

Statement to the 76th session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme

Introductory remarks by Kelly T. Clements, Deputy High Commissioner

Assembly Hall, Palais des Nations
09 October 2025

Mister Chair,
High Commissioner,
Distinguished delegates,
Excellencies,

It is a true privilege to be with you here at the 76th session of the Executive Committee. This moment carries particular weight, as it marks the final ExCom with High Commissioner Filippo Grandi and under his leadership. With less than three months left and this being our last joint public moment on this podium, I hope you will indulge me as I share a brief personal reflection.

Listening carefully to the interventions during the general debate with accolades for an illustrious career of service to others – let's face it, Mr. High Commissioner – you will have very big shoes to fill.

I think it's fair to say that this is not the year that you (or any of us) wished to have to end a remarkable mandate with so many achievements. But stand with you, we will - and looking forward, we must. As you say, the mandate is as relevant as ever and our duty to stand with the 122 million people forced to flee and stateless persons are as pressing as ever. Together, we must keep hope alive for those who need us most. The stakes are high.

Distinguished delegates,

Last month I visited Lebanon and Syria, where I met families who had returned home after many years in exile. It was a powerful reminder, that solutions are possible and within reach.

At the Standing Committee, I told you about the Syrian refugee Amira, a mother looking out for her family first and foremost. Today I want to tell you Mahmoud's story. We met at the outskirts of Homs. He's a blacksmith who returned from Lebanon with his wife and son. The early days were tough, his tools were stolen, and his son, then 9, had to drop out of school to make ends meet. At a UNHCR-supported community center the family found help. His wife and son received psychosocial and child protection support, and Mahmoud himself was given the chance to complete an entrepreneurship training, and access a small business grant to reopen his workshop. Today, he repairs homes for other returning families, supports the rebuilding of his community, and is already dreaming of expanding into larger construction projects. Yes, we were inspired.

Mahmoud's story is one among thousands. As many delegations have noted this week, many Syrians have returned home. UNHCR and our partners are there, at the borders, in towns and villages, supporting families making some of the hardest decisions of their lives. This fragile progress depends on lasting peace and urgent investments inside Syria. It also depends on

continued support for host countries, which for 14 years have shown extraordinary generosity in welcoming Syrian refugees.

These signs of hope push us to keep going – with urgency and purpose.

Mister Chair,
High Commissioner,
Distinguished delegates,

Let me turn now briefly to the immediate topic at hand – the current funding situation and our proposed 2026 budget. UNHCR has received only 32% of its funding needs this year. And if funding pledged is funding received (which we count on, distinguished delegates...), we hope to end 2025 with close to 3.9 billion USD in funds available, roughly the same as a decade ago when I joined UNHCR – when only half as many people counted on us.

Despite our relentless efforts to mobilize more resources, diversify funding sources and invest in private sector fundraising, the funding shortfall has forced UNHCR to make drastic cuts. We have reduced our global footprint by 32%, cut projected expenditure by 1 billion USD, and we have had to part ways with close to 5,000 colleagues – a number that will sadly continue to grow. Thank you to those delegations who have recognized that while refugees have paid the highest price for these cuts, our workforce too has suffered mightily. The High Commissioner has briefed you on the specific steps we have taken to respond to these abrupt funding cuts. The final changes of that review took effect last week.

To deliver the most we can with the limited resources available, we have focused on where we have most impact and a comparative advantage: on protection and solutions, lifesaving interventions and emergency response. The priorities which so many of you have highlighted as being our forte in this Executive Committee meeting.

Our efforts align with the streamlined vision reflected in the Secretary General's UN80 reform proposal and the Humanitarian Reset under the Emergency Relief Coordinator's leadership. We will continue to revert to this Committee for advice on how we contribute and implement UN80's ambition and that of the Reset, building on the ambitious transformation agenda the High Commissioner started towards the beginning of his mandate a decade ago.

Distinguished delegates,

Thank you to the Board of Auditors, the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), the Independent Audit and Oversight Committee (IAOC) and the Inspector General's Office for their steady support throughout this particularly demanding year.

The recommendations provided by external and internal oversight entities and evaluations help us strengthen the management of the resources entrusted to us. This is especially valuable as we navigate ongoing financial pressures, including short-term liquidity challenges and the need to balance the budget. We are in advanced discussions with a number of donors and extend our deep appreciation for the contributions that many are planning to make before the end of this year. Even taking this support into account, we are facing a substantial funding shortfall, estimated at over 300 million USD for 2025 against expenditures. A deficit is not an option and we need your immediate help.

One of our greatest challenges now is the mismatch between tightly earmarked support and the demands on us to deliver. We continue to monitor expenditures closely and have implemented strict controls. But this alone will not be enough. And as you have heard from many hosts this week in this room, further cuts would be catastrophic.

I would like to express our sincere appreciation to all Member States, for standing with us during these difficult times. We know you too are stretched by competing priorities and limited resources. We know you too face equally impossible choices as those we have had to make this year. Thank you to donors who provide flexible funding, which is GOLD to UNHCR, and to host countries, who remain the ultimate donors of refugee protection and the backbone of our collective response.

Mister Chair,

It is this difficult reality that has shaped UNHCR's budget proposal for 2026, which stands at 8.5 billion USD, a 20% reduction from 2025. It reflects a mix of factors, including a smaller workforce and a reduced budget for internally displaced people and a greater solutions focus.

The proposed budget also reflects a sharper focus on interventions where UNHCR has the greatest added value, and regions with the most urgent refugee needs, particularly in low and middle-income countries. Underscoring our joint and long-standing commitment to the Global Compact on Refugees, the budget reflects our efforts to advance a strategic shift to sustainable responses to forced displacement where development partners, private sector and others have indicated an ability to step in. Approaches that help forcibly displaced stand on their own feet and build better futures.

To the extent possible, we will continue to reinforce the capacity of national and local actors. As mentioned in Tuesday's side event, we aim to work as locally as possible, and internationally only when necessary. Last night, I received a message from Anna, the CEO of South Sudan's Women and Change NGO. She had seen the launch this week of our localization guidelines – a practical tool to shift power to local responders. In short, she gave us a big thumbs up on our approach which included more than 250 local actors. We are committed to continuing and strengthening this effort. And rest assured that statelessness and solutions will remain priorities, as mentioned by the High Commissioner and the Assistant High Commissioner.

Looking to the future, let me underscore that we have heard your concerns about our current needs-based budget methodology, in this hall and in September at the Standing Committee. We are currently reevaluating the way that we plan and prioritize, aiming to shift towards a budget and resource allocation model that reflects today's funding realities while reinforcing UNHCR's ability to deliver on its mandate. We will engage with you every step of the way, with the first consultations in the coming months.

Mister Chair,
Distinguished delegates,

In a world of rising humanitarian needs and constrained resources, our pursuit of innovation and efficiency efforts – through smarter systems, leaner structures, and sharper focus – is relentless. UNHCR is engaged actively in broader UN efficiency efforts, through the UN80

reform proposal and its Humanitarian Compact, leading some lines of effort. A key strand is the expansion of common services and platforms, some of which we discussed last week in the UN's Chief Executives Board's High Level Committee on Management and linked to related efforts in the Business Innovation Group. As highlighted by the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, UNHCR is also committed to deliver a Humanitarian Reset together with other partners in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

In pushing for system-wide reforms we are building on best practices from our internal efficiency efforts. Today, UNHCR is a leaner, more data-driven, and digitally enabled organization. Accelerating our Deliver Better Roadmap, we are now translating value for money into measurable impact. We are introducing a Business Score Card to track and demonstrate our comparative advantage and a Management Results Framework to empower managers to spot inefficiencies faster, use resources more smartly and better monitor impact. Our efforts to consolidate transaction processing through global shared services will reduce costs and strengthen our internal control systems, enhancing integrity and fraud prevention. This shift will plug into the ongoing UN efforts on common services. In our latest Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) reporting, we recorded 59 million USD in efficiency gains. And we will provide further updates to this Committee to demonstrate continued progress and accountability.

And as you have heard from the High Commissioner and Assistant High Commissioner, we are deepening collaboration with our UN partners too, such as IOM, UNICEF and WFP. All to reduce duplication, fill gaps, and amplify results.

Mister Chair,
Distinguished delegates,

I cannot end without recognizing the incredible people who make this work possible: our dedicated colleagues and partners. Like many organizations across the humanitarian sector, budget constraints have forced painful decisions. While we had no choice but to reduce positions, it has inevitably meant that committed colleagues have lost their jobs and those who remain are under growing pressure and uncertainty.

We are working closely with the Global Staff Council, whom you will hear from later, doing everything we can to support affected colleagues, offering career guidance, prioritizing internal placements, and keeping doors open for future opportunities. But this is a very difficult moment for all of us. And yet, through it all, our colleagues continue to serve with dedication and care. We cannot thank them enough.

And to address some delegations' comments, even with the recent downsizing, we have so far managed to keep the progress achieved on gender and geographic diversity from past years. At the international level, we still have gender balance and representation from the Global South has grown steadily over the past few years. That said, there is still work to do, especially when it comes to improving the number of women in national roles and increasing Global South representation in senior positions. Moving forward, we will soon launch an innovative dashboard where you can access our workforce data in real time.

During times of transition, accountability, trust and transparency is ever more essential. We rely on the strong formal and informal integrity systems we have invested in over the last years, along with the robust systems for reporting possible misconduct and abuse. You will soon hear

more from the Inspector General. He has guided the evolution of UNHCR's oversight system into the professionalized and respected structure it is today. As this is his final ExCom, I want to thank him for his principled leadership during these dynamic years.

Mister Chair,
Distinguished delegates,

After everything we have heard and shared this week, one thing is clear, the purpose that brings us together is stronger than anything that might divide us. It is our shared commitment to protect, to find solutions, and to help people forced to flee and stateless persons build a better future. Let us hold on to that unity of purpose.

Mahmoud, the blacksmith that I mentioned earlier in the outskirts of Homs, believed in that future. After returning from Lebanon with his wife and son, he faced enormous challenges. But as I mentioned earlier, with support from UNHCR, he is rebuilding his life. Mahmoud's story is one of hundreds of thousands. It shows what is possible when people are given the chance to recover and thrive. Yet it also underscores a critical truth: return is not the final chapter. Without sustained support, it risks becoming the beginning of a new cycle of hardship, rather than a path to hope. It calls on all of us to stay the course and uphold the responsibility we share.

Hope takes courage. It takes determination. And it takes the belief that change is possible, even when the odds are high. Families returning to Syria. Colleagues and partners working through uncertainty. Communities rebuilding from rubble. They move forward because they believe in something better.

And so must we. Because when we believe change is possible, we can help make it happen.

Thank you for your continued support and trust in UNHCR. It matters, now more than ever.