

**Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme
94th Standing Committee meeting**

**Statement by Catty Bennet Sattler
Director, Division of Human Resources**

**Agenda Item: 2 (b) Human resources, including staff welfare (EC/76/SC/CRP.23)
8-9 September 2025**

Chair, Excellencies,

As you've just seen in the video, although the past year has been one of the most difficult in our organization's history, we're still here, and with your partnership, we carry the light.

With growing humanitarian needs, people forced to flee are among the hardest hit by the global funding crisis. And while we are no strangers to change in the context of our work, the funding decrease has led to one of the largest downsizing exercises UNHCR has ever faced. These changes were rapid, wide-ranging, and deeply felt across the organization, affecting colleagues and teams in every region, under every contractual modality.

At the end of August 2025, UNHCR's workforce stood at nearly 15,400 colleagues, with over 4,400 dedicated and passionate humanitarians having had to leave the organization so far this year. And this number is already outdated as our workforce continues to reduce over the next months. This represents a stark decrease compared to recent years, reflecting the impact of both financial constraints and our global restructuring. Most importantly, for UNHCR—an organization for people by people—the need to reduce our workforce at the very moment when displacement is at record levels underscores the profound human cost of the situation.

Over the past months, I have had many difficult conversations informing colleagues that their positions were being discontinued. Very difficult conversations. Time and again, I have been humbled by their response: a steadfast commitment to our mandate and, remarkably, an offer to continue contributing in any way possible. It is a testament to the extraordinary character of our people. Even in exit surveys completed in recent months, 82% of departing colleagues still recommended UNHCR as an employer of choice and are keen to return. To those who are leaving us, I want to say: I am deeply sorry. This is not a reflection of your dedication or your contribution, but of the extraordinary circumstances we are facing, forcing us to make decisions none of us ever wished to make. I thank you for your service for the most vulnerable.

For me and my teams, supporting our colleagues throughout this period was and remains our highest priority. How this phase is managed is crucial to ensuring that those departing are treated with dignity and respect, and it will significantly influence the organization's future work environment and culture.

Human resources teams worldwide enhanced their support to managers, individuals, and teams with empathy and care. I am so proud and grateful for how our HR teams keep showing up

despite also being impacted by the reductions. Information sessions and dedicated resources were put in place to minimize uncertainty. Practical advice and career transition support services were significantly expanded as well as counselling and well-being support. Over 3,800 colleagues participated in career support webinars and workshops, complemented by nearly 2,000 hours of individual and group coaching. These measures aimed at ensuring that colleagues could make informed decisions and feel supported during this difficult transition.

Policy changes and special measures were put in place to offer flexibility during the downsizing while safeguarding fairness for impacted colleagues. We sequenced vacancy advertisements to prioritize redeployment of colleagues affected by post discontinuations, continued the temporary freeze on external recruitment, and established a roster for separated colleagues to be able to rejoin UNHCR, allowing us to preserve essential skills and institutional knowledge for the future. As a result of these efforts, half of all available international regular assignments over the past year were filled by colleagues awaiting reassignment, while the remaining posts were taken up by other UNHCR personnel. And we are now carefully and as fast as possible managing the 350 international positions advertised in June and July as part of the restructuring.

In July we introduced a contingency policy on staff placement and reduction in force. It is designed to manage situations where the number of unassigned colleagues becomes too high, with a focus on maximizing placement opportunities within the organization's available means.

Many of you ask about the impact of the downsizing on gender and geographic representation. In this context I am pleased to say that at this point, the downsizing has not materially impacted the geographical and gender representation of our workforce. Notably 80% of our total workforce continues to be from the Global South in keeping with our ambition to reflect the people we serve. Representation remains at the forefront of our minds, especially as conscious efforts and concrete measures have delivered progress over the last years. You all joined us in celebrating achieving gender parity in the international category last year. We will continue to monitor data and review reassignments to safeguard balanced representation in our workforce.

Chair, Excellencies, on 1 October, the Division of Human resources will transition to the Division of People Management as part of the HQ restructuring and as a significantly smaller team. Some of you ask how will we do more with less? **The simple answer is we will not.** The current situation inevitably impacts our HR priorities. While we will always place our people in operations first, it is clear; with fewer resources, difficult decisions need to be made.

At the same time, we continue to pursue efficiencies and alternative ways to improve the employee experience. Workday, our HR digital system, has become fully embedded in our HR function allowing efficient and timely follow-up for our workforce with digital case management and data-driven decision-making. We have also been fully engaged in the phased transition to a UNHCR Global Shared Service model for location-independent HR transactions, building on foundations from recent years. While our resources for learning and development have declined, we are working hard to forge new partnerships and have leveraged pro bono alliances to expand opportunities for our colleagues, harnessing external expertise at no cost, particularly in people management learning and coaching.

Beyond UNHCR, we are working within the broader UN system. We are actively contributing to the High Level Committee on Management efficiencies agenda, including by co-leading the stream on management of insurance within the UN System. As co-chair of the Chief Executives

Board Human Resources Network, we continue to shape common system reforms, with a focus on modernization, harmonization, and pooling of resources. But the challenges before us call for more than efficiencies and streamlining. They demand a deeper rethink of how the UN as a whole manages its workforce.

The challenges we face are not unique. Across the UN, agencies are being forced to downsize. Many colleagues have proudly served a lifetime with the UN and never imagined they would have to leave the system—and for those who do, the absence of social safety nets and limited indemnities make the transition especially painful. In an era where humanitarian systems are being tested like never before, rethinking the UN workforce model is not only a strategic imperative, it's a necessity; and an opportunity that we cannot harness without you.

From UNHCR's perspective, we are accelerating the development of a new, more agile workforce model. This requires rebalancing our fixed staff, which was designed for more stable times, and strengthening alternative contractual modalities so they become both attractive career paths and a source of greater adaptability for colleagues and the organization alike.

To navigate this new reality, we must also reimagine how we manage our talent and put skills at the forefront. That means understanding the capabilities our entire workforce brings, not only staff but also affiliates and temporary colleagues, whether it is technical expertise, digital know-how, or the ability to lead in complex crises. It also means actively building the new skills we will need in the future, bridging gaps left by post reductions, and striving to prepare UNHCR for the challenges ahead.

Chair, Excellencies, as you can see, every effort has been made to mitigate the impact of downsizing, both on our people and on the ability of the organization to continue delivering on its mandate. Yet we must also acknowledge the strain this moment places on our internal systems. We therefore ask for your patience and partnership as we navigate this difficult period and determine how best to move forward.

Going back to the video we started with; despite being a smaller organization, our commitment remains unchanged and our operational presence robust, with 90% of our workforce continuing to serve in operations, with many in very challenging and high-risk situations.

In this period of profound challenge and change, one constant shines through: **the dedication of our colleagues. It is their resilience, professionalism, and humanity** that enable UNHCR to continue delivering on its mandate.

I thank you.