

Remarks of Mr. Ayman Gharaibeh, Director of the UNHCR MENA
Bureau

89th Meeting of the Standing Committee

Geneva, 13-15 March 2023

Your excellency Ambassador Katharina Stasch,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Clearly, 2023 has not been an easy year for everyone living in the MENA region, among them over 16 million forcibly displaced persons. Older conflicts have become more entrenched, all while new conflicts have erupted. Gains in economic development are being lost as millions fall further into poverty.

As previously stated many times by the Secretary-General, we are deeply concerned with the ongoing situation in Gaza and the impact on civilians.

Our operation in Egypt continues to closely monitor the highly fluid situation in and around Gaza, particularly the risk of regional spillover. Contingency plans are being aligned in anticipation of different scenarios, in which UNHCR's role would vary. In Egypt, UNHCR is presently supporting cross-border operations in Gaza through the Egyptian Red Crescent (ERC) and is fully engaged with the broader UN and inter-agency

coordination structures. On the Lebanon front, there has been a major impact. Actual or anticipated exchanges of fire between Israel and Hezbollah have resulted in more than 91,000 people displaced from south Lebanon, including over 8,700 refugees

One lesson from Gaza and other new emergencies is the impact on our emergency preparedness. We have quickly dispatched regional stocks to support the ERC, for instance. We have robust and agile regional emergency preparedness systems to assist operations in coordinating humanitarian relief, guide other partners, and support interagency responses in internal displacement emergencies. We can cope in addressing multiple situations simultaneously. But this capacity is challenged in the context of reduced funding. I commend to you the importance of maintaining funding levels at a time when this capacity is sorely needed.

The Syria crisis has entered its thirteenth year. It continues to be the largest in the region in terms of population movements, with over 12 million people forcibly displaced across the region. In 2023, the Arab normalization and other initiatives did generate a possibility of a change that might create conditions which would allow Syrians to return home voluntarily and in safety and dignity. However, the implementation of these changes is still to be seen. Neighbouring countries continue to host close to 6 million Syrians, while the socioeconomic conditions and vulnerabilities of refugees and host communities continue to deteriorate. In Lebanon, 90% of Syrian refugees find themselves living in conditions of extreme poverty; while in Jordan, nine out of ten refugee households are in debt. Inside Syria,

16.7 million people need humanitarian assistance, and 12.9 million people are food insecure. In 2024 we will continue supporting solutions inside Syria through early recovery, with a focus on strengthening the resilience of communities through an area-based approach, but it is crucial too that funding and access to services and livelihoods is maintained and expanded in host countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In North Africa, the eruption of the civil war in Sudan has forced more than 450 thousand people to flee to **Egypt**, a country facing its own economic challenges. We have also noted an increase in Sudanese irregular entry and stay across Egypt, particularly in the south. UNHCR continues its collaboration and advocacy with the Government of Egypt to ensure that those fleeing Sudan in need of international protection have access to asylum and assistance.

Movements by sea from North Africa to Europe continued, with more than 97,000 arrivals in Italy from Tunisia, almost tripling in 2023, while 52,000 arrived from Libya. Crossings to Spain via the Mediterranean Sea increased by 19 percent.

UNHCR continues to work with the concerned authorities and partners to strengthen access to protection and solutions at the first point of encounter. Our strategy includes short-term measures to address the immediate needs

and longer-term interventions to strengthen access to national protection systems.

On another note, a new influx of almost 55,000 Malian refugees to Mauritania has resulted in an ‘out-of-camp’ population that requires immediate attention. We have recently announced a level 1 emergency for Mauritania and, along with our partners, must strengthen our capacity to respond to lifesaving needs while linking up already with mid- to long-term resilience and development efforts.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our ability to deliver our Mandate, but also crucially, the ability of host countries to fulfill their protection obligations are tied to the **funding situation, both of UNHCR and of the refugee and IDP responses overall.** Large host countries like Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt are the first responders for multiple crises and need predictable, multi-year support. We already see the consequence of funding cuts: in reduced protection space, increased poverty and risks of onward movement to Europe. In 2023 we were forced to cut back critical aid, including all winter assistance in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt. In 2024, our cash assistance programmes – the most efficient and targeted way to deliver material aid – are at risk. I appeal to all of you today to consider this important message. The repercussions of further funding cuts are evident, in terms of insecurity, population movements, and, crucially on the welfare and protection of refugees themselves. **Thank you.**