

**ExCom Chairperson's mission to Ethiopia:
Report to the 96th meeting of the Standing Committee**

Introduction

From the outset, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to the Government of Ethiopia for the warm welcome and to His Excellency Ambassador Tsegab Kebebew Daka, Permanent Representative of Ethiopia in Geneva.

Ethiopia's commitments and leadership

I chose to visit Ethiopia because it represents one of the most ambitious examples of refugee inclusion anywhere in the world.

At a time when displacement continues to rise globally, Ethiopia keeps its borders open to those fleeing conflict. The country hosts more than 1 million refugees and asylum-seekers. Yet, despite significant challenges and limited resources, it has adopted progressive policies that promote freedom of movement, access to education and social services, the right to work, and inclusion in national systems.

During my meetings with the government, I heard repeatedly that refugees should not be viewed merely as recipients of assistance. Rather, they should be empowered to become active participants in society and contributors to their communities. I was impressed by this vision, and I was equally struck by the determination to pursue it.

Visit to Melkadida

During the visit, I travelled to Melkadida in Ethiopia's Somali Region. What makes Melkadida particularly remarkable is not the protracted nature of the displacement situation but the efforts being made to transform it. What I witnessed in Melkadida was an attempt to move beyond traditional humanitarian assistance towards something more sustainable.

UNHCR, working closely with the Government and partners, is creating an enabling environment in which refugees and host communities can develop skills, establish businesses, access finance and strengthen their resilience. This is not about replacing humanitarian assistance overnight. Rather, it is about creating pathways that gradually reduce dependency and expand opportunity.

The head of UNHCR in Melkadida described this approach to me in a way that I found particularly compelling. He said: "We are the engine behind it, because we need to help build solutions that will allow us to phase out."

Those words stayed with me throughout the visit.

They capture UNHCR's catalytic role in bringing together government institutions, development actors, financial institutions, private sector partners and refugee communities around this shared objective.

During my visit, I spoke with refugees and host community members involved in cooperative businesses in agriculture, livestock, energy and crop production. They explained how small grants had enabled them to establish businesses and generate income for their families. These initiatives were creating opportunities not only for refugees but also for host communities, helping strengthen social cohesion and local development.

One refugee woman, Maymuna, spoke candidly about the consequences of limited opportunities. She explained that many refugees had felt trapped and that some had contemplated dangerous onward movements in search of a better future. These opportunities had restored their hope and given them a sense of purpose.

Climate action and resilience

While these opportunities exist, significant challenges remain.

Melkadida faces recurrent droughts and floods that undermine livelihoods, threaten food security and jeopardize protection. The camps are vulnerable to climate-related shocks and remain heavily dependent on costly energy and water systems. It was evident that investments in solar energy and other climate adaptation measures would in parallel strengthen livelihoods, improve essential services and support local economic development.

In this context, I am pleased that my own Government is supporting a project called the CRADLE initiative under the Green Climate Fund which is being developed by the Government of Ethiopia, UNDP and UNHCR. By bringing climate financing into displacement-affected areas, it will have a ripple effect and attract additional investments in support of refugee inclusion and local development.

Education and aspirations

One of the highlights of my visit was to the secondary school in Bokolmayo camp, where I met with a group of refugee girls to discuss their future.

Education remains one of the most powerful tools available to refugee children and youth. It offers opportunities, promotes self-reliance and helps shape future leaders. I was encouraged to learn that refugee students are increasingly being integrated into Ethiopia's national education system and are studying under the national curriculum.

Yet the girls spoke candidly about the difficulties they face. They described long walks to school in extreme heat, limited access to electricity and internet connectivity, shortages of learning materials and the absence of school feeding programmes. Others spoke about forced marriage. These challenges, coupled with limited prospects for the future, often lead to drop out.

Yet their determination was inspiring. One girl said she dreams of becoming a doctor. Reflecting the determination of many of her peers, she summed up these challenges simply: "All we need is opportunity."

Registration and inclusion in the national digital identity system

I also visited several registration centres, both in Melkadida and in the urban context in Addis Ababa, where refugees are enrolled in Ethiopia's national digital identity system, known as Fayda – which means "value" in Amharic.

And trust me, it is of value.

By linking refugees with the national digital identity system – the same one all citizens and residents of Ethiopia have access to – refugees are better able to access services, open bank accounts, participate in economic life and exercise their rights. It is a practical example of how inclusion can be translated into reality.

Conclusion

Throughout my visit, there was a recurring theme: the desire to move from dependency to opportunity. Ethiopia's Makatet Roadmap presents a solid foundation for this transition. Yet it is clear that Ethiopia cannot achieve these ambitions alone. The country requires sustained international support if it is to fulfil its commitments.

Ethiopia is a place where the Global Compact on Refugees is being operationalized in practice. It demonstrates what is possible with strong government leadership and when a broad range of stakeholders come together around a common vision. It demonstrates that refugee inclusion can work. It demonstrates that refugees can become economically active, contribute to local development and strengthen the communities that host them. Most importantly, it demonstrates that the High Commissioner's vision of reducing dependency and achieving "50 by 35" is not merely aspirational. It is possible.

The refugees I met were not asking for charity. They were asking for opportunity. Opportunity such as the one given to Sangano, a Congolese refugee from Kivu who I met in Addis Ababa. He told me:

"We have been given a chance to rebuild our life. It is like being reborn. Now, I can forget the past."

His sense of belonging was palpable. In Ethiopia, he said, "we are not treated as strangers, but as brothers and sisters".

These words capture the promise of what can be achieved. Ethiopia continues serving as a positive example for the world. Let us help it succeed.

Tenure as Chairperson

Finally, I would like to mention how proud I was as Chairperson of the Executive Committee to hear consistent appreciation from all parties for UNHCR's leadership and its ability to bring together humanitarian, development, government and refugee actors around common objectives.

I would like to add my own appreciation and admiration for UNHCR and the extraordinary work it carries out, not just in Ethiopia but around the world. Throughout my tenure, I have seen firsthand the dedication of its staff, the breadth of its partnerships, and its unwavering commitment to protecting and finding solutions for some of the world's most vulnerable people. I have come away with deep respect for the dedication, professionalism and humanity of UNHCR and will remain a committed advocate and supporter.

Thank you.