

Remarks for the 96th Standing Committee meeting  
Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme  
Kelly T. Clements, Deputy High Commissioner  
16 to 18 June 2026

Madam Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

A warm welcome to our new Chairperson, Ambassador Sobhan and my sincere thanks to Ambassador Oike of Japan, for his superb leadership as the Executive Committee Chair during an intensive seven months. This is a very special Standing Committee, and I speak today with deep gratitude, as this will be my final engagement with you as Deputy High Commissioner.

It is also the last Standing Committee for my colleagues, our two Assistant High Commissioners Ruvendrini Menikdiwela and Raouf Mazou, who have devoted their careers to refugees and those forced to flee. UNHCR is stronger for their leadership and lifelong service to humanity. And we have worked closely together as a Senior Executive Team - I will deeply miss our partnership.

Even as we each feel the weight of this transition, the demands of UNHCR's work continue with undiminished urgency, which is where our focus remains.

Distinguished Delegates,

When I began in this position in 2015, the Syria crisis was at its height. Since then, we have faced successive crises, from the Sahel to Myanmar, to Ukraine and many more. Over this past decade the number of people forced to flee has nearly doubled. A trend that continued year after year, until now.

A few days ago, UNHCR reported that global forced displacement has declined for the first time in a decade, from over 123 million people in 2024 to just under 118 million at the end of 2025. This is due to large-scale returns in displacement situations such as Afghanistan, Sudan and Syria, some under adverse circumstances.

Too many people are returning to fragile conditions, where safety is uncertain, services are limited, and the means to rebuild livelihoods are not yet there. The Assistant High Commissioner for Protection will speak shortly to these protection risks, and how we are responding.

Today, one in seven refugees live in long-term displacement, far from the world's spotlight and support. I was reminded of this during my recent visit to Cox's Bazar, in Bangladesh, where over 1 million Rohingya refugees and their Bangladeshi hosts, some of them, continue to depend on humanitarian aid. The young people we met spoke of their hopes to return home, to study, to work and to build a future.

This is the shift, we just heard this from the Ambassador, this is the shift we are collectively called to support: to reduce by half, over the next decade, the number of refugees trapped in long-term displacement and dependent on humanitarian aid.

And as we approach the 75th anniversary of the Refugee Convention, it is also a moment to match words with action, and to recommit to defending asylum and protection.

Distinguished Delegates,

Following last year's drastic funding cuts, UNHCR is moving forward. Later this month, the High Commissioner will brief you on the changes needed to put UNHCR on stronger footing and achieve his ambitious '50by35' vision. This initiative builds on the foundations laid by former High Commissioner Filippo Grandi, including the Global Compact on Refugees. 50by35 will be a core element of High Commissioner Salih's Strategic Directions, which will guide UNHCR from 2027 onward.

UNHCR cannot achieve the '50by35' ambition alone and will count strongly on you in the coming weeks and months as we work to operationalize it under the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations' leadership – it will be a collective effort with all stakeholders. We focus on low- and middle-income countries, where most refugees are hosted, expanding opportunities for returns, resettlement, and other safe legal pathways, while supporting greater self-reliance.

You will hear more from the High Commissioner, including on the independent management review he commissioned in March. Oliver Wyman has structured its initial recommendations around six operational pillars: planning, funding and budget allocation; workforce and culture; delivery model; shared services; systems and data; and organization, governance and delegation. The consultants have just begun to brief the High Commissioner and the senior team on these recommendations, so they are very fresh for us as well.

These new efforts are closely aligned with our shared commitments across the UN and humanitarian system, including the Secretary General's UN80 initiative and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Humanitarian Reset, led by the Emergency Relief Coordinator.

These initiatives build on real progress in recent years. As regularly briefed to this Committee, UNHCR's modernization of systems, being among the first to move fully to the cloud several years ago, and a strengthened focus on performance and efficiency, bringing decision making closer to delivery, has put the organization in good stead to take these reforms further. We are continuing this trajectory by embedding the Deliver Better Roadmap across our operations, to drive synergies, improve delivery, and strengthen accountability.

As new technologies reshape how we work, UNHCR is investing more in data, digital systems and artificial intelligence to improve how we anticipate needs, target aid, and deliver protection. In parallel, we are streamlining support functions and expanding Global Shared Services, and contributing to system-wide efficiencies through initiatives like the Digital Hub of Treasury Solutions, UNFLEET, and more integrated supply chains, to deliver sustainable, unbranded core relief items and shelter materials to all humanitarian actors. And we are reducing duplication by making humanitarian and beneficiary data interoperable, particularly with the World Food Programme, which already uses UNHCR registration data to deliver food aid to refugees.

In that same spirit, I have been reflecting on my time over the last decade as Vice-Chair of the High-Level Committee on Management, where together with Chair Catherine Pollard, we have worked relentlessly to advance UN system-wide reform; much of this work has now become the backbone of the Secretary-General's UN80 reform agenda.

Distinguished Delegates,

Turning to budget and funding. The 2026 ExCom approved budget stands at USD 8.5 billion, which is USD 2.1 billion less than the year before. At present, we are only 29% funded with USD 2.5 billion available. This reflects the difficult financial environment we continue to face. More than half of our income is now tightly earmarked, the highest level in UNHCR's history. This limits our ability to respond quickly to emergencies and deliver on our mandate in underfunded crises.

To mitigate this, we are continuing aggressive efforts to broaden the donor base. Last year, the private sector was the largest source of unearmarked funding, a trend expected to continue in 2026, with some USD 310 million in unearmarked contributions alone. We are investing more in digital fundraising and data to deepen the relationship with individual supporters. And we are expanding partnerships with corporations, philanthropic actors, and foundations.

The changed funding context is also putting greater pressure on how we plan and budget. Throughout the spring, Directors have briefed you, our Member States, on UNHCR's budget model reform. We thank many of you for participating in these discussions and appreciate greatly your advice. By the end of this month, we will share a proposal for your review and comments. The aim is to have a final proposal for decision at the October Executive Committee meeting, and to implement a new budget model from the 2028 budget year.

On that note, on behalf of many, let me acknowledge the hard work, vision, and finesse that our Controller, Hans Baritt, has exhibited in all facets of his work with UNHCR over the last 8+ years. He has been instrumental to many aspects of our modernization and drove efficiencies – including #More4Refugees – and exemplary financial and management practices. He has piloted new ways of working across the organization. We are profoundly grateful for his outstanding service to UNHCR, to refugees, and the broader UN system and partners. Our loss is the International Telecommunications Union's gain where he takes up the role as Chief of Finance and Administration on 1 August.

Distinguished Delegates,

This is not an easy time for UNHCR. Our dedicated workforce has always been our greatest strength, but the past 18 months have been particularly hard on colleagues across the organization.

As of last month, we have close to 12,700 colleagues, down from 20,000 just a year ago. Funding shortfalls have forced us to scale back operations, discontinue positions, and leave a high number of our international rotational staff between assignments. Many now face deep uncertainty about their future.

Today, following the difficult decisions last year on what positions could be retained, we have approximately 1,800 posts for close to 3,000 international staff. Despite our efforts, freezing recruitment, intensifying placements, and introducing early separation, the gap cannot be resolved through normal means. This is why the High Commissioner recently activated the Staff Placement and Reduction in Force Policy for international staff. It means that unassigned colleagues will compete for available vacancies, and those not placed by the end of September will leave UNHCR.

These are financially unavoidable decisions, but they come at a real human cost, despite providing affected colleagues with career support, placement assistance, and, where separation becomes unavoidable, fair, and transparent terms consistent with our policies.

At the same time, we are working towards a more sustainable workforce model that better aligns our strategy, staffing structure, and financial realities. This includes reviewing our mobility and contractual frameworks for international staff. Our aim is to rebuild a workforce that can respond to the calls upon UNHCR to deliver on its mandate and the High Commissioner's vision, while retaining talent and strengthening critical skills. We will continue to draw on your guidance as we move ahead.

UNHCR also remains firmly committed to a diverse and representative workforce. Today, we have 153 nationalities represented - 45% of our workforce are women and 80% are from the Global South. And we have been able to maintain these levels of representation despite the significant workforce reductions last year.

Throughout my time as Deputy High Commissioner, we have worked energetically to strengthen our organizational culture on integrity, respectful workplaces, diversity, anti-racism, gender equality, women's leadership, and protection from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. The pressures of last year's funding crisis have inevitably set some of those areas back. The High Commissioner, with strong support from his Chef de Cabinet and the new senior team, seeks to rebuild and sustain this progress in the difficult period ahead.

Madam Chair, Distinguished Delegates,

I cannot overstate the importance of strong integrity and oversight systems, particularly in a leaner organization. The High Commissioner's integrity action plan is a good start.

Risk management is equally critical. It helps us navigate uncertainty, make informed decisions, and sustain delivery. The 2026 Risk Review is now complete with full compliance across the organization. We are also sharpening our approach to risk appetite, bringing greater clarity to how we prioritize in a constrained environment.

As a longstanding champion of gender equality and protection against sexual misconduct, I am pleased that we have been able to retain our dedicated Victim Care Team for survivors of sexual misconduct and the NotOnlyMe platform, now in its third year. More than 300 colleagues have used it to seek support. And it has encouraged reporting to the Inspector General's Office, helping to hold repeat offenders to account.

Thank you also to our oversight bodies, for their continued work reviewing our systems and performance. They have been trusted advisors through a most difficult period in UNHCR's history and helped to prepare it for the road ahead.

Madam Chair, Distinguished Delegates, Dear Colleagues,

Speaking personally for a moment, I've been reflecting in recent weeks on 11 extraordinary years with UNHCR. They have been marked by intense pressure: the pandemic, deep financial constraints and uncertainty, and difficult but necessary reforms to remain a strong organization

in dedicated pursuit of better protection, aid and solutions for refugees and other forced to flee, as well as stateless people around the globe.

There has been real progress: strengthening our work with women and girls; placing greater trust in refugee-led and local organizations; advancing protection from sexual misconduct; and expanding partnerships through the Global Compact on Refugees – with development actors, financial institutions, the private sector, sports associations and technology partners. We invested in innovation, data, and new ways of delivering aid. And I am enormously proud to be associated with this progress.

My recent visit to Bangladesh, Madam Chair, where my humanitarian journey began more than 30 years ago, brought that reflection full circle. It reminded me of why this work matters so deeply. And why it must continue.

It has been the honour of a lifetime to serve in this role. And to work alongside such dedicated colleagues and partners and all of you.

I want to express my sincere appreciation to this Committee, for your engagement, your support, and for standing daily with those forced to flee and with us. Thank you for your partnership.

It is now time to welcome warmly the new leadership team, who will guide UNHCR forward. Tressa Finerty, Anton Leis, and Edem Wosornu bring deep experience, commitment and energy at a moment when UNHCR and the broader UN system need it most. And with the High Commissioner, they will be a dynamite team, and we wish them well.

The work continues. The responsibility continues. And our shared commitment must continue.

Onward.