged in addressing and mitigating – those impacts. Assistance, including food assistance, would continue to be provided through the “solidarity lanes” that had brought over 34 million tons of Ukrainian grain and agricultural products to world markets. That initiative, together with the Black Sea Grain Initiative and the Ukrainian Government's “grain from Ukraine” programme, had been key to ensuring the continued availability and affordability of food and fertilizers.

103. Despite the unprecedented burden and responsibility of hosting and assisting the many millions forcibly displaced and in dire need as a direct result of the Russian Federation's war of aggression, the support to Ukraine had not come at the expense of responses to other refugees crises around the world. The European Union and its member States remained committed to providing international protection and upholding the principle of non-refoulement, with over 900,000 people having applied for protection in 2022, nearly 50 per cent more than in 2021. The sharp rise in the numbers of irregular arrivals, however, was concerning, and partner countries were urged to do more



to prevent irregular departures, to intercept the many migrant smugglers, human traffickers and other unscrupulous criminals abusing and endangering the lives of those on the move, and to cooperate in readmitting nationals not entitled to stay in the European Union after applications for international protection were rejected. At the same time, the European Union and its member States remained committed to providing safe and legal pathways to protection and had pledged more than 29,000 resettlement and humanitarian admissions in 2023.

104. The next Global Refugee Forum would be a key opportunity to reaffirm commitments to greater burden- and responsibility-sharing, to mobilize new pledges and commitments, and to broaden the range of stakeholders and partners. The European Union and its member States, expressing deep appreciation to UNHCR and its staff for their work and dedication in the current challenging circumstances, urged it to continue its proactive engagement with development actors and international financial institutions, as well as its advocacy for the inclusion and meaningful participation of refugees and refugee-led organizations.

105. The representative of **Mexico**, expressing deep concerns about the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, said that her country had shown solidarity with the Ukrainian people since the start of the military invasion, receiving persons in need of protection and making financial contributions to support the UNHCR activities there and in refugee-hosting countries. Mexico appreciated the Office's critical role in assisting internally displaced persons, especially in the winter months when humanitarian needs were all the greater, and would continue to support it and the international community in those efforts. In the meantime, the parties to the conflict must fully respect international humanitarian law and the human rights of all, and strive to arrive at peaceful, lasting solutions to enable safe and dignified returns and help the returnees to rebuild their country.

106. On the recent earthquakes in Türkiye and the Syrian Arab Republic and the growing humanitarian needs of those affected, Mexico was aware of the extent to which the disaster had exacerbated the already significant challenges faced by internally displaced persons and other vulnerable persons as a result of the protracted conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. Her Government had recently announced a \$6 million contribution to the Office's efforts to provide them with humanitarian support and protection, and acknowledged the important role played by the Government and people of Türkiye in receiving refugees from other countries in the region, including the Syrian Arab Republic. A concerted humanitarian response was essential, to which end Mexico had sent a team of experts to assist in search and rescue operations and over 100 tonnes of humanitarian aid to attend to the most urgent needs of the displaced. UNHCR was encouraged to continue its humanitarian support in both countries.

107. The representative of **Estonia**, aligning her delegation with the European Union statement, expressed her country's strong condemnation of the Russian Federation's invasion of – and war of aggression against – Ukraine, which had caused extreme human suffering, a massive refugee crisis in Europe and a food crisis that had had negative impacts on refugees throughout the world. The Russian Federation's unjustified aggression was a blatant and unacceptable violation of international humanitarian law, human rights law and, as reaffirmed in a number of General Assembly resolutions, the Charter of the United Nations, resulting in the loss of thousands of innocent lives and the destruction of hospitals, schools and other civilian structures. Estonia called on the Russian Federation to respect international humanitarian law and guarantee full and unhindered access for humanitarian workers who must be allowed to operate without fearing for their lives.

108. Estonia was particularly concerned about reports of Ukrainian children being abducted, forcibly taken to the Russian Federation and involuntarily naturalized and adopted. Those illegal practices must stop, and the children must be returned without delay. The Russian Federation must grant UNHCR unimpeded access to all Ukrainian refugees and children in particular. Estonia would appreciate more information from UNHCR on the current situation regarding access to Ukrainian children in the Russian Federation.

109. Ukraine continued to face a humanitarian crisis on a massive scale, and humanitarian assistance must be sustained, coordinated and well-targeted. Estonia commended all humanitarian actors, including UNHCR and its partners and local and Estonian NGOs, for their efforts. It expressed appreciation to the humanitarian workers on the ground for their work in difficult and dangerous circumstances, and stressed that national leadership and close coordination were needed between national and local government actors, the UNHCR system, donors, and international and local civil society organizations. Estonia would continue to support Ukraine and its people in all areas, be it political, economic, financial, humanitarian or security-related. It had provided over 23.1 million euros in humanitarian aid to Ukraine since February 2022, including 4.1 million euros

from the public sector, and would respond to the needs identified in the plans for 2023. In a situation in which more than 15 million men, women and children had been forced to flee their homes, Estonia had kept its borders open to Ukrainian refugees and continued to host, alongside the Czech Republic, the largest number of Ukrainian refugees per capita. It also supported efforts to assist Ukrainian refugees in other host countries, such as Georgia and Moldova; Estonia commended them, as well as Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, among others, for their unwavering solidarity, hospitality and support for refugees, and expressed its deep appreciation to UNHCR and its staff for their work and dedication in the current challenging circumstances. Unfortunately, no amount of aid could ever compensate for the lost lives and homes and the destruction caused by the Russian Federation. The Russian Federation had started the war, and it must end it immediately by withdrawing its troops from the internationally recognized territory of Ukraine.

110. The representative of **Malta**, aligning his delegation with the European Union statement and recalling that the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine had forced millions – mostly women and children – to flee their country, said that his country, despite not being a neighbouring State, had received more than 1,400 applications for temporary protection since 24 February 2022 under the Temporary Protection Directive activated by the European Union. His Government commended the work of UNHCR and its partners both in Ukraine and in neighbouring States, and reiterated its readiness to support those fleeing the violence of the Russian Federation's unprovoked and unjust war of aggression and to cooperate on efforts to find short- and long-term solutions.

111. While migrant and asylum-seeker arrivals at specific locations were liable to fluctuate periodically, the central Mediterranean route had seen a net increase in the number of migrants risking their lives in attempted crossings for a third consecutive year. Those that succeeded usually applied for asylum, and Malta remained fully committed to respecting its obligations under international law and the human rights of all persons in the territory under its jurisdiction. The Maltese authorities had not ignored a single distress signal from a vessel entering their area of jurisdiction with migrants and asylum-seekers on board, and those granted international protection had always enjoyed access to essential services, including health care, which had been bolstered in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that every person's human rights were respected.

112. The Office's continued work to assist in advancing community-based, whole-of-society approaches to protection through the UNHCR Country Office in Malta was commendable. While female genital mutilation was not – and had never been – a social practice in the country, a number of cases had come to light in some migrant groups in past years. In 2022, UNHCR had introduced community mobilization programmes to combat the harmful practice, and his Government had remained steadfast in its commitment to eradicating it – by amending the criminal code, for instance – as part of its efforts to meet target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals (Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation) and to implement the European Union's Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy.

113. Malta reiterated its commitment to implementing the Global Compact on Refugees and looked forward to the second Global Refugee Forum. It expressed appreciation to UNHCR for its invaluable assistance and cooperation in all the areas within its remit, which would hopefully be further strengthened, and for its work globally in the field of humanitarian action in often challenging circumstances.

114. On the eve of International Women's Day, his Government paid tribute to the excellent work of the UNHCR female staff around the world. Their efforts were a tangible demonstration of why the inclusion of women in all aspects of society was vital.

*The meeting rose at 1.18 p.m.*