

76th plenary session of the Executive Committee

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

(as delivered)

Mister Chair,
Distinguished Delegates,

It is a pleasure to be with you today and to introduce the agenda item on Protection.

In the aftermath of a world shattered by war, the international community recognized that displacement could not be met with ad hoc fixes or fleeting sympathy. It demanded a coordinated response - anchored in law and in shared responsibility. And so, the international community acted with purpose, establishing UNHCR in December 1950. Seven months after, the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees was adopted, setting the standards for refugee protection, and entrusting UNHCR with safeguarding these worldwide. This was followed by the 1967 Protocol.

For nearly three quarters of a century, the Convention has been the bedrock of international protection. A living instrument, it has been interpreted and applied to meet evolving global realities. It has guided legal instruments at the regional and national levels, together forming a comprehensive and dynamic global legal framework.

The framers understood that protection demands collective responsibility. They saw how conflict and violence do not remain contained within a line on a map. How instability reverberates across regions and displacement flows within and beyond borders, touching both neighbors and distant States alike.

At a time where one in every 67 people across the globe has been forcibly displaced, this framework endures as a critical lifeline.

Distinguished delegates,

As of late, there are some voices calling into question this international protection architecture. Some suggest that asylum came about haphazardly; that somehow this

framework is a relic of the past; that it is at odds with state sovereignty; or that the solution lies in abandoning the Convention.

Let me be clear:

The Convention and the institution of asylum have saved millions of lives in the past and continue to save million lives every day. They are a reflection of humanity's oldest traditions - once offered at ancient city gates and sanctuaries, today codified and upheld through nearly seventy-five years of consensus. And as the High Commissioner noted in his opening remarks, sovereignty is not weakened by protection—it is strengthened by the legal and moral authority it conveys.

Through interpretation and application of the Convention, the international refugee protection regime has evolved to address the realities of displacement. It has endured precisely because it is pragmatic, not dogmatic.

It has guided, and continues to guide, Member States and our own work across more than 172 countries —from registering those fleeing violence or persecution, to building border capacity to prevent refoulement, to addressing the specific needs of children, to partnering with governments to integrate refugees into national health, education and social protection systems, to providing survivors of sexual violence with psychosocial and legal support, and to facilitating solutions, including the safe and dignified return of those wishing to go home.

To weaken protection - to make it conditional on convenience or expedience - would be to gamble with our humanity. We must, therefore, reject any vision that calls it into question or frames it as optional.

Distinguished delegates,

The future of refugee protection hinges on our ability to confront challenges honestly and respond boldly—not by tearing down mechanisms that save lives, but by building them up to respond to the crises of our times.

Allow me to reflect briefly on some of these challenges, which require your urgent support.

As we have heard during the General Debate, we are facing a perfect storm: Protection needs are rising, solutions are out of reach for many, and humanitarian resources are diminishing.

On a recent mission to Chad, I saw what this means on the ground, for those escaping the conflict in Sudan. At a transit site on the eastern border, I met new arrivals bearing unimaginable physical and psychological scars. Many had walked for days, visibly traumatized and malnourished, to reach the border. A young girl recalled her brother being shot in front of her as she escaped. An elderly woman recounted being repeatedly raped. And while Chad – a country with its own challenges - has generously opened its borders to nearly 900,000 Sudanese refugees since April 2023, refugees continue to arrive, even in the middle of the rainy season. About 80 per cent of those arriving are women and children, with 70 per cent having suffered some form of sexual violence or abuse. Yet less than 10 per cent of them are reached by GBV programmes, given the lack of capacity and funding. These are just some examples. The protection needs are similarly staggering across many of our other operations.

We are continuously prioritizing and reprioritizing. We are seeking efficiencies – and you will hear more from the Deputy High Commissioner on this. We are also working closely with the UN and other partners, including through the Humanitarian Reset, to streamline the coordination and delivery of protection responses in mixed IDP and refugee settings, and to consolidate the protection clusters in situations of internal displacement.

But without increased contributions, these efforts, important as they are, **do not offset the harsh reality**. We have had to scale back our presence, personnel and protection services for those who desperately need it, at precisely the moment when risks are soaring. Our partners – and especially frontline local and community-led organizations - cannot fill the gap, as they too are hit hard, with some even having to fold.

Children are paying a heavy price, as UNHCR and partners are unable to continue to provide child protection services to the 1.5 million children and caregivers in 78 countries that we reached last year. Many partners have also lost over 40 per cent of their budgets, leaving children exposed to violence, child labor, early marriage, and forced recruitment.

Programs addressing **violence against women and girls** have also been significantly impacted, by reductions by 38 per cent. While our teams and partners have supported nearly 600,000 refugees – mostly women and girls - in the first half of this year in 83 countries, the cuts are leaving an estimated 2.3 million women without prevention and response services, medical care, or safe shelters.

We have also been forced to suspend or delay **registration and documentation** across various operations. In West and Central Africa, there are more than 700,000 refugees and asylum seekers waiting to be registered.

With our operational budgets and 61 per cent of dedicated statelessness staffing reduced, critical **work** - including access to birth registration, legal assistance, and support to governments – **is severely compromised**.

Meanwhile, generous **States hosting the majority of the world's forcibly displaced** – 73 per cent of whom are low- and middle-income countries - are not spared, leaving them to shoulder a disproportionate burden - further straining their systems, diminishing their goodwill, and ultimately pushing refugees and asylum seekers to embark on dangerous onward movements.

With few legal avenues available, **refugees and migrants are taking the same perilous** routes, not just towards Europe or North America, but also, along the Southern Africa route, in West Africa, and in South and East Asia. These movements have strained asylum systems, as migrants have turned to asylum procedures as their only means of stay.

States have increasingly **responded with restrictions**—closing borders, suspending asylum, externalizing responsibilities, and even transforming pushbacks into policy. Too many refugees fleeing violence are abandoned at borders, stranded at sea, or deported in flagrant breach of the principle of non-refoulement.

These **measures do not solve the problem**. They deny life-saving protection, fuel chaos at borders, push vulnerable people into the arms of traffickers and further drive irregular and dangerous movements. During a mission to Greece recently, I learned that in their desperation to reach safe shores, some destitute refugees were compelled by people smugglers to operate the boats, instead of paying for their journeys, even though the refugees were aware that they would face probable prosecution as people smugglers by doing so.

Distinguished delegates,

The challenges outlined, including in mixed movements, are, as the High Commissioner noted, not challenges of principle but of implementation. And for that, practical options – ones that are outside the box, but within the law – are available to address them. These can already be put into action today.

As you know, together with IOM and other partners, UNHCR has put forward **a route-based approach**, for States and other stakeholders, with tools, guidance and expertise at your disposal to address mixed movements.

This is not about encouraging movements. On the contrary, it is about providing effective protection and assistance and thereby stabilizing forcibly displaced people where they are - in countries of origin, first asylum, transit and destination. It is about protecting those fleeing conflict, violence and persecution, and offering alternatives to dangerous journeys, based on international solidarity and responsibility sharing.

We recognize that many asylum processes are ill-equipped to deal with present-day realities. We are therefore promoting **fair, efficient and adaptable asylum systems** to meet these present-day needs. Differentiated and accelerated processing is essential – including simplified procedures for those likely to qualify, and expedited handling of unfounded claims. UNHCR supports States to strengthen their national asylum systems by providing concrete actions across five areas: (i) supportive law and policy frameworks; (ii) performing institutions; (iii) effective implementation of differentiated asylum procedures; (iv) capacitated workforce; and (v) accessible information and legal assistance.

We also recognize the need for **prompt returns for those found not to be in need of international protection**. This is essential to preserve the integrity of asylum systems and public confidence. Last year, about 5 million people lodged asylum claims. Of the 1.4 million decisions issued, around 45 per cent were negative. With the right safeguards, arrangements between States to transfer those who cannot be returned directly or immediately to their countries of origin to alternate locations - often referred to as **return hubs - are an option**. UNHCR stands ready to work with governments to ensure effective return systems – through promoting voluntary return wherever possible, and encouraging cooperation on documentation and reintegration, so that these returns are sustainable.

While we do not necessarily promote them, **international transfers of refugees and asylum-seekers** can be both lawful and practical. As the risks of ad hoc measures in this area continue to grow, our guidance lays out key elements and safeguards, including legally binding agreements that ensure access in countries of transfer to fair and efficient asylum procedures; lawful stay, protection against refoulement; and monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance.

We, together with our partners, are also currently implementing interventions to support protection outcomes along key routes. These are already bearing fruit.

For example, in Chad and Mauritania, **multi-purpose hubs** are operational, providing registration, legal aid, and specialized services for survivors of trafficking, GBV, and children at-risk amongst others. These also connect refugees, migrants and hosts alike, to long-term opportunities, including vocational and university studies. Chad's national plan will expand this model to at least five other locations. We are advancing similar plans in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda, transforming existing structures into multi-purpose hubs which also integrate solutions.

Importantly, and you have heard me say this often before, we need to expand **safe and regular pathways for refugees**. In addition to resettlement options, complementary pathways engage diverse stakeholders – governments, private sector, academia and civil society – to create a supportive ecosystem to help refugees rebuild their lives, contribute to their communities, and relieve pressure on host countries. Programs supported by UNHCR – such as education mobility pilots in Australia and Slovenia; family, work, and study permits offered by 37 OECD states and Brazil; and Italy's work visa initiative which connects safe mobility with support to refugees and host communities using a train-to-hire model – are invaluable and must be scaled up.

Importantly, we urge you to **channel your political capital where it matters most - into resolving conflicts and seeking solutions**. Humanitarian work saves lives but is only a band-aid at best. Conflicts and persecution are not acts of nature—they are choices—political choices. It requires political will and decisive action from governments—and support from all of us—to change their course.

And change course, we must - as the High Commissioner noted in his opening statement — to allow those who have endured years, even decades, in displacement to reclaim their futures. Like the 12 million forcibly displaced Sudanese who long for home. Or the 1.6 million Myanmar refugees, many of whom live in abysmal conditions with their lives on hold. Or the 90,000 most vulnerable Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf, who, after five decades, still depend on humanitarian aid.

I wish to underline again that political solutions are desperately needed.

Distinguished Delegates,

The preferred solution for most refugees is always a **safe and dignified return** home. As you have heard, over 1 million Syrian refugees have already returned – many not to comfort, but to destroyed homes, and uncertain futures. There are also the more than 440,000 refugees who have returned to **Burundi, Ethiopia, and Rwanda** last year. Their resilience shows that the will to rebuild their lives at home is strong, but it cannot succeed without our support.

As many of you have noted, the **Global Refugee Forum Progress Review** in December, co-hosted by Switzerland, is an important opportunity to demonstrate our continued support to the populations that we serve. Through the GRF process, more than 3,400 individual pledges and 47 multi-stakeholder pledges have been mobilized so far. These are not symbolic. They are a reaffirmation of the broad base of support needed, to solve the challenges of our times. They are a reminder that alone we can do little, but together we can do so much.

Mister Chair,
Distinguished Delegates,

Let me conclude with this final reminder:

Let us not lose sight of what we can achieve, what we have actually achieved – the millions of people who have been granted protection; the lives rebuilt; those whose journeys began in despair and exile but whose presence and contributions have strengthened the societies that have welcomed them. This people must always be our guide.

Thank you.