

90th Meeting of the Standing Committee

Opening Remarks by Ms. Ruvendrini Menikdiwela, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection

01 July 2024

Madam Chair,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege to be with you today to introduce the protection agenda item, for the first time since being appointed Assistant High Commissioner for Protection. This tremendous responsibility comes at a particularly turbulent and uncertain time. I came here today feeling a deep sense of pride and humility - *pride* in the impact, we along with our partners, are achieving. You have heard some highlights in the presentation of the 2023 Global Report. And I have seen this on the ground on my recent visits to our operations. And *humility* in the face of the challenges impacting the lives of the people we serve, and the work we have ahead.

From Sudan to Myanmar, to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to Ukraine and Gaza and so many others, warring parties are bringing about unfathomable suffering.

In **Sudan**, amid deafening global silence for the second year now, fighting has raged, and a profound humanitarian crisis has unfolded. Sexual violence is rife, and reports from local women's organizations highlight rising suicide rates among survivors. Grave violations against children are growing. In the Darfur region, civilians are being killed based on their ethnicity and skin color.

Sudan is now home to the largest number of internally displaced people globally - 9.4 million people. About 2 million people have fled including to neighbouring Egypt, South Sudan, Ethiopia, the Central African Republic, and Chad – countries which are under strain and have generously welcomed the Sudanese people. Today, I want to call on other States, both in the region and beyond, to respond to the international protection needs of Sudanese refugees and to support the communities hosting them. They need the means to exercise their rights and live in dignity. This is a situation in which true responsibility sharing could not be more evident – or more urgent.

I was in **Myanmar** just before the latest escalation in November last year. Within a few short days, the conflict intensified and spread across several regions. Many of the places I had visited were no longer accessible. Since then, bombing campaigns, executions, and detentions have pushed an additional 1.6 million people to flee. Over 3.1 million people are now displaced within Myanmar, and thousands have been compelled to flee to safe countries.

The **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, a country that has grappled with nearly three decades of war and unrest, is suffering more devastation. Over 700,000 people have been newly displaced, bringing the total to an all-time high of 7.2 million people. As battlefronts have shifted, sites housing the internally displaced are targeted. Atrocious violations against children, including sexual crimes, abductions, and forced recruitments are taking place with impunity. By many accounts, the eastern part of country is one of the most dangerous places in the world for women and girls. Insufficient aid has meant that they are easy prey for armed groups, as they go in search of income or firewood for cooking.

Now in its third year, the war in **Ukraine** has only grown more entrenched. Assaults on cities have destroyed countless homes, schools, and businesses. Thousands of people have been evacuated or forced to flee in recent months. Relentless attacks on Ukraine's power stations have destroyed 68 per cent of the country's electricity production capacity and have left millions in the dark. Thousands of people have been evacuated or forced to flee in recent months.

Meanwhile, in **Gaza**, more than 37,000 people have been killed, and over 85,000 injured. An unconscionable number of children – nearly 21,000 according to the latest data - are missing. They are unaccompanied or separated, disappeared, detained, or buried under the rubble or in mass graves. An

estimated 1.2 million Palestinians in the enclave are displaced. And while the population struggles on the verge of famine, trucks filled with food and life-saving aid are obstructed from reaching those who need it most.

These are just some of the conflicts that drove new displacements in 2023. **Climate impacts and disasters** were also another key factor, associated with a significant number of new displacements. For displaced people, conflict, fragility, and the impacts of climate change converge in a complex web of crisis. At the end of 2023, almost three quarters of forcibly displaced people were living in countries with high-to-extreme levels of exposure to climate related risks.

Elsewhere **violence, crime, and instability** have left people with no option but to flee. In **Haiti**, escalating gang violence has reached alarming levels - unleashing a pervasive environment of fear and curbing people's access to essential services. It has also pushed nearly 600,000 people to leave their homes in 2023, more than double the 2022 total. Many are making their way through extremely hazardous routes to reach safer terrains.

Madam Chair,

You will next hear from the Director of the Division of International Protection, who will present the High Commissioner's Note on International Protection. The Note is not intended to represent the views of all the members of the Executive Committee. Rather, it reflects the independent voice of the High Commissioner, in presenting the facts on key protection issues, challenges, and opportunities as they relate to UNHCR's mandate.

Allow me to highlight some of these overarching areas that are particularly concerning.

As violence, conflict, and climate continue to drive record levels of displacement - **a staggering 120 million people worldwide as of May this year - solutions are in short supply**. Dialogue among States is increasingly polarized, even deadlocked. And when warring parties and their allies do come to an agreement, implementation remains a challenge. In 2023, global military spending surged across all regions, reaching a record \$2.4 trillion dollars. This is in stark contrast to the resources that went to resolve conflicts or help those whose lives have been ravaged by them. Humanitarian assistance constituted a meagre 1% of global military expenditures, at \$24 billion.

This has meant that, in 2023, the much sought after solution – **safe, dignified, and voluntary return to places of origin - was largely out of reach**. Globally, over 1 million refugees repatriated, a decline from 1.3 million in 2022. Four out of five were either Ukrainian or South Sudanese returnees. The more than half a million refugees who returned to South Sudan, primarily fleeing Sudan, did so under difficult circumstances, where conditions for living in safety and dignity may not be sustainable.

Similarly, the number of **people returning from internal displacement fell by 39%** to 5.1 million. More than 4 million of these returns were in just four countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ukraine, Ethiopia, and the Central African Republic – countries where much is in flux.

Meanwhile, **humanitarian actors are left to pick up the pieces, with fewer resources to meet growing needs**. Over 50 million children were forcibly displaced in 2023. Gender based violence was the top protection risk reported by protection clusters in over 30 emergencies. People with disabilities, the elderly, and other marginalized people continued to be neglected and cut off from services. You will also hear about the growing needs of internally displaced people in a dedicated agenda item. As we speak, **there are 17 active emergencies declared by UNHCR, and 32 countries deemed at high risk of emergency**. In the last three years alone, UNHCR declared 118 emergencies globally – essentially, a new emergency every 10 days.

Excellencies,

By nature, **humanitarian work is rooted in an ethic and a practice of solidarity and cooperation** – cooperation which the 1951 Convention itself recognized as crucial to addressing refugee displacement. **This year, this ethic and practice is on the ballot in many countries.**

With over 80 elections taking place across the globe, migration and asylum have been made into hot button issues. **Political expediency coupled with sensational and inaccurate media coverage** in the vote-harvesting season is paving the way for misinformation, xenophobia, and in some cases, hate speech and violence. Refugees and asylum-seekers are scapegoated as the cause of social ills, unemployment, insecurity, and health crises. Worryingly, in a survey of refugees who attended the Global Refugee Forum last December, 85 per cent said they had witnessed hate speech and misinformation targeting displaced people, and 72 per cent noted they were personally targeted.

In several elections, populist and anti-democratic movements are gaining ground. And with that, disdain for core values essential for international protection – the rule of law, pluralism, multilateralism – is growing. **Across continents, we are seeing backsliding on core protection principles and rights** – from threats to principles established to protect asylum seekers, to rollbacks on gender equality and non-discrimination, to undue pressure on civil society.

I am deeply concerned about trends by some **States to limit access to territory, through externalization and draconian legislation that restricts asylum**. Deterrence and securitized border management are more prevalent, along with pushbacks and violence at land and sea borders. Refoulement incidents were reported in significant numbers. Some States are going even further – taking steps to criminalize solidarity and repress non-governmental actors, who are involved in rescue and life-saving activities.

These measures are not only dangerous but also ineffective. They endanger the international protection system and undermine the right to seek asylum. Such measures place vulnerable people in limbo, at risk of mistreatment or refoulement, and ultimately drive them to more perilous routes. Dangerously, they also lead States to avoid and shift, rather than share, responsibility, in line with their obligations.

With few options for safe, regular pathways, it is no surprise that refugees and asylum seekers are resorting to **irregular means of travel, on mixed routes along with migrants**, using smugglers or traffickers. They move across countries in Asia; from the East and horn of Africa towards the Arabian Peninsula; towards South Africa; or the Mediterranean into Europe; into the UK; and towards the U.S.-Mexico border. The collective failure to put in place sustainable protection and solutions is in effect outsourcing the management of human mobility to criminal networks.

Distinguished delegates,

Let me be clear – asylum is a fundamental right, rooted in international refugee law and our shared humanity. Granting asylum to refugees is an international obligation for State parties. While exercising the sovereign right to manage their borders, States must also uphold human rights and international law, including the customary *non-refoulement principle*. **Safeguarding international protection is a key priority.**

Outsourcing and externalizing asylum obligations cannot be condoned.

Protection and security must be considered as twin dimensions of policies and practices.

However tempting, **we cannot pick and choose the moments in which the law applies**, and to whom it applies or does not. Humanitarian law and principles and universal human rights serve a vital function for all of us, and they must be reinforced.

Misinformation and **scapegoating** cannot be tolerated.

Limiting **civil society space** is not compatible with fundamental freedoms and human rights.

States cannot pursue policies in contravention of long-established laws and principles and expect others to shoulder the bulk of the responsibility.

The High Commissioner has called for engagement in the **route-based approach to mixed movements**. This set of policies and interventions work together as part of a strategy with cooperation at its core. UNHCR – and indeed my office – is committed to continuing to work hard with governments and our many partners to improve the efficacy of asylum systems, bolster protection, and find sustainable solutions.

Madam Chair,

I shared this litany of challenges with a purpose in mind: to bring these to our collective attention and to urge all of you – our Member States and partners – to *recommit to do more, and to do better*.

I would also like to take this opportunity to note some encouraging developments, which we must build on.

We are thankful to **States and communities that keep their doors open** to those forced to flee. For decades, the governments and people of for example Türkiye, Pakistan, Colombia, Uganda, Kenya, Iran, and many others have hosted large numbers of refugees. Their solidarity is commended. At the same time, their burden must be shared. We consistently see that the countries showing the most generosity with refugees are those who are struggling with economic and political challenges. In 2023, these countries hosted three quarters of the world's forcibly displaced.

Despite the challenges, last year, more countries **aligned their legal frameworks with the international refugee instruments and statelessness conventions**, than in 2022. UNHCR provided advice and support to States and worked to ensure consistency with legal standards. Courts, judges, and lawyers worldwide expressed appreciation for the cooperation with, and contributions from, UNHCR as amicus curiae to their proceedings. We will continue to support national courts and tribunals, in playing their crucial role as independent institutions charged with interpreting and upholding the law.

The international **legal framework for combating statelessness also took steps forward in 2023 and 2024**, as the Republic of the Congo and Sao Tome and Principe became States party to both statelessness conventions. This past month, Cameroon adopted a bill authorizing the accession to both conventions. These triumphs are in part due to targeted advocacy by UNHCR and our many partners, including women's rights organizations, who have been key allies in addressing gender discrimination in nationality laws.

Since the launch of #IBelong Campaign in 2014, more than half a million people have acquired a nationality. And in 2023, 32,200 people had their nationality confirmed or received citizenship. 2024 will culminate in the High-Level Segment on Statelessness and the launch of the new Global Alliance to End Statelessness. Let us use this milestone year as an opportunity to reflect on achievements to date, build on the past decade, and redouble our efforts to address bottlenecks and achieve transformative change.

Moving to available solutions, we are encouraged that **resettlement is on an upward trend**, with more than 155,000 refugees submitted for resettlement in 2023. A record 96,000 departed to countries such as Canada, the United States, Australia, and Germany. The majority of those resettled were Afghan, Syrian, Congolese, Myanmar, and Somali refugees. These efforts are welcome, and they should be scaled up significantly, given that an estimated 2 million refugees need resettlement.

We also welcome the **growing engagement of development actors, who are increasingly facilitating the inclusion - and indeed the protection - of refugees in national services and economies**. These non-traditional actors, including financial institutions, are stepping up with fresh ideas and new funding to support States hosting refugees.

We have also made strides in **facilitating the meaningful participation of affected people in shaping and delivering on policy and programme priorities**. We have invested in supporting community-based protection initiatives. We have also reformed our processes to support more robust and diverse partnerships. In 2023, UNHCR worked with some 850 local and community-based NGOs, including with those led by forcibly displaced and stateless people, women, youth, and persons with disabilities. Over the past two years, UNHCR also facilitated the participation of refugees and stateless people in key decision-making and high-level fora such as the Sexual Violence Research Initiative, the NGO consultations, the Global Refugee Forum and others.

With almost 2,000 pledges made, **the Global Refugee Forum embodied solidarity among an expanding and more diversified circle of supporters**. Over 4,000 participants gathered to re-affirm support for the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees. The Forum went against the currents of

division and polarization; it was a **hopeful reminder of what our collective action can achieve**. It provided a concrete way forward for further protection, inclusion, self-reliance and solutions for forcibly displaced people and the communities that host them. The pledges ranged from technical and policy support to material and financial pledges, with an estimated \$2.2 billion in financial commitments alone.

The task for us this year and beyond – one of my priorities – is to **keep the momentum going and move from words to action**. Six months on, I am encouraged by the progress we are seeing. Ahead of the High-Level Officials Meeting next year, the successes should be supported, celebrated, and rapidly accelerated.

Madam chair,

Excellencies,

I have spent over 35 years working to uphold and advance the rights of forcibly displaced and stateless people. I say this not to age myself but to reassure you that I have no illusions about what we need to do – what I committed to do when I took this role. I know full well that it is not easy. It is hard. But, together, it is also not impossible.

In fact, we have a lot at our disposal. We have important existing treaties, laws, and policies that States have crafted and to which they have committed. We have agreement on important declarations of principles and values. We also have a toolbox of innovative, strategic approaches. And as they say, where there is a will, there is always a way. At the Global Refugee Forum, we committed that *solidarity is our way*.

Now is the time to collectively move forward, clear-eyed and focused, and at a pace commensurate with the challenges before us.

I have confidence that together we can do better.

I have confidence that together we can lead the way to more sustainable protection and solutions with and for the millions of forcibly displaced and stateless people. And to do so with humility and compassion.

I have that confidence.

Thank you.