

87th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme - Opening Remarks by Ms. Gillian Triggs Assistant High Commissioner for Protection

Mr. Chair, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies, and gentlemen,

This year the United Nations celebrates the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration has since inspired international treaty commitments to protect human rights.



Eleanor Roosevelt, as Chair of the drafting committee, well understood the need to ensure universal rights for everyone and to respect the equal worth of every person.

The Declaration is of special importance for refugees and people who are stateless for it recognises two crucial human rights: the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution and the right to a nationality.

While the Declaration was agreed in the aftermath of the Second World War, at a time of great optimism for world peace, the tragic reality is that since then, the numbers of people seeking asylum have continued to rise. For 10 years we report increased numbers. Every year the plight of those displaced becomes more desperate.

The root causes of rising forced displacements are typically to be found in breaches of the very human rights the Declaration was designed to protect: the rights to equality, to life, liberty, and security, to protection from discrimination and arbitrary arrest or detention, to education, work, and freedom of movement, and to a nationality. To respect these human rights is to address the root causes of refugee flight in the spirit of leaving no one behind.



Building upon the Universal Declaration 3 years later, the 1951 Refugee Convention was revolutionary for its time in guaranteeing refugees the “widest possible exercise of... fundamental rights and freedoms”, adding economic, social, and cultural rights to civil and political rights.

Human rights and refugee laws are not static or set in stone.

Over the last 75 years, international and national courts and tribunals, UN resolutions and the practices of states and international organizations have interpreted these laws giving them contemporary relevance.

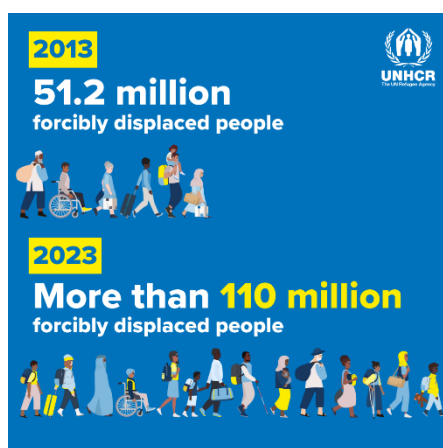
This year, the High Commissioner’s Note on International Protection focusses on the right to seek and enjoy asylum as it has evolved since the Universal Declaration was agreed. The Note examines the progress made in securing the protection rights of all those within our mandate – refugees, returnees and people who are displaced in their own country or stateless. It concludes that many of those forcibly displaced seeking international protection are unable to enjoy their rights, are denied access to asylum, and pushed back at borders making them vulnerable to refoulement.

My remarks reflect both on the High Commissioner’s note as well as the Standing Committee papers on Statelessness, Solutions and IDPs.

To begin, what is the global environment in which the UN Refugee Agency seeks to provide international protection?

The scale of forced displacement and international protection needs globally is staggering.

The High Commissioner announced today in the Global Trends Report that there are now more than 110 million people forcibly displaced throughout the world, including those fleeing the eruption of conflict in Sudan over the last few weeks - double the numbers reported ten years ago.



Of the global total, 35.3 million are refugees, people who crossed an international border to find safety, while the greater share - 58 per cent, or 62.5 million people – are displaced in their home countries fleeing conflict and violence.

The impact of conflict and violence as the primary driver of displacement is clear. Over two-thirds of all refugees and others in need of international protection have fled from Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, and Venezuela, forcing the fastest displacement of people since World War II, prompting the UN Refugee Agency to declare 35 new emergencies last year, an unprecedented spike in humanitarian needs globally.

The impact of the recent conflict in Sudan on the civilian population has been devastating. Over 3.5 million people are now displaced within Sudan, joining 1.1 million refugees who have been hosted in the country. 736,000 people are newly displaced within Sudan and over 150,800 have fled to neighbouring countries - Egypt, Chad, Central African Republic and Ethiopia, among others.



While on mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo recently, with the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, Raouf Mazou, I saw the crowded and unsafe conditions for the 6.3 million people displaced within the country, along with half a million refugees. Conflict in the region of North Kivu, around Goma and Beni, has forced families from their homes and villages, mainly women and children, who are living in cramped makeshift shelters or with generous, though poor, host communities. Food insecurity and the fear of further violence make their lives a misery. Violence continues with armed groups attacking families and the death toll mounts. The protection needs are funded thus far to 29 per cent, mirroring the dire financial constraints upon UNHCR's work with our partners in the region.

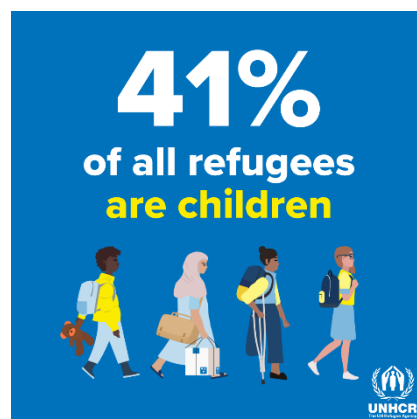
This grim picture of protection needs is nonetheless lightened by examples of solidarity, inclusion, and compassion by governments and civil society as they share the burdens and responsibilities for people who are forcibly displaced.

Despite the rise in refugee numbers, many countries have kept their borders open to those in need of international protection. The right to seek asylum continues to be respected by

most countries, providing a lifeline for millions. Examples include the triggering of the Temporary Protection Directive by Europe in response to the millions fleeing the war in Ukraine, and the grant of prima facie status by the Central African Republic to new arrivals from South Sudan.



These examples of best practice stand in stark contrast to the efforts by a few countries to shift the responsibility for assessing refugee claims to other, usually poorer, distant countries. Unilateral policies that deny territorial access to claim asylum are both inconsistent with international law and are failing as a deterrent.



A tragic aspect of forced displacement is that at least 40 per cent of those having to flee their country are children. In some conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine, women and children are about 82 per cent of those struggling across borders to safety. Similarly, women and children are the most at risk among those internally displaced in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.



Compounding conflict driven displacement, the past year has brought drought in Somalia, food insecurity across Africa, global inflation, dwindling economic opportunities, earthquakes in northwest Syria and Türkiye, and floods in Pakistan.

The World Bank's 2023 World Development Report estimates that 40 percent of the world's population - 3.5 billion people - live in places that are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change such as water shortages, drought, heat stresses, sea level rise, and extreme events such as floods, fires, and tropical cyclones, all fueling yet further conflict and displacement.

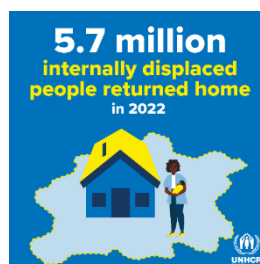


As protection needs have risen, UNHCR has sought solutions that are sustainable and respond flexibly and pragmatically to a rapidly changing global environment.

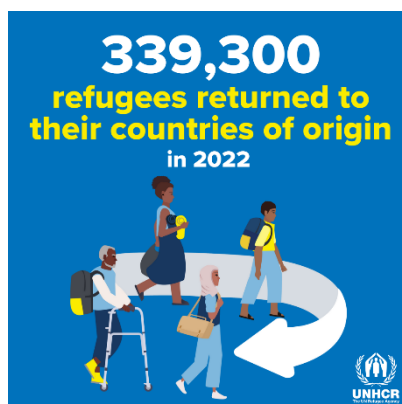
Refreshed, creative thinking is needed more than ever to ensure effective protection of displaced people.

The traditional solutions for people who are forcibly displaced have been voluntary returns to the country of origin where it is safe and dignified to do so, local integration in the host country, and third country opportunities for resettlement, family reunion, labour mobility, education and community sponsorship.

With respect to voluntary returns, UNHCR's surveys confirm that most refugees and IDPs hope to return to their towns, villages, and communities. Most will not do so unless the conditions are safe and conducive to rebuilding their lives. In 2022, protracted conflicts, political instability, threats from non-government armed groups, lack of basic services such as health clinics and social support, few opportunities to work, conscription, the closure of schools and unresolved property and land disputes have all deterred return.



Despite these impediments, some returns have been possible over this past year. At least 5.7 million IDPs returned to their place of origin in 2022, 8 per cent more than the previous year.



There have also been some successes in refugee returns:

- In June last year, the cessation clause for Ivorians was invoked. By the end of 2022, about 96 per cent of refugees had returned to Côte d'Ivoire, ending one of the most protracted refugee situations in West Africa.
- UNHCR also facilitated the voluntary repatriation of over 207,000 Burundian refugees, primarily from the United Republic of Tanzania to Burundi, where the conditions for return have significantly improved.

While 339,300 refugees voluntarily returned to 38 countries of origin in 2022, this was a decrease of 21 per cent compared to the previous year. We need to continue both to support countries that host refugees and to address root causes in countries of origin.

Durable solutions can also be found with resettlement, regular pathways such as labour mobility, education, family reunion and community sponsorship.

UNHCR's Roadmap for these Third Country Solutions is ambitious. By 2030, it is planned to provide three million refugees with third-country solutions through resettlement, complementary pathways, and family reunification.



2022 saw a strengthening of resettlement with over 57,000 refugees departing to 20 different countries, a 49 per cent increase compared with 2021, though falling short of the 90,000 target. Despite these numbers, the gap between new refugees and refugees benefiting from a solution increased to its highest level. For each refugee that returned to their country of origin or was resettled in 2022, there were 16 new refugees.

Family reunification in a third country is one of the most effective protection solutions with residence permits surpassing 1.2 million annually, and 64 per cent of all permits granted. But barriers to family reunion continue to keep families apart, especially fees, costs and documentation requirements.



Labour mobility provides a mutually beneficial solution where a job matches the skills of refugees with the growing workforce needs of many countries, especially in health care, hospitality, agriculture and construction. Vital to the ability of a refugee to access the job market is recognition of their qualifications and efforts are being made to encourage global policies. A major impediment for refugees when competing in the international job market is the lack of travel documents. They often do not have national passports or cannot use them for fear of being returned to their country of origin.

The idea of refugee travel documents that are recognized internationally is not a new idea. It was promoted by Fridtjof Nansen, appointed the High Commissioner for Refugees of the League of Nations in 1921. We hope that the Global Refugee Forum may stimulate our Member States to consider making a pledge for a 21st Century version of the original Nansen passport... an idea that might attract international support.



Inclusion

In summary, voluntary returns, resettlement and regular pathways do offer solutions for the forcibly displaced. But such options, in fact, benefit very few of the most vulnerable.

The practical solution for most forcibly displaced people, whether as refugees or displaced within their own country, lies in inclusion within their host communities on a non-discriminatory basis. Inclusion means access to health, education, to food security, livelihoods and freedom of movement and the issue of valid documentation. Inclusion also places a severe financial burden on host communities. International support for hosts is needed to help build resilience and to strengthen human capital to give refugees and others displaced to be self-reliant and contribute to their communities.

Civil society and local communities are critical to inclusion as they are the protection front line. Organizations led by displaced and stateless people, local communities, and faith groups work tirelessly to protect displaced people. They truly “stay and deliver.” They know better than anyone what is needed on the ground and provide essential services, mobilize volunteers and funds.

Local authorities, cities and mayors also play an essential role in ensuring meaningful integration of displaced people. The two Global Compacts on Refugees and Migrants have, for example, stimulated a call to action by 36 cities worldwide to provide services and programmes to support and integrate refugees and migrants within their urban areas.

People who are displaced within their own country are of course the primary responsibility of the State itself as citizens entitled to basic rights. Last year, UNHCR in collaboration with the Global Protection Cluster’s Task Team on Law and Policy, released the [Global Report on Law and Policy on Internal Displacement: Implementing National Responsibility](#) that calls for effective national laws to protect people who are displaced within their own country.

Yet another aspect of inclusion arises for people who are stateless. Conflict and violence can lead to displacement that in turn poses the risk of statelessness when papers are lost, or birth registration is not possible or for other political and legal reasons. Without nationality a person often cannot get health care, or register their children in school, open a bank account or get work.

The right to a nationality, is a right also recognized by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. While 4.3 million people are reported as stateless in 95 countries, statelessness remains largely invisible and underreported. Yet, with political will, nationality can so easily be granted, fostering genuine inclusion. UNHCR’s #IBelong campaign to end statelessness has had some successes. A concerted push is now imperative if we are to make sustained progress. At the end of 2024, the baton will pass to the multistakeholder Global Alliance, a “whole of society” approach to end statelessness that will broaden advocacy and community support and strengthen engagement with stateless-led organisations.

These are some of the solutions adopted to respond to forced displacement.

However, the scale and complexity of global displacement today is fast outpacing these solutions.

New creative and holistic thinking is urgently needed to address root causes while also ensuring urgent protection.

One of the most effective initiatives by UNHCR to support responsibility sharing has been collaboration with development actors, specifically development Banks, International Financial Institutions, regional and national development agencies in the spirit of the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus.

UNHCR's non-transactional role with these institutions has facilitated concessional grants and loans to some 23 refugee hosting countries, releasing billions of dollars for development and poverty reduction.



Development funding helps host countries to support the costs of inclusion. By focusing on economic opportunities and self-sufficiency, access to education and social services, and improved infrastructure, it is possible to benefit host communities and displaced populations alike.

UNHCR's partnership with development actors has far reaching protection and solutions objectives and our report [Advancing protection outcomes through Humanitarian Development Cooperation: What can we observe so far?](#) uses 15 case studies to illustrate the protection impacts of these support mechanisms.

The importance of development cooperation was the focus of the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection last December. It also informs our Strategic Directions over the next 4 years aiming to integrate development action into solutions for refugees and host communities.

“Whole of Journey approaches to protection”.

Another more recent initiative supported by UNHCR is to take a "whole of journey" approach, or as the High Commissioner has described it, a “panoramic view” of mixed movements of both refugees and migrants. Protection and solutions for people forcibly displaced must be available at every stage of their journey.

People on the move, whether refugees fleeing conflict or migrants seeking opportunities for themselves and their families travel across many different countries along their route where they often do not have access to basic services. Without documentation or visas, these people are vulnerable to arrest and detention, to trafficking and to gender-based violence, especially women and children.



Taking a comprehensive approach, with support from UNHCR and IOM, international organizations, NGOs, local authorities, and civil society can provide “joined up” protection services across travel routes.

A recent example of such a holistic approach to protection is in the Americas.



The United States of America has, for example, recently announced a “safe mobility” program, where eligible refugees and migrants will be considered for humanitarian entry and other regular means of entry to the United States or other countries that may offer these opportunities.

Such initiatives could be piloted in other parts of the world to identify the most urgent needs of refugees en route and to provide information about regular, safe and legal pathways. Corporate and private sector investments for training, work and inclusion in host communities could also support refugees and migrants in their region to avoid dangerous onward journeys. Protection along the journey could help to give refugees and asylum seekers access to services and livelihoods wherever they find themselves, without having to risk dangerous onward journeys.

We need, however, to be clear. A whole of journey approach must not be adopted at the expense of the right to territorial access to claim asylum. The whole of journey approach is a package and not for cherry picking. It should help to protect territorial access to asylum while also ensuring safe pathways for both refugees and migrants.

The Global Compact on Refugees as the roadmap



The global protection crisis and the mounting numbers each year of forced displacement teach us that Governments, international organizations, and civil society cannot be effective alone. We must act together, and we have the tools to do so.

The Global Compact on Refugees continues to provide a coherent strategy to support host countries and to find durable solutions. It commands the support of the international community, and most notably of our Member States. The whole of society approach is an essential element.

As we prepare for the second Global Refugee Forum in December here in Geneva, we ask whether the aspirational commitments under the Compact are producing concrete outcomes for those in need of international protection? Is the commitment to share the responsibility more than a one-line slogan?

At UNHCR we are encouraged by examples of world best practice, while acutely aware that a great deal more needs to be done to translate the Compact into action and measurable impacts. The Forum provides an opportunity for the international community to demonstrate solidarity and to shoulder a fair share of the burden of hosting refugees and people displaced and to finding solutions.

We thank you for working to make the Forum a success and encourage you to implement your pledges and to make new, quality pledges, maybe even mega pledges with partners.

In concluding, I return to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

As we seek to protect all those under UNHCR's mandate, evolving international human rights inform our work under the Refugee Convention and both Statelessness Conventions. These rights are universal, applying equally to refugees and people internally displaced, to returnees, and people who are stateless at every stage of their journey to find protection.

Thank you.

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