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Chairperson,
Distinguished Delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Away from the headlines of Ukraine, Sudan and Syria, there is a region where even the smallest countries are meeting their international obligations towards refugees and forcibly displaced people when their neighbours are faced with instability.

When Mozambique was grappling with post-election violence causing people to seek safety across borders, Malawi often referred to as the “warm heart of Africa”, lived up to its name, taking in around 8,000 people while the kingdom of Eswatini took in over 1,000 people, even while its own nationals were facing heavy rains and flooding. South African officials initiated contingency planning in the event the situation worsened. Thankfully, it never came to that, and we hope that stability will continue to prevail in Mozambique.

For UNHCR, the Southern Africa region includes the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is one of the largest displacement crises globally. Last September, I visited Goma, where I met with Odette, a mother who had been displaced from her home and was trying to ensure her children had enough to eat, a place to sleep, and could go to school as she was trying to rebuild her small business.

I witnessed partners working together on the ground, who were doing their best to support the more than 7 million IDPs like Odette. Sadly, the escalation of the conflict in Eastern DRC has led to more and more displacement. IDP camps have been destroyed or dismantled. People have had no choice but to return to home areas, where they face an uncertain future, insecurity and lack of lifesaving essentials such as food and clean drinking water, a roof over their heads and adequate sanitation.

The people in the Eastern DRC are in the midst of one of the worst protection crises globally, with horrific reports of sexual assault and abuse against women and children – an average of 70 per day in recent weeks, escalating crime, explosive remnants of war litter the ground, and essential services like education and health care disrupted. I am deeply concerned about Odette and wonder every night if she and the hundreds of thousands of others like her are safe.

In my role as the Regional Refugee Coordinator for the DRC situation, it is with a heavy heart that I have to report that we are having to revise the Regional Refugee Response Plan to reflect additional needs, as more than 80,000 Congolese have had to seek asylum across borders in just the first few months of this year. It's a great tragedy.

In addition to conflict-induced displacement, natural disasters have also significantly impacted southern Africa. In December 2024, Tropical Cyclone Chido unleashed its fury across several countries, including the Comoros, Madagascar, and Mozambique, causing widespread displacement and exacerbating the vulnerabilities of displaced populations. In northern Mozambique, UNHCR supported the government with its preparation and response measures, such as training local disaster management committees and providing relief items, which were crucial in mitigating the cyclone's impact. Elsewhere, the El Nino drought pushed many communities to the brink of major food insecurity as crops dried up in Malawi and Zambia. Thanks to UNHCR's partnership with the African Union's African Risk Capacity, a parametric insurance solution was implemented in Malawi. For the first time, refugees and host communities in and around Dzaleka were able to receive a payout allowing them to meet their basic needs and not have to resort to drastic measures. Efforts are underway to replicate this innovative partnership in other countries across the continent.

These heavy storms, cyclones, and droughts are not going away. The Southern African Development Community has recognized this challenge, and advancements have been made in the SADC-led pioneering tripartite partnership with the African Development Bank, and UNHCR on the Joint Programme on Addressing Forced Displacement, Fragility Mitigation, and Climate Resilience in Southern Africa. This

will allow Member States to provide protection, support, and solutions from the onset of a crisis.

Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates,

I acknowledge we are facing a brand-new world regarding resources provided across Africa related to both humanitarian and development assistance. It is an unfortunate reality. In so doing, however, we should not abandon countries who have hosted refugees for decades and where there is relative stability for sustainable responses to advance, allowing for refugees (and their host communities) to thrive and for refugees eventually to no longer need assistance.

Today, I must confess, I am deeply worried about the most vulnerable refugees across the region who rely on support from UNHCR to be able to meet their basic needs. In Namibia and Botswana, we could run out of funds for the cash grants that they use to buy food and other essentials. This will only exacerbate protection risks.

This is just one example of why investing in livelihood opportunities and supporting sustainable responses is needed now more than ever.

Countries like Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Mozambique have recognized this and are investing in turning previously long-standing refugee settlements into economic opportunities.

Zambia, through its November 2023 National Refugee Policy Implementation Plan, aims to transform long-standing refugee settlements into vibrant economic hubs, enabling refugees to access and contribute to markets. Self-reliance of refugees is being fostered through the cultivation of 125 hectares of agricultural land allocated in Zimbabwe.

Steady progress in including refugees in national systems has been made in several countries, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees, and the region remains committed to advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. For instance, through the Joint Sustainable Development Goals Fund, refugees in Malawi will gain access to clean and renewable energy technologies for cooking and lighting.

Other legislative and policy reforms, such as the ongoing review of the Refugee Act in Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Botswana, will create a more enabling environment that fosters sustainable responses.

Furthermore, the collaboration with development partners like the World Bank and the African Development Bank remain critical for sustainable responses. For example, projects in Zimbabwe and Mozambique are supporting livelihoods, private sector engagement, resilience efforts, and electricity. The aforementioned new National Refugee Policy in Zambia is supported by the World Bank IDA Grant approved last September, which is providing resources for legal and policy harmonization, inclusion in a new national digital identity management system, infrastructure, and economic opportunities for refugees and the local communities.

These are all examples of the advancement of some of the 214 GRF Pledges made by States and other stakeholders in the Southern Africa region. Nearly half are at various stages of implementation.

These efforts will maintain stability across the region and allow for communities and their hosts to prosper ensuring more safety and stability across the region.

Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates,

I am happy to report that pledges made to address statelessness have achieved some milestones, including the adoption of national action plans to eradicate statelessness in the Republic of Congo, the DRC, Eswatini, and Zambia. Last November, the Pan-African Parliament adopted the Resolution on Endorsement of the Draft Model Law on the Right to Nationality and the Eradication of Statelessness in Africa. UNHCR will support regional consultations on the model law before its anticipated adoption in the second half of 2025.

As the region prepares for the High-Level Officials Meeting in December, we will continue partnering with multi-stakeholders in implementing the commitments made in tandem with enhancing the rollout of the Route-based Approach and Sustainable Responses in the Southern Africa region.

The SADC-UNHCR High-Level Technical Meeting held with Member States in December marked a significant step toward the operationalization of the route-based approach. Key recommendations included enhancing data collection, strengthening asylum systems, and prioritizing protection and humanitarian assistance while combating human trafficking.

Significant efforts have already been made to enhance data collection and analysis, and as a result, over 40,000 refugees and registered asylum seekers were identified in mixed movements, mainly from the DRC, South Sudan, and Burundi, and moving towards South Africa, Zambia, Republic of Congo and Malawi.

Finally, Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates,

Engagement with local and refugee-led organisations remains a key commitment and continues to be extremely important. A key example is the critical role they have played in highlighting protection challenges in the Eastern DRC during this recent conflict.

To all the Member States, development partners, UN agencies and NGOs, and refugee-led organisations, regional bodies and the private sector, I am grateful for your support and partnership.

As we look ahead, I want to reiterate that in Southern Africa we have a real opportunity to improve the futures of displaced people and their host communities.

We must not let them down.

Thank you.