

Opening remarks for the 92nd Standing Committee meeting  
Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme

Kelly T. Clements, Deputy High Commissioner

11 to 13 March 2025

Mister Chair,  
Excellencies,

It is a privilege to be with you today. Much has changed since we last met at the Executive Committee in October. And we can already see how challenging this year will be. Or rather, how challenging it already is, for all of us, especially those forced to flee.

So, if I may, before we engage in our dialogue these next few days with a focus on the dynamic regional operational contexts, a plea to all of us: let's keep refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless people at the center of our work. Because there will be noise and there will be distractions.

In a world that feels unstable, where the present is uncertain, there will be pressure to focus on many other competing priorities – security priorities, political priorities, economic priorities. There will be the temptation to retreat, or to lose faith in our collective humanity.

We cannot afford to do that. Too much is at stake. Let us not lose sight of what brings us together: our commitment to protect those who need it, and to find – with a sense of urgency - solutions for them. That commitment is never more important than in times of crisis. In fact, that commitment, and UNHCR's mandate itself, is borne out of war and devastation. So let us seize every opportunity, during this Standing Committee and in the weeks and months to come, to make the world more stable, less uncertain. And to do it together.

Distinguished delegates,

Let me start with what is keeping us awake at night – the current financial situation. UNHCR concluded last year with a strong level of funding, close to USD 4.9 billion in contributions, and I want to sincerely thank all donors and host countries for standing with us so

strongly. It allowed us to protect and aid close to 120 million people around the world, to deliver life-saving support in Myanmar, Ukraine and Sudan – to name just a few, and to respond to 43 emergencies across 25 countries quickly and with great agility.

For 2025, UNHCR's budget stands at USD 10.6 billion, including the USD 10.2 billion approved by the Executive Committee in October, and the supplementary budgets issued since to respond to the situation in Syria and surrounding countries.

And yet, at this critical juncture, there is more uncertainty over UNHCR's funding than ever before. Part of this uncertainty is due to the pause in foreign assistance announced in January by the United States, pending a 90-day review of foreign assistance programs. Let me acknowledge and thank the United States for being historically UNHCR's most steadfast supporter for decades, and our largest donor. While we remain confident that we will be able to continue earning the trust of United States Government and the American people, the impact of this freeze on UNHCR has been immediate and severe.

But this is not isolated to one donor, and it is not isolated to UNHCR – the entire humanitarian and development system is facing an existential moment. In addition to changes in the U.S., more than a quarter of our top donors have announced ODA cuts due to mounting pressure and competing priorities. Even if some of these reductions are scheduled to take effect next year or later, the trend is clear: less funding, greater needs, and more restricted funding. This will severely impact our ability to respond quickly and appropriately to address the growing human consequences of war, conflict, and persecution.

Mister Chair,  
Distinguished Delegates,

These cuts affecting the humanitarian system at large will have a disastrous impact on refugees and people forced to flee. The Assistant High Commissioner, Mr. Mazou, and the Regional Bureau Directors will speak more to this shortly but let me give you a few examples.

In Bangladesh, in the camps in Cox's Bazaar where one million refugees live, food rations are being cut – which will lead to malnutrition – with children and vulnerable people dying of hunger. The same is true in other places.

In Kenya, there have been security incidents in the Kakuma refugee camp. Thousands of refugees clashed with police last week after receiving news of cuts in their food allocations. In Sudan, some 9 million people have been displaced by brutal conflict and urgently need shelter, mental health and psychosocial support. The reduced funding will affect at least a half a million people, who no longer will have access to water, sanitation services or medical help. The withdrawal of support risks destabilizing entire regions.

The impact on host countries is also serious. In addition to cuts in humanitarian and development support, some host countries are seeing reductions in bilateral aid. This is weakening their abilities to support refugees and include them in national services. Leading to less opportunities for forcibly displaced people, more insecurity, and more movement elsewhere.

Turning to the broader humanitarian community, other UN agencies, NGO partners and local responders have also been hard hit. With less resources available, we are all forced to make painful choices, prioritize and stop work in which we have invested and know we are making a difference.

This is creating a ripple effect that leaves people forced to flee without the aid they desperately need. In short, it puts the entire humanitarian system at risk.

But we persevere. And we will continue to persevere, even if we do not know now the exact future contours these funding shortfalls will mean for the organization or the programs we support in more than 130 countries around the world.

Mister Chair,  
Distinguished delegates,

To mitigate the impact of this uncertainty on refugees and our operations, UNHCR immediately announced a set of cost-cutting measures, focused initially on the administration and management of UNHCR. We placed restrictions on recruitment and were compelled to reduce our workforce with over 400 colleagues directly impacted to date. And we froze over USD 300 million in activities – with more now under consideration. This includes activities in the Central

African Republic, South Sudan and Uganda – to name a few, where UNHCR and partners have been forced to stop services for close to 180,000 refugee women and girls at risk of violence. Similarly, in Ethiopia, a total of 200,000 refugee women and girls are directly impacted, and the closure of a safe house is leaving survivors at immediate risk of being killed. And we are developing scenarios now with potential contingencies to be deployed in the weeks ahead with further actions ready to be activated if required. As part of potential additional measures, UNHCR is finalizing a comprehensive review of our office presence, to take advantage of more efficient ways to deliver.

At the same time, we are actively reaching out to existing and new donors to call for more funding, and more flexible funding. We have launched a new revolving fund of USD 300 million to help boost our budget for critical emergency responses. We have asked donors to focus on critically under-resourced programs, for example, to prevent and respond to sexual violence and operations where we see the potential for solutions. We continue to expand and diversify our partnerships with private sector, beyond financial support – to advocate, provide expertise and innovate. And since end of January, we have seen an increase in contributions from individuals wanting to help people forced to flee. This year we aim to raise USD 700 million from private sector, with close to USD 300 million of those dollars in unearmarked funds and the goal of reaching 3.2 million individual donors. Alas, this alone will not meet current and increasing needs.

Distinguished delegates,

In line with our commitment to transformation and change on which you have heard from me on this podium over the last 9 years, we are redoubling our efficiency efforts and innovative work both within UNHCR and across the UN System – supporting the ambitious inter-agency efficiency plans and system reforms. Doing more for refugees and spending less on ourselves has long been a top priority for this organization, using any possible innovative means. We have systematically applied an efficiency lens to our delivery and generated savings of some USD 59 million last year alone. Having launched our Business Transformation Program several years ago, we generated efficiency gains of some USD 3.4 million in one year alone and we know that we have just scratched the surface of what is possible with this 'best in class' technology to support our enabling functions. So, we only just begun. And at the June Standing Committee, we will present our organization's value for money framework – the Deliver Better Roadmap.

We are also stepping up our efforts to use Artificial Intelligence and emerging technologies to transform humanitarian responses, empower displaced communities, and drive innovation to deliver life-saving aid faster and more effectively. A flagship example is the Digital Gateway, a platform that puts refugees in control of their own data. It allows displaced individuals to enter and update their information securely and interact with UNHCR using new technology.

Efficiency also means no fraud and no corruption. Our commitment to zero tolerance for misconduct is even more important when a system is under stress, like we are today. We have increased our training and outreach to colleagues to proactively combat and mitigate fraud, something the Inspector General will be speaking to later in this programme. You will also have seen the High Commissioner's annual report on Disciplinary Matters and Cases of Criminal Behaviour, which underscores our dedication to transparency and accountability to address and prevent misconduct within UNHCR and beyond. And last month, we adopted an Accountability Framework that provides an overview of the policies and processes we use to keep ourselves accountable, including our integrity systems. Beyond emphasizing the accountability of all colleagues to behave ethically at all times, the framework also clarifies our accountability objectives to deliver our mandate efficiently and effectively.

But efficiency gains alone cannot compensate for lack of critical funding. None of the measures that I have outlined are enough to support what is required of us when peace fails and people are caught in the middle. We must do more for them.

Which takes us to the vision of the Global Compact on Refugees... we continue to adjust our planning to ensure a strategic shift to sustainable responses to ensure that precious humanitarian aid is dedicated to the most vulnerable who need it with longer term responses rightly assumed by others. It is about host countries supporting refugees' access to jobs and land and allowing them to start businesses and contribute to local economies where they live. It is about including refugees in national services such as education and health. This will enable refugees to help themselves and host communities to benefit from the economic spark that these approaches entail. We know that it requires upfront resources, and we are appealing for donors, development actors and private sector to continue to step in and step-up. You will hear more about this from the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations shortly.

Mister Chair,  
Excellencies,

In closing, I want to take a moment to acknowledge our incredible incredible workforce. Amidst all this uncertainty, worsening security, and stretched resources, they remain committed to working even harder to support those who rely on us under impossible conditions. We in turn are working closely with other equally impacted organizations across the system, to ensure we can do our utmost to support all of our colleagues, no matter where they work in the world, keeping them informed as we navigate these difficult times together as one UNHCR.

I also want to thank the many of you who have accelerated your contributions to us to help address our cash flow worries. And I reiterate the appeal for more funding, and a shift to more flexible funding, which is essential to continue to respond to unforeseen emergencies and provide lifesaving support to the many people forced to flee. I also want to thank the host countries who have absorbed more responsibilities, despite their scarce resources. Both are examples of global solidarity, something we need more of – not less.

Final plea. A call for unity. Despite the mounting pressure that we are all under, we must remain united and focused on what counts. On refugees. On asylum and protection. On the forcibly displaced to find lasting solutions. With more than 123 million people forced to flee, the need for humanitarian aid and protection has never been more urgent.

We need your support. And we will continue providing you with ours.

Thank you very much