

Remarks of the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Ms. Ruven Menikdiwela, at the 96th Meeting of the Standing Committee

16 June 2026

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Madam Chair,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege to address you today and to introduce the international protection agenda item. The Director of the Division of International Protection and Solutions, Ms. Elizabeth Tan, will update you in greater detail on protection developments and UNHCR's responses over the past year.

Before I begin, I would like to also thank Ambassador Oike Atsuyuki for his reflections on the ExCom Bureau's mission to Ethiopia and for his advocacy for the rights and dignity of those forcibly displaced. I would also like to thank the Government of Ethiopia for its generosity and compassion in hosting refugees.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year, we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. It is apt that I deliver these remarks here in Geneva. Because it is here, not too far away from these premises, that the rights and dignity of refugees found their most enduring expression, that auspicious day in July 1951. And it is from these same roots that many of us here have drawn purpose and a lifetime of service.

At a time scarred by one of humanity's darkest chapters, when States had marched the dead-end streets of war and destruction, the Convention was a watershed advance.

It codified one of humanity's oldest traditions, enshrined in most religions and philosophies: from the "cities of refuge" of the Hebrew Bible, to the sanctuaries of ancient Greece, to the church grounds of late antiquity, to the Islamic traditions of *jīwār* and *aman*, and to Buddhist teachings that call on us to be protectors of "those without protection... and a boat, a bridge, a passage for those seeking the further shore".

It recognized the inadequacy of mere sympathy and ad hoc measures to address the plight of refugees. Instead, a rules-based framework grounded in law and advanced through cooperation was established, with its preamble affirming responsibility sharing, Article 1 defining who is a refugee and who is not, and Article 33 prohibiting refoulement, the forced return of refugees to harm. The Convention also set out core minimum civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and protections for refugees.

Since then, the Convention has been interpreted and applied pragmatically to meet changing global realities, bolstered by the 1967 Protocol and regional instruments like the 1969 OAU Convention, and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration. Most recently, the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, which entered into force last week, presents an opportunity to move toward more predictable, fair, and effective refugee protection and migration management in Europe – an opportunity whose success will be defined by its implementation, safeguards, and protections.

Indeed, the Convention represents humanity's collective wisdom: we learned, at great cost, what it means to turn away those seeking protection, and we swore never to do it again.

Together with other instruments, it has saved millions of lives: from post-war displacement across Europe, the 1956 Hungarian uprising, and decolonization across Africa; to the upheavals in Indochina and conflicts in Central America; from decades of invasion and insurgency in Afghanistan to unspeakable horrors in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia; and to more recent crises in Iraq, Myanmar, South Sudan, the DRC, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, Yemen and beyond.

Different decades, yet a familiar reality: war, instability and human rights abuses have consistently brought tragedy and displacement in their wake. And it is in *the promise* and *the practice* of international protection that millions have found refuge, and with it, hope for a better tomorrow.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would have liked to say to you that the decades since 1951 have been marked by unbroken progress. Yet, the present moment seems less like a path forward, and more like a tide pulling us back. We must resist this tide.

We are living in a world divided, a world disordered.

Insurmountable violence has become routine. In most conflict situations, civilians are not incidental victims caught in the crossfire; they are increasingly deliberate targets. Attacks on schools, hospitals, and displacement camps are no longer anomalies. Might is outmuscling right, and international humanitarian law is cast aside.

Nearly 118 million people are forcibly displaced, some many times over. About 68.7 million are displaced within their homeland, and around 41.6 million are refugees.

Humanitarian action is restricted. We are told where not to go, whom not to help, what to highlight, and where to dim the light. Our colleagues and partners are attacked, maligned, killed. At least 326 humanitarian workers were killed last year alone.

Those wreaking this havoc pay no cost for their actions. They continue with impunity.

International institutions for collective problem-solving wrestle with deadlock. They are weakened, their resources eroded, and personnel laid off. Over the past 18 months, funding cuts have weakened UNHCR's protection capacity on the ground. For example, mandate refugee status determination has shrunk, with the number of

countries where UNHCR determines claims falling from 51 in 2024 to 42 in 2025. In Afghanistan, services for an estimated 1.6 million displaced children were discontinued. Over 60 per cent of funding for lifesaving gender-based violence prevention and response was cut. These reductions have a tragic impact at a time of deepening vulnerability.

And then there are those who discount facts and spread hatred. Those who turn public service into self-service. Those who exploit the tired politics of division to distract from governing. Those who turn slogans like “Refugees go home” into political capital.

Meanwhile, responsibility is externalized, not shared. Opaque arrangements, interceptions, transfers, pushbacks, and removals risk becoming our new normal. Costly and ineffective, these measures also fail to address the fundamental reasons why people move.

At the end of World War II, more than 30 countries received refugees from Europe. Nearly 40 countries received Hungarians when they fled in 1956. By contrast, today we have only 20 resettlement countries and ever shrinking resettlement quotas.

Today’s reality is that States with the least resources are asked to do the most, with about 68 percent of the world’s forcibly displaced living in low- and middle-income countries. Instead of support, they face receding solidarity - testing their goodwill, and, ultimately, driving refugees to undertake ever more perilous onward journeys in search of protection and assistance elsewhere.

Across different contexts, asylum systems are buckling under pressure. They are weakened by chronic underinvestment and strained by refugees that use them to access safety and even larger numbers of migrants that misuse them for lack of other legal options. This is a shared concern for UNHCR and States. It points to a clear imperative to invest in asylum systems and effective migration pathways.

This erosion of protection is based on choices – political choices - and urgently require us to resist this onslaught.

Ladies and gentlemen,

UNHCR appreciates that the promotion of international protection is not about exhortations. It is about painstaking cooperation and sustained dialogue. It is about providing practical guidance, bold options, and lawful solutions.

Let me elaborate briefly.

First, as you have heard me say before, while the principles underpinning international protection remain sound, their implementation requires renewed political commitment and consistent application.

Here, the 75th anniversary of the Convention presents an important opportunity, not for commemoration alone, but to also reinforce the normative, institutional, and political foundations of international protection.

In this regard, I am proud to announce that, based on its supervisory responsibility, UNHCR has launched a multi-year project to modernize its core legal guidance. The 1979 *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status*,

together with *UNHCR's 14 Guidelines on International Protection*, will be consolidated into a new *Handbook on Refugee Law*. For decades, this body of guidance has been indispensable to legislators, practitioners and scholars alike. The new *Handbook* will be a valuable investment, offering a comprehensive and accessible legal tool to assist States in addressing current challenges in refugee protection.

In this anniversary year, UNHCR will also convene national, regional and global dialogues, which build on the success of the 2025 Global Refugee Forum Progress Review. Together with States and partners, these will identify concrete priorities to strengthen the implementation of the Convention, better address challenges, and galvanize broader engagement. The High Commissioner's Protection Dialogue in December will help shape this revitalized protection and solutions agenda and set direction for the Global Refugee Forum in 2027.

Second, while these efforts aim to catalyze support for protection, they must be matched by equally determined responses on the ground. In this regard, UNHCR continues to build on good practices to advance policy options that are outside the box but within the law, among these, guidance on the return of failed asylum seekers, the lawful transfer of refugees and asylum seekers, and whether and how expulsion may be applied in cases where refugees engage in criminal conduct.

UNHCR also promotes responses that focus on entire displacement routes rather than isolated national contexts, equipping States and stakeholders with tools, guidance, and expertise to better address mixed movements of refugees and migrants. This route-based approach — that you have heard me mention repeatedly — requires structured political dialogue and cooperation across countries of origin, asylum, transit and destination as well as predictable funding commensurate with the scale of these movements.

At the same time, UNHCR recognizes the real pressures on asylum systems, many of which are not equipped for today's realities. Through its Strategic Approach to Strengthening National Asylum Systems and the Asylum Capacity Support Group, UNHCR supports more sustainable national systems. This is already yielding results: Armenia has developed a comprehensive workplan to reinforce its system using UNHCR's Asylum Capacity Self-Assessment Tool; countries across West and Central Africa have also developed similar roadmaps; and Colombia has advanced reforms to improve fairness, efficiency, and reduce backlogs. In Egypt, the adoption of a national asylum law paves the way for the eventual establishment of a national asylum system.

This brings me to my third point on the way forward on protection.

With 7 in 10 refugees living in long-term displacement, UNHCR's protection efforts are placing a renewed focus on solutions. This is articulated in the High Commissioner's 50by35 vision, which challenges us to move beyond simply managing displacement to reducing it. This vision also brings together voluntary return, resettlement, complementary pathways, local integration, and self-reliance as mutually reinforcing - not competing - priorities.

Of course, the preferred solution for most forcibly displaced people is voluntary return in safety and dignity. In 2025, returns reached their second highest level in 60 years, with over 14 million people, including over 4 million refugees and 10 million internally displaced people, returning home. Some did so voluntarily. Many returned under adverse circumstances and to extremely fragile contexts, while others were forcibly

returned. Without peace and investment in countries of origin, returns will not be a sustainable end to displacement, but simply a temporary measure.

Resettlement fell sharply to just 81,800 in 2025 – less than half the previous year – as quotas and humanitarian funding were slashed. Today, there are only 21,000 resettlement places available. This comes as 2.4 million refugees are projected to be in need of resettlement next year. This lifeline must be scaled up as a pillar for sharing responsibility.

In parallel, access to complementary pathways must expand. These pathways – be it work, study, or family reunification - engage a broader coalition of stakeholders to help refugees rebuild their lives, contribute to their communities, and ease pressure on host countries. Initiatives which expand refugee access to tertiary education in Morocco or across Africa are transformative, as are “train-to-hire” programmes in the Asia-Pacific, Italy, and OECD countries. These exemplify solidarity in action and need to be delivered at scale.

Finally, together with UNDP and IOM, UNHCR is also advancing solutions for internally displaced people — notably through the Solutions Hub and through area-based approaches and initiatives, with demonstrated impact in the Central African Republic, Colombia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen. In Ethiopia, 50,000 IDPs received national identification cards. In the Syrian Arab Republic, community-based interventions benefited over 1.2 million people. In Ukraine, nearly 89,000 IDPs accessed services, housing and documentation. In parallel, UNHCR and OCHA have also streamlined coordination models in 16 mixed refugee and internal displacement countries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On the topic of solutions, let me turn to another area where solutions must be scaled up.

This year also marks the 65th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. In a world of nation States, it is a cruel contradiction that millions – more than 4.5 million people – are not recognized as belonging to any, and thus, are denied the full protections a nationality affords. To be stateless is to live in limbo, without a place in the world’s ledger of belonging.

We know full well that statelessness is not inevitable. In fact, it *can* be resolved. It *can* be prevented. We have seen this between 2014 and 2024, when political will and tireless advocacy allowed more than 613,000 stateless people to attain nationality. And last year, an additional 46,000 people acquired citizenship across 24 countries.

Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan resolved all known cases of statelessness. Kenya granted nationality to members of the Shona, Makonde, and Pemba minority groups. More recently, Thailand championed solutions for stateless persons, with over 116,000 people benefitting so far. North Macedonia has also spearheaded solutions, with important positive developments in Syria and the Gambia to address long standing statelessness situations.

This is no small feat.

Indeed, to gain nationality or legal status is nothing less than a new lease on life. It is to step into the light - to claim one's voice, one's rights - what Nosizi Dube, the statelessness advocate from Kenya's Shona community, described as reclaiming one's power and freedom to live up to one's potential.

Through the Global Alliance to End Statelessness, we must sustain momentum, share solutions, and support States to accelerate protection and break the intergenerational cycles of exclusion. We must also adequately resource these efforts – the funding cuts over the past year have devastated this area of work – because solutions are not only possible; they are within reach.

Madam Chair,

Distinguished delegates,

As I bring almost 38 years of service in UNHCR to a close, I am profoundly grateful for the honor accorded to me to serve the mission of the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. It has been the privilege of my life to do this work alongside so many committed colleagues and partners. And as we welcome the incoming Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Edem Worsonu, I know that she will enjoy the same solidarity, cooperation and partnership from which I have benefited for almost four decades.

In this final address to the Standing Committee, allow me one last appeal:

History is never a straight line; it advances and recedes.

When the tides are rough, take comfort in knowing that the right way is seldom the easy way. And the fact that international refugee protection is still in the headlines today is proof that it matters. And it matters because it speaks to a fundamental element that binds us all: our shared humanity.

And when history renders its verdict, let it record this: we did not yield on the Convention's promise.

We were its guardians, not its gravediggers.

Thank you.