

93rd Meeting of the Standing Committee

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

17 June 2025

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Mister Chair,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege to be with you today to introduce the protection agenda item. I am joined by the Director of the Division of International Protection and Solutions, Ms. Elizabeth Tan, who will shortly address specifics related to the *Note on International Protection*.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year marks 75 years since the adoption of the Statute establishing the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. For 75 years, UNHCR has addressed one major emergency after another. Together with States and partners, we have fostered a multilateral approach to refugee protection, supervised the implementation of refugee treaties, and catalyzed international cooperation to address the evolving challenges of forced displacement in all its forms. Across continents, we have worked through conflicts and turmoil, mass displacement crises, and financial uncertainty, and this year is no different.

Conflict, persecution and violence have triggered yet another record-breaking number of displaced, reaching a staggering 122.1 million people.

From Sudan to the Democratic Republic of Congo, to Ukraine, Myanmar, the Sahel, Haiti and Gaza, egregious attacks on civilians have become routine. Civilians, it seems, are now the deliberate target in conflicts.

Displacement sites, hospitals, schools, and vital civilian infrastructure are targeted indiscriminately, and attacks on humanitarian operations continue with impunity.

Starvation is used as a bargaining tool, as food decays in aid trucks waiting to be allowed access to beleaguered communities in Gaza and in Darfur.

Sexual violence is weaponized, exacting untold suffering on women and girls, and reaching endemic levels across Sudan and in the Eastern DRC.

And at a time when the need for protection has never been greater, the international protection regime that we have collectively built is under unprecedented strain.

Our geopolitical landscape is fragmented. Institutions meant for cooperation and collective problem solving are gridlocked.

In far too many places, respect for international humanitarian law and international human rights law is treated as optional, with previously unthinkable actions now promoted as legitimate options.

There are deliberate attempts to dilute, undermine — even dismiss — fundamental rights; attempts to chip away at protections for those who are most vulnerable — asylum seekers, women and girls, minorities, and people with disabilities among others.

Responsibility-sharing continues to be alarmingly uneven: three out of every four refugees are hosted in low- and middle-income countries near their countries of origin. Meanwhile, cuts to international aid are leaving communities that have generously hosted refugees for years, without the needed support — risking diminishing political goodwill, reduced access to asylum, and, ultimately, perilous onward movements.

Asylum systems are under immense pressure, with both refugees and migrants resorting to them as the sole method of legalizing their presence. The response has increasingly been to put in place restrictive measures. Some States are denying access to territory, externalizing responsibilities, or seeking to translate pushbacks into policy. Those who escaped home at the barrel of a gun are being maligned, exploited, and abandoned at borders or on the open sea. Even more egregiously, many are being deported to unsafe countries, in clear violation of the cardinal principle of non-refoulement.

These measures not only undermine international protection for those directly affected, but they also undermine security for all.

But there are some positive developments in this otherwise bleak landscape. The work we are continuing to lead with IOM and other partners on the route-based approach in key priority countries is one such example. This approach presents lawful policy options that support States to better respond to the challenges of mixed movements - by building resilience and sustainability in countries of origin and host countries; strengthening asylum systems, including through prompt returns of those not in need in international protection and lawfully transferring persons to safe third countries where they had, or could have, found effective protection; stabilizing populations along key routes; and averting dangerous journeys.

Another example relates to complementary pathways, which offer much needed safe migration possibilities for refugees, especially as options for resettlement dramatically shrink, with quotas dropping by 85 per cent this year. With UNHCR's support, Australia and Slovenia launched education mobility pilots; Italy became the first country to grant refugee workers visas through its migration framework for non-nationals; while nearly 1 million refugees from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and elsewhere were granted permits by Brazil and several OECD countries in the last five years, to study, work or join their families.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Every day, our colleagues — like other humanitarian workers — take tremendous risks, and some have paid the ultimate price, to help those in need. But more and more, and

especially this year, we find ourselves dramatically under-resourced to meet the needs of those the international community has entrusted us to protect, assist and find solutions for.

UNHCR, and the humanitarian sector more broadly, are experiencing cataclysmic shifts, as several of our largest donors have announced substantial reductions in their international aid budgets. Our sector, which time and time again has had to pick up the pieces of failed political processes, is being pushed to the breaking point.

Faced with this brutal reality, we have been compelled to drastically reduce our capacity. You have heard directly from the High Commissioner and from other senior colleagues — including just now from the Deputy High Commissioner — on what this means for the people we serve, for our presence in many countries, and for our committed workforce. So, I will not repeat what has already been said. But allow me to highlight some implications for protection.

We have taken specific actions to preserve protection, solutions and emergency response as these are core to our mandate, including through the return of the responsibility for overseeing our work on solutions to the Division of International Protection, and preserved protection leadership at the regional level.

Simultaneously, as Ms. Clements just outlined, we have stepped up our efforts to explore new ways of working, to seek efficiencies, and to better leverage our partners and sister agencies' strengths and respective mandates so that the majority of our resources go towards protection and operational delivery.

Together with our cluster leads, UNHCR is also actively engaged in the "Humanitarian Reset," led by OCHA. As part of this effort, we are working with UNICEF, UNFPA, NRC, and others, to consolidate the protection cluster, while ensuring specialized responses to gender-based violence, child protection, mine action, and housing, land and property issues.

But despite all our efforts, the funding crisis is having a severe impact on our ability and capacity to protect. We have prioritized and reprioritized again and again to focus on the most severe needs. Yet, in this cruel triage to protect as many lives as we can with the resources we are given, a simple fact must be underlined: those who are the most vulnerable, who have been failed by the international community's collective inability to prevent or solve crises, are being failed once more.

Of course, we are yet to see the full impacts on the ground. But from what we are already seeing, I can tell you, these cuts are not just numbers on a spreadsheet; they are already life-and-death consequences, which will grow more dire. Just a few examples:

- In Myanmar, UNHCR is forced to reduce its programs by half, which will impact about 530,000 stateless and displaced people, who rely on humanitarian aid.
- In South Sudan, Central African Republic, and Uganda, services for women and girls who have experienced violence are being reduced or shut down, with around 180,000 people being left without access to these vital services. Similarly in Jordan

and Lebanon, nearly 300,000 women and girls are being left without the needed care by reductions in services.

- This year, UNHCR had initially planned to reach about 1.3 million children with child protection programs across 70 operations. The financial cuts have compelled us to significantly reduce this support, including in critical operations such as Bangladesh, Sudan, Chad, and Egypt — by up to 50 per cent in some situations.
- In Syria, 53 of the 122 UNHCR-supported community centers will be closed. These are the backbone of our protection and solutions strategy, and they are especially critical in the current context of returns – acting as “one-stop-shops” to provide integrated protection services, legal aid for issues such as reclaiming land titles, and services for older persons and those with disabilities. They are also key hubs that strengthen community self-help networks and offer vocational skills development.
- In Colombia, where I was recently on mission, funding cuts are severely impacting the documentation of over 500,000 Venezuelans. And in Côte d'Ivoire, the cuts have forced the suspension of the issuance of documentation to 72,000 Burkinabé refugees. Absent registration and appropriate documentation, vulnerable people remain in limbo, without status, without rights, and without access to lifesaving protection and assistance

Our partners are unable to fill these critical gaps, as they too have seen their funding and capacities decimated. Local organizations, including those led by displaced and stateless people, are particularly hard hit. A recent survey shows that nearly 50 per cent of women-led organizations are at risk of shutting down in the next six months. Hard-earned advances on women's rights risk being eroded, ironically as we mark thirty years of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Let us not lose sight of the fact that assisting countries in their generous efforts to host millions of refugees on their territories; or supporting States to address asylum backlogs so that those fleeing persecution can be identified and protected; or bringing together stateless-led organizations and other stakeholders in a Global Alliance to end statelessness – all these take time, resources, and a collective will to see them through.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The reality is that we live in an interdependent world, where cooperation is the only way forward.

The adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees, and the two subsequent Global Refugee Fora, were key milestones, where this interdependence was concretely reaffirmed. They reinforced the wisdom that the more we do together to address the big challenges of forced displacement, the lesser the burden is on individual countries. In our increasingly polarized world, this blueprint for a whole-of-society response is now more relevant than ever.

Collectively, you - our Member States and all our partners - have made 3,400 pledges in the two Global Refugee Fora. To date, progress has been steady and encouraging. About 591 pledges have been fulfilled, and 1,300 are in progress. Yet, we need to do more to meet the challenges of the moment.

The next high-level officials meeting in December, now called “the Global Refugee Forum Progress Review”, will be critical in this regard: to take stock of advances made, and chart the path toward the third Global Refugee Forum in 2027. Matching pledges and mobilizing additional funding to support self-reliance, inclusion, and solutions, remain a central priority. Here, sustainable responses will be critical, including to reinforce the operationalization of the Compact.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Nowhere is the sustainability of our response more consequential than in Syria. In December last year, and after 14 years of war, the dream of many displaced Syrians to go home became a reality. An estimated 1.9 million people have since returned - many to ravaged homes, uncertainty, and little to no functioning infrastructure. While UNHCR is not promoting returns in the current context, our survey shows that 80 per cent of Syrian refugees hope to return one day, and 27 per cent intend to do so within the next year.

Now that the prospect of a better future is within reach for Syrians, we are at a crossroads. The big test for us collectively is how to make their return sustainable. To ensure that their hopes to rebuild their lives and to live in safety and dignity materialize. We can either let things go by, with little meaningful action. Or we can invest in sustainable responses and early recovery to enable Syrians to stand on their own feet. To stabilize their return. To solve a crisis that has defined a generation.

Mister Chair,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Syria offers us a rare opportunity to act. Let us not squander it.

Let us also act to find sustainable solutions to the other crises – Afghanistan, Sudan, Ukraine and all those making the headlines, and, crucially, those taking place away from the spotlight.

Collectively, we have the ability and the resources to make a change.

For, as Martin Luther King said, if we do not act decisively, “we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors of time, reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight”.

Thank you.