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MENA Oral Update

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The Director of the Bureau of Middle East and North Africa

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Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honour to address the Standing Committee for the first time in my capacity as the Director of the Regional Bureau of the Middle East and North Africa as well as the Regional Refugee Coordinator for the Syria Refugee Response. This year has proven to be the most challenging yet for the entire region and most profoundly for Syria and its neighbours. The past year has been exceptionally tragic in the severity of violence and loss of life within Syria and the magnitude of displacement; at the same time it has been an extraordinary year in view of the generosity of host countries, host communities and donors.

Inside Syria, it is estimated today that nine million people are in need of protection and assistance. UNHCR and partners, as part of their participation in the inter-agency humanitarian response, reached 3.4 million across the country with humanitarian relief, including cash assistance to a limited group of the most vulnerable. In addition, UNHCR winterization support also reached over one million people. Millions were reached with core relief items last year in all 14 Governorates and UNHCR Syria has established field presences in six locations. UNHCR also participated in the inter-agency convoys to hard-to-reach areas and spear-headed the recent

UN airlifts from Erbil to Qamishly. Nonetheless, the security situation within Syria remains untenable and humanitarian access is severely restricted.

Beyond those we reached, many more are in need of relief and the besieged areas are a stark reminder that protection must remain our primary objective. We are driven by the desire to ensure that those in need are assisted, however we must recognize that the evacuation of the Old City of Homs took place under circumstances that challenged us all. We are hopeful that the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2139 (2014) will facilitate the expansion of humanitarian relief operations, in accordance with applicable provisions of international humanitarian law, and that the safety of the IDPs, as well as humanitarian workers, will, in the future, be ensured.

Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

The **magnitude** of the Syrian refugee crisis cannot be overemphasized. January 2014 alone saw over 100,000 refugees arriving in the neighboring countries, and today the total number of registered refugees stands at almost 2.5 million, if Government estimates of unregistered refugees are included this would increase to around 3 million. Compare this to a year ago, when the total number was 773,000. This represents 320% of the Syrian refugee population a year ago. And, with slim prospects for a political solution in the immediate future, the refugee flow is expected to continue throughout 2014.

An essential component of protecting and assisting Syrian refugees has been the registration process undertaken by UNHCR, in cooperation with the host governments. 2.5 million refugees is no small achievement, requiring interviews with each individual, comprehensive data collection and biometric technology, followed by regular verification. Registration is the basis on which well-targeted, cost effective programmes are built. But, most importantly, it is the gateway to protection, assistance and thus, to dignity.

The **generosity** of neighboring countries and local communities in hosting this number of people must be commended. Borders have for the most part remained open. Jordan is now host to some 578,000 and the number of refugees in Lebanon has reached over 945,000. Turkey hosts nearly 620,000 refugees while the number in Iraq, mainly northern Iraq, is around 225,000. Egypt

continues to host over 134,500 refugees. These numbers reflect registered refugees whereas the Government estimates of unregistered refugees bring the totals much higher.

It is important to emphasize that in all host countries the large majority of Syrian refugees (over 80%) live in local communities, not in camps. The burden this places on the communities, public services (health and education) and job markets, must be acknowledged. The cumulative economic and social consequences of hosting the refugees should not be underestimated.

As Syria's neighbours rightly remind us, this is not their burden alone; it is for the international community as a whole to step forward. In this regard the High Commissioner and Ministers of the host countries have established a process, the High-Level Segment of ExCom on Solidarity and Burden Sharing, to ensure continued attention to the heavy burden borne by the host countries and secure commitments to a multifaceted response based on international responsibility sharing.

We call upon Syria's neighbors and those countries further afield, that Syrians are reaching by any means, to keep their borders open and facilitate access to asylum. It is unthinkable that Syrian asylum seekers are turned back, including to host countries in the region, which have shown such generosity in responding to the protection needs of so many Syrian children, women and men. In this context, I thank countries further afield, for increasing their quotas for resettlement, expanding Humanitarian Admission Programmes and considering other forms of admissions for Syria refugees.

I would also like to highlight **the invaluable support** of traditional and non-traditional donors, through the Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP) and the Refugee Response Plan (RRP) 5, as well as bilaterally, for our programmes in 2013. This support has enabled UNHCR and its partners to assist and protect the millions of displaced within Syria and those seeking asylum across its borders. The projects funded through these appeals reached a 90% implementation rate.

Donors have also been generous in terms of pledging funds for the year ahead. The 2014 RRP6 and SHARP appeals are unprecedented and we thank donors for their commitments at the

Kuwait II pledging conference earlier this year. It is our sincere hope that donors will continue their support throughout 2014 and beyond.

As the longer term nature of the conflict is becoming a reality, bolstering the capacity of host countries to continue their support is paramount. UNHCR is participating in the Comprehensive Regional Strategy, supporting the No Lost Generation initiative, and is partnering with development agencies, such as UNDP, and international financial institutions like the World Bank, to assist countries in coping with the structural impact of the sudden increase in population through national resilience and stabilization plans and, in the longer term, benefit from the presence of the refugees.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While the Syria crisis is much larger in size and scope than other humanitarian crises in the region, it does not diminish their severity or the need for our attention. Urban nature of refugees coupled with continued mixed flows of migrants and asylum-seekers are some of the challenges that the Middle East and North Africa region is currently facing.

In addition to the Syrian refugees, Egypt is host to over 50,000 refugees and asylum seekers, mostly of African origin, for whom the protection challenges remain considerable, given the overall volatility in the country. The number of individuals seeking asylum in Egypt, not counting the Syrians, has doubled since 2012.

Over 60,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Israel face difficult conditions in terms of basic rights and services. With measures put in place by Israel to stem the flow of migrants, access for asylum seekers has also become increasingly difficult, and their protection space severely limited. While we understand the challenges faced by Israel in managing the reception of migrants and asylum-seekers, it is important that the treatment of asylum-seekers be in line with international refugee and human rights law, and we reiterate our call that the asylum-seekers should have access to fair and efficient asylum procedures, as well as means to renew their existing visas while their claims are adjudicated.

With the Sinai route curtailed, the migratory flux has shifted to Libya, another main transit route for asylum seekers and migrants. Despite the fact that Libya is still grappling with an extremely challenging security environment, asylum seekers continue to register in both Tripoli and Benghazi. As of February, UNHCR registered some 33,400 asylum seekers of various nationalities, including over 17,400 people fleeing Syria.

I wish to draw your attention to the situation in Iraq, where internal displacement approaches 1.2 million, as the 900,000 long term displaced are joined by over 300,000 persons fleeing renewed violence in Anbar. UNHCR started to distribute core relief items in January 2014 and lead the protection and shelter clusters as part of the inter-agency response. Displacements are increasingly spread beyond Anbar with no signs of immediate improvement on the situation.

In Yemen, over 300,000 Yemenis remain internally displaced in 2014, and with the worsening economic situation and insecurity, many have become increasingly vulnerable. Security permitting, a profiling exercise for IDPs in the north, planned for the first quarter of 2014, will provide both an intention survey for durable solutions and initial base-line data on which to develop projects that will hopefully provide solutions to the longstanding displacement. UNHCR stands ready to work with the Government and the partners as part of the inter-agency efforts to find solutions to the IDPs in the North.

Yet, despite the complex humanitarian and security conditions in Yemen, desperate refugees and migrants from the Horn of Africa continue to arrive on its shores in the tens of thousands - joining the nearly 250,000 refugees already generously hosted by the Government and its people. Meanwhile, UNHCR will continue to implement its urban refugee programme with emphasis on community mobilization, mainstreaming increased access to services and livelihood opportunities as well as support to the people with specific needs. Following the Regional Conference on Asylum and Migration from the Horn of Africa to Yemen that the Government of Yemen, with the support and co-operation of UNHCR and IOM organized in Sana'a in November 2013, the Sana'a Declaration was adopted. Participating countries have recently been called to designate a focal point to work on the follow-up process with the Government of Yemen. This is an important first step in the process of addressing asylum and migration in the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In addition to the Horn of Africa-Yemen and Sinai routes, North Africa is a major route for mixed migration, smuggling and trafficking, including of asylum seekers and refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa, many of whom are taking risky voyages across the Mediterranean at a high cost. As mentioned earlier, Libya has seen a significant increase in departures and will continue to be a point of departure for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees trying to reach Europe. Irregular movements are also impacting Tunisia which rescued 600 individuals off vessels in distress during 2013. Among those rescued were 140 asylum seekers from Sub-Saharan Africa.

Other countries in North Africa also face similar challenges and in some cases, they have become not only transit countries on the migratory route, but increasingly the destination for migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. The challenges of mixed migration and protection at sea cannot be resolved unless tackled comprehensively. In this regard, UNHCR greatly values and will further strengthen our partnership with relevant actors such as IOM, civil society and the Governments concerned.

Amidst all challenges, I am pleased to report that a good progress has been made to **strengthen the protection** environment in North Africa.

In Morocco, UNHCR welcomes the Government's continued work on its reform of national migration and asylum policies. At the end of 2013, the first Moroccan refugee cards and residence permits were issued. UNHCR welcomes Morocco's stated intent to have a fully functional new asylum system and stands ready to work with the Government in this context.

The reduction of the backlog of refugee status determination cases in Algeria is another achievement. Similarly, UNHCR and partners are able to afford protection and offer assistance activities to 90,000 Saharawi refugees in the camps near Tindouf. We are however concerned on the reduced donor funding for this group of refugees and appeal once again for stronger donor support to one of the most protracted refugee situation in the region.

In November 2013, UNHCR, in cooperation with the Government of Morocco and Frente Polisario, undertook a Confidence Building Measure programme's beneficiary registration

exercise in the refugee camps near Tindouf and the four towns in the Territory. With the additional newly registered 5,669 persons, around 28,500 persons will benefit from the family visits programme. In this regard, UNHCR is actively consulting the parties for an immediate resumption of family visits flights which remain suspended since June 2013

We appreciate the Government of Tunisia for its continued support in working towards finding solutions to refugees who have been relocated to urban areas from Shousha camp. While the camp was officially closed in 2013, UNHCR remains engaged in working with the government to resolve the issue of a small number of residual cases to put a final end to this situation.

In a number of North Africa countries, work towards the drafting and adopting the national asylum legislation continues to progress. UNHCR is committed to support this important development through the provision of technical advice and deployment of experts.

A total of some 31,300 Malians arrived in Mauritania's Mbera camp in 2013 making the current total refugee population to some 60,000 individuals. The joint biometric enrolment launched by the Mauritanian authorities and UNHCR, in April last year, strengthened the accuracy and reliability of data and allowed for better targeted protection and assistance programmes. While UNHCR and partners keep focusing on improving the assistance standards in the camp, including nutrition and education, UNHCR has observed small scale spontaneous returns to Mali and received positive feedback from refugees attending reconciliation meetings in Bamako. Nonetheless, the humanitarian and security situation in Mali remains fragile and refugees in Mauritania are not yet prepared to return on a large-scale. Pending durable solutions, support to host community will be a critical complement to the ongoing refugee programme for Mauritania. UN agencies and NGO partners are developing a strategy in this regard.

In the Gulf, the partnership between UNHCR and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries continues to be strengthened and enormous progress has been achieved in this regard over the past few years. Intense efforts have been exerted to highlight and elaborate on UNHCR's protection mandate and role, its activities and obligations towards refugees, and focusing on UNHCR's effective presence and deliverables on the ground. In light of the enhanced implementation capacity of many partners in the region, there is also a stronger push towards

encouraging greater coordination and stronger participation from GCC actors in existing UNHCR mechanisms.

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Looking forward, protection will remain foremost among the strategic priorities of UNHCR's operations in the Middle East and North Africa. This coming year, we will increase our focus on the complexity of mixed migratory flows including through initiatives for enhancing protection at sea as part of UNHCR's global strategy on this topic. We will aim to improve refugee status determination practices and process, particularly related to the increasing urban caseloads. We will continue to strengthen our programmes to prevent and respond to Sexual and Gender Based Violence, in recognition of the risk and vulnerability of refugees, the displaced, and other persons of concern face globally.

The search for durable solutions remains another key priority across the board, and self-reliance is an essential component of any solution. We will employ creative approaches to this end, both for the long term displaced and capacity building for their host communities. Cash-based programmes, where possible, will increasingly become a mainstay in our response. These programmes promote self-reliance, are more cost-effective and provide greater dignity to refugees and displaced persons.

Resettlement, as mentioned earlier, has played a critical role for many individuals and families, both Syrians and other nationalities. For the most vulnerable, resettlement can, at times, be the only possibility for a future. Voluntary repatriation continues to be the durable solution that refugees and displaced alike overwhelmingly benefit from, and UNHCR is ready to assist where conditions are deemed conducive and the benchmarks for legal, physical, and material safety are met.

In the meantime, and until conditions allow refugees throughout the region to return to their countries of origin in safety and dignity, UNHCR will continue to rely on the strong relations developed with national, regional, and international partners. It is through these partnerships that we can deepen and expand our reach to ensure that all refugees, including the most vulnerable,

are protected and assisted in the most flexible, innovative, and efficient ways possible in increasingly complex contexts.

Thank you.