



**UNHCR**

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

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**65<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's  
Programme**

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**Introductory remarks by George OKOTH-OBBO, Assistant High Commissioner for Operations to  
Agenda Item 3, “Regional Activities and Global Programmes”, Monday 15 March 2016**

Mr Chairman  
Excellencies Ambassadors and Heads of Delegations  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning.

At this meeting last year, I made my first statement in my present capacity as Assistant High Commissioner for Operations. In the 12 months since then, UNHCR's global operations have been nothing short of highly charged! We have witnessed important successes and positive developments in our work as you will hear over these next two and a half days here. The overall global operational landscape has however remained fundamentally very trying and deeply preoccupying. These features have of course extended to my work in overseeing those operations in the course of which I have met and worked with many of you here in the Permanent Missions. I have also visited our Field Operations, among them Croatia, Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Mexico, Slovenia and Pakistan. Each in their own way exemplify the crucial role of the membership represented in this Standing Committee in granting asylum, providing humanitarian assistance, taking forward the different solutions for the persons we are mandated to serve or in financially, politically and through other means supporting or leveraging the work of UNHCR. I wish to extend to you all my deep appreciation for this support both personally to me in my work and, most crucially of all, in those respects which have directly served the beneficiaries of our mandated responsibilities. Thank you very much indeed.

Today, I will overview – as briefly as I can – the discharge of those mandated responsibilities in the five Regional Operations - Africa, Asia and the Pacific, the Americas, Europe and the Middle East and North Africa – more details of which you will hear from my colleagues the Bureau Directors in the sessions that will follow. As I have indicated already, overall it has been a very preoccupying protection and humanitarian topography worldwide not least in Europe. Here, we have witnessed what some have called a relentless storm unfold over the 12 months of last year and so far in the three months of 2016 in such a highly changeable manner that has revealed in equal measure, on one hand, heart-warming solidarity and humanity and, on the other hand, the venality that in both cases Governments and ordinary citizens can be capable of. Down the route of mobility and even further afield to countries of resettlement, extra-ordinary welcome and support have been extended to a total of nearly one million people the decisive majority of whom have originated from among the world's top refugee-producing countries namely Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. But we have at the same time been confounded by a disturbing toxification of the refugee and migrant discourse. A tide of xenophobia, islamophobia, fear, the stereotyping of refugees and migrants as terrorists and even violence continues to greet the new arrivals and to fan or reinforce a panoply of strict control and deterrence measures that now include the definitive closure of the so-called Western Balkans route. The very system of asylum and protection based on well-established international law principles that has served humanity so abidingly these past 65 years is being trenchantly questioned and its existence could even be in jeopardy.

The Standing Committee will hear from the Director of the Europe Bureau how the situation in Europe is poised today including the critical humanitarian situation that is evolving in Greece since the definitive closure of the Western Balkans route mentioned already. Most immediately, 16,000 people have been left stranded at the border with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia under the

terrible conditions being imaged in the international media. A still growing number of others - now 40,000 – is caught up elsewhere in the country in a situation which, ranging from overall protection management to registration, reception and accommodation conditions, the provision of humanitarian assistance, implementation of relocation and overall coordination urgently requires vital political decisions and the effective institution of a number of crucial operational measures if a disaster is to be avoided. If one pauses for a moment to think of it, it has to be said that 50,000 people are not by number, pace or swiftness of arrival the most over-whelming situation with which global refugee emergency response has been faced. In other words, as much as operational effectiveness is urgently required at the present moment, it is surely the political will decisively to act and manage what is indeed palpably a manageable situation that is even more vitally called for.

Mr Chairman, the overviews that the Committee will hear will also illustrate how inexorably inter-connected situations actually are even if they may play out in different regions. With most of the Afghans, Iraqis and Syrians who are arriving in Europe from or through Turkey, the Middle East at large or South West Asia; Africans originating from or through West and the Horn of Africa; or the mobility towards the United States from the Northern Triangle of Central America, the reality that stands out is that without a joined-up, end-to-end approach, it is not possible to turn off the tap as it were in only one geography and expect that a real solution will result let alone endure.

Beyond this, I hope that what you will hear about the situation in these other regions will not be coming as too much of a reminder because our collective attention has been crucially commanded by the situation in Europe. The briefing will in any case underscore that both the examples I have just cited in reference to the issue of inter-connectedness and others such as the Nigeria Situation which only 12 months ago we were highlighting as the most compelling unfolding displacement emergency at that time, or the ones which broke out, respectively from the Burundi elections or the conflict in Yemen, all still require very fundamental life-saving assistance and core protection interventions. These responses have to be carried out in often much more difficult and dangerous conditions of access in which the safety and security of our staff are routinely threatened and even lives lost. Funding availability is terribly limited yet continues to diminish.

Attention will also be called to the fact that these are actually the regions in which the bulk of the Office's operations are taking place and in which the decisive part of the refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons and internally displaced persons for which States and UNHCR are accountable are to be found. Furthermore, as pre-occupying and indeed even grim as the images on our TV screens of the crisis in Europe evidently are, both in Europe itself and elsewhere the world over, there are opportunities that must be grasped so as to consolidate protection dividends, transformational outcomes and lasting solutions for the persons of our concern. I highlight, among others, the Brazil Plan of Action; the situation of Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan; the RAHA project in Pakistan; the local integration of naturalized Burundian former refugees in Tanzania and many others as you will hear.

Mr Chairman, in these efforts to extend protection and the search for solutions, we are grateful for what is still very solid asylum and solidarity extended to UNHCR's persons of concern and the financial and material contributions we receive from our donors. Many challenges of course remain. For instance, food assistance or planned cash assistance for refugees continues to be severely short of the

full ration in many operations in Africa and the Middle East although I should also acknowledge the stupendous efforts by WFP which have resulted in the restoration of relatively stable food pipelines in a number of previously impacted operations. We call on our financial donors not only to sustain, but, particularly, increase your donorship to significantly more than the 50% at which our requirements of over US\$ 7 Billion were funded in 2015. I call your attention in particular to the differentiated financial responses which are seeing some grossly underfunded programmes even facing a threat to their existence. In Africa, where overall funding availability was at only 35% of the requirements, programmatic integrity is at breaking point in, respectively, the Mali Emergency Situation (funded at 16% and with a US\$ 93.3 million funding gap); the CAR Situation (funded at 24% and with a US\$ 182.4 million gap); and the South Sudan Situation (funded at 30% and with a funding gap of US\$ 544.1 million). Funding for programmes in the Americas was at 25% (and a gap of US\$ 84 million); in Asia and the Pacific at 35% (a gap of US\$ 389 million); Europe 40% (a gap of US\$ 357 million); and in MENA at 58% (a gap of US\$ 907 million).

Mr Chairman, coming to conclude, let me acknowledge and express UNHCR's deep appreciation to our more than 930 partners globally for their accompaniment in what remains an extraordinary moment. Of its US\$ 3.5 billion global expenditure in 2015, the Office entrusted nearly 80% of it to 753 national and international NGOs of which 90 were new partners. The NGOs often are the first on the scene and remain long after international players have left. We thank them most earnestly for their inter-locking of hands and effort with us over these past 12 months even more of which will continue to be needed as we forge forward. On behalf of UNHCR, I reiterate our commitment to even greater inclusivity and better coordination with you to optimize the effectiveness of our collective efforts.

I thank you all very much for listening to me.

George Okoth-Obbo, Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, UNHCR.