

Remarks for the 89th Standing Committee meeting  
Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme  
Kelly T. Clements, Deputy High Commissioner  
13 to 15 March 2024

Madam Chair,  
Excellencies,

Thank you. It is a privilege to be here, and to have the opportunity to deliver a few brief remarks at the start of this session of the Standing Committee. But allow me to begin by extending my wishes for peace at the start of Ramadan.

Peace has been in short supply since we last met during the Executive Committee in October, six months ago. An eventful six months. Eventful within UNHCR and of course – and especially – eventful outside UNHCR. Tragically so.

In Gaza first and foremost, where the humanitarian crisis has reached catastrophic proportions, with a besieged population that has virtually no access to food or water. Far too little aid is coming in. And now families, children facing starvation. We join the Secretary-General's call for a humanitarian ceasefire, and for the immediate and unconditional release of all remaining hostages.

In Sudan, where in less than a year, senseless violence has displaced over 8 million people both inside and outside the country. There too families are left to bear the brunt of a conflict to which there is no end in sight. Where peace seems more distant than ever. Where the belief has taken hold among the different factions that the way out of the conflict lies through more violence and more fighting. Leading to more displacement. To more women and children forced to leave their homes in search of safety. In Sudan, but also, for more than 1.6 million of them, in Egypt, South Sudan, Ethiopia, the Central African Republic, and Chad. Countries that themselves are struggling to cope with instability, with the rising cost of basic necessities, and with the effects of climate change. And yet these countries continue to welcome Sudanese refugees into their communities. And we thank them for that.

I met some of these families only a few days ago, when I was in Farchana and Adre, in Eastern Chad, at the border with Sudan. A remote location surrounded by sand and heat that now shelters thousands. Where the local authorities, despite their best efforts, are overwhelmed and under-resourced. Unable to provide much beyond safety and a welcome. And although it is important to acknowledge and be grateful for that safety and welcome, we know that more needs to be done, which is why we work every day with partners to support the government to respond to growing needs despite dwindling resources.

I spoke to Sudanese children who long for normalcy and stability in simple everyday things, like playing and learning. Children who sit to learn under trees, in the blazing sun. When I asked one 11-year old student how they cope with the heat, she simply replied “we move with the sun.”

I wanted to bring you these children's words and share their reality. For too many, that is the reality of forced displacement – one that UNHCR contends with every day in Eastern Chad, and in so many other places around the globe. Over the next three days of this Standing Committee, as we look ahead to another year – no doubt another challenging year – let us not lose sight of that reality.

Madam Chair,  
Excellencies,

Today is also the first time that we meet in this committee since the Second Global Refugee Forum took place in December last year. We will provide a comprehensive report – the official Outcome Document of the Global Refugee Forum – at the end of March. This will be presented to you by Ruven Menikdiwela, UNHCR’s new Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, who is joining us today for the first time in this capacity. Welcome Ruven.

Let me share in the meantime a few key statistics on the GRF. More than 40 multi-stakeholder pledges were launched in December – many of them co-led by governments. Thank you for that. In total, over 1,700 pledges were made – which is considerably more than were made during the first Global Refugee Forum in 2019. These pledges represent significant financial, technical, material, and policy commitments cutting across a range of thematic areas and sectors, from economic inclusion to climate to gender-based violence, to name a few. We also had broader representation and engagement. Between the first and second Global Refugee Forums, the number of non-State actors making pledges tripled. The wide array of stakeholders and participants – including UN agencies, Member States, development actors, financial institutions, faith groups, the private sector, foundations, NGOs and of course forcibly displaced and stateless persons themselves – made for a very dynamic event, and lent it strength, conviction, and optimism.

And that perhaps is the most important lesson we can draw from the Global Refugee Forum. That the right vision will unite and inspire us all in the search for solutions. That presented with a shared purpose, international cooperation and partnership are still possible, even in an era of geopolitical division. When they are most needed. At a time when forced displacement is at an all-time high.

The work now shifts to ensuring that these pledges are implemented and that we follow up on our commitments. The road ahead is long and will be difficult, but we have clarity of purpose. We will work tirelessly to achieve the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees. To respond, to include, and to solve. And to do it together. Because we cannot do it without your support and your leadership.

Madam Chair,  
Excellencies,

Not only do we know what our destination is, we know how to reach it. By being more agile. By being more responsive. And by being more efficient.

The recent Multilateral Performance Network (MOPAN) assessment – a comprehensive and independent review exercise that was led by the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom – found that UNHCR made immense progress on all these fronts. The MOPAN assessment, the first since 2018, recognized UNHCR’s clear leadership in forced displacement situations. A leadership rooted in the strength of our mandate. The assessment also recognized our ability to mobilize our stakeholders and surge our operations in response to sudden emergencies. In short, that UNHCR is a modern and well-managed organization.

One of the key strengths mentioned in the report that I would like to emphasize – and I encourage you to read the full report if you haven’t already – specifically relates to our

organizational structure and, as the assessment puts it, our ‘comprehensive reform process.’ Our transformation.

As you know, UNHCR underwent a process of decentralization and regionalization whereby our structures, and decision-making authority, were moved away from Geneva and to seven regional bureaux around the globe, closer to refugees. This structural transformation was followed by a complete systems overhaul – the digital transformation of UNHCR’s processes and software solutions under the banner of the Business Transformation Programme, which closed formally at the end of 2023. The third pillar of UNHCR’s transformation focuses on ourselves and our people, on fostering a culture of inclusion and integrity. On creating an organization where each one of us feels valued and empowered. Where we are all accountable for our actions – whether positive or negative.

We are now at the stage where we have started to evaluate and draw lessons from UNHCR’s transformation across all three pillars. An independent evaluation of the decentralization and regionalization is currently underway, with the report and recommendations expected in the second half of 2024. This evaluation will help identify areas that may require further focus and investment, as well as any potential course correction. We are also looking to learn from the implementation of the Business Transformation Programme, through two initiatives. The first, a lessons learned exercise conducted with support from Bain and Company, will help guide future UNHCR systems transformation. The second, an Impact Gains Assessment undertaken together with the UN Advisory Alliance and set to conclude at the end of 2024, will assess the gains in efficiency and effectiveness achieved through the Programme. And finally, we have just embarked on a culture assessment – a first for UNHCR – using the UN Leadership Culture Assessment tool, which will yield insights into team dynamics and internal ways of working, and help guide our broader cultural transformation.

A lot of change over the past few years. And with more on the horizon. This includes some consequential initiatives that aim to make UNHCR more responsive, and our programming more sustainable. For instance, through the potential fundamental re-design of UNHCR’s funding model. Many of you have voiced concern about the sustainability of our financing model, given the ever-widening gap between humanitarian needs and resources available. And we are listening. Although still in its early stages, this initiative entails, among other things, identifying potential options for reforming UNHCR’s funding model informed by research and external perspectives that take our mandate into consideration. We look forward to discussing this and other ambitious strategic shifts with you over the coming months.

Madam Chair,  
Excellencies,

In an organization like UNHCR, change is competency, not an event. Our history is one of constant evolution and adaptation. Adaptation to a changed geopolitical landscape and to the emergence of a multi-polar world. To the erosion of protection and asylum space even as the number of forcibly displaced continues to grow. And, as just mentioned, to a funding environment that is more challenging every year, where the increase in humanitarian needs outpaces available resources.

In 2022, total contributions received by UNHCR reached a record amount: \$5.9 billion. This was driven in large part by the surge in financial support in response to the war in Ukraine. Last year, against a needs-based budget of close to \$11 billion, UNHCR received just over \$4.8 billion. Or a decrease of about 11% in income from 2022. And while we are unable to

make any firm income projections against a budget of \$10.8 billion for 2024 at this stage, all indications are that contributions will be lower – perhaps substantially - this year than last. The trend lines are clear.

Let me pause here for a moment to express UNHCR’s appreciation for the support you have provided and continue to provide. Both as countries supporting forcibly displaced and stateless people and as donors to our programmes. And in the case of many of you, as both. UNHCR is grateful for your support, and we work hard to earn your trust. We fully appreciate the pressures – political, social, economic – that you face, and we are fully cognizant of the strains created in hosting countries, and the many competing demands on donor countries for funding.

But we also have a duty to be forthcoming about the implications of the projected funding shortfall. Just as we have in the past. It is in that spirit of transparency that we want to draw your attention at this juncture to the potentially drastic consequences of this continued funding uncertainty. UNHCR’s cash position, in particular, is becoming increasingly tenuous, and our ability to meet near-term financial obligations could soon be hamstrung should financial pledges remain unmet in the next weeks. We stand ready to work with you to avoid a worst-case scenario.

Of course, we have not been idle in taking a series of measures to absorb some of the expected financial impact so more can be spent on refugees and others we serve – by looking for efficiency gains across our operations and reviewing our supply processes. By trying to optimize our travel and fleet management, by simplifying our regulatory and policy framework, and by being much more conservative in authorizing increases in operational expenditures, including in response to emergencies.

We are also in the middle of a realignment and rationalization process that has entailed a review of our structures and functions across all levels, from sub-country presence to Headquarters. This exercise is about “who does what where?” in the most efficient way, and about reducing potential duplication. A result of this work has been the discontinuation of more than 1,600 positions, and the process continues this year and into the 2025 planning cycle. At the best of times, strategic workforce planning is bound to create anxiety and tension within our offices and among our teams as livelihoods are at stake. And understandably so given the deeply personal consequences for our colleagues, many of whom have become a second family. When compounded by uncertainty – as is currently the case – these tensions easily transform into divisions and recriminations. As I’ve reported to this Committee previously, we have robust formal and confidential processes in place for such allegations. In addition, for colleagues impacted, we offer a wealth of resources, from career management services, to training and reskilling opportunities, complemented by mediation and informal conflict resolution when needed.

As we receive more information on the financial situation, we continue to prioritize and re-prioritize our operational activities, and to reconsider our operational presence and footprint as needed. We are doing this and much more, but the reality is that UNHCR can only absorb so much before the impact is also felt by our partners and of course by refugees themselves.

That is already the case in many of our operations. I was in Kenya last week, where food aid to refugees is being scaled back, and already making the security situation more tense in camps. In Tunisia, UNHCR will no longer be able to provide vouchers and one-time cash grants for newly arrived and extremely vulnerable asylum-seekers. And there are countless

other examples across all regions where UNHCR and our partners operate, and where we collectively have had to make painful decisions to scale down our activities, or suspend them altogether. And we know what the implications will be. More reliance on negative coping strategies. Children having to work instead of attending school. Greater likelihood of recruitment into armed groups. And asylum seekers and refugees deciding to risk everything by relying on criminal networks to move onward to other countries of asylum. And the figures, including of arrivals at borders in Europe and North America, bear this out.

We cannot afford to tire now. But neither can we afford, in the absence of evident solutions, to fall back on outdated and unsustainable response models that rely solely on humanitarian aid. Or that focus exclusively on life-saving interventions. It is critical to have our development partners with us, as part of the operational response, from the onset of a displacement crisis. And to stay the course, especially during challenging times, as the benefits of joined humanitarian-development actions are not always immediately visible. That much was evident in Chad.

A final word Madam Chair, Excellencies, on our commitment to transparency. Both in the context of this Standing Committee and more generally, as part of a conscious push towards more openness and greater engagement. We are fully committed to a culture of accountability, including on matters of integrity and oversight. For the first time this year, we recently shared with you the High Commissioner's annual report on Disciplinary Matters and Cases of Criminal Behavior. I would also encourage you to attend the side event on Friday morning on UNHCR's oversight landscape, organized by the Inspector General's Office and oversight providers.

In closing, allow me to thank you once again for your steadfast support to forcibly displaced and stateless persons, and for the trust you place in UNHCR.

Thank you.