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Statement by H.E. Sayed Hussain Alemi Balkhi, Minister of Refugees and Repatriation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
70th session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme 2019

*Mr. President, Boudjemâa Delmi,
Mr. High Commissioner, Filippo Grandi
Distinguished Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Good morning!*

It is an honor to represent the Government and people of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan at this Seventieth Session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme.

Excellencies,

The people of Afghanistan just last week showed their courage, unwavering determination and strong commitment to democracy, peace, and stability by voting in our young democracy's 4th presidential election. Despite the threat of terrorism, millions of Afghans risked their lives and voted not just for a president, but for our constitution, prosperity, peace and democracy. The men and women of Afghanistan defied terrorism, in all its shapes and forms, and exercised, against all odds their constitutional rights.

This year marks the 40th year since the beginning of large-scale Afghan refugee movements into Pakistan and Iran. At this juncture, Afghan displacement remains one of the most complex challenges facing the world today. Security and stability must improve in Afghanistan so that refugees will want to come back home. Despite the difficult conditions including ongoing conflict in some parts of the country and natural disasters, the Government of Afghanistan together with its international partners, particularly UNHCR have made important strides over the past five years.

Creating a conducive environment for the voluntary, safe return and reintegration of Afghan refugees is at the centre of our efforts. The return of more than 5.2 million Afghan refugees and 5 million undocumented migrants since 2002 speaks of that reality.

Significant initiatives have been undertaken to ensure the inclusion of displaced persons and returnees in our national programming, including addressing land issues for returnees, investing in provinces of high return and displacement, and working together to ensure return and reintegration is sustainable and that the root causes of displacement and humanitarian needs are addressed. We have identified and prioritized 15 priority areas of return and reintegration that have absorbed higher number of returnees and where our Citizen's Charter and other National Priority Programmes are also delivering projects. 5 new areas will be identified jointly with UNHCR in 2020. We call on our partners in the international community to support this important initiative, including by channeling the much needed development assistance into these areas.

Given that solutions for refugees and migrants are key to stability and security in the region, the government of Afghanistan has identified the return and reintegration of its citizens as the building blocks of peace and reconciliation. Peace talks, initiated by the United States of America, had led to a dozen sessions prior to its suspension due primarily to Taliban's disagreement to a comprehensive ceasefire. Now that the presidential election is successfully held, an earlier resumption of peace talks is expected.

By achieving peace, we will witness high return of refugees; about two million and we have prepared a post-peace return plan. However, I acknowledge that Afghanistan alone is unable to secure its budget. I take this opportunity to call on all friendly nations and international organization to help Afghanistan.

Mr. High Commissioner,

You know all too well that we have also included the issues of Afghan refugees and their return as part of a larger dialogue with Pakistan, Iran and UNHCR, including through the well-established tripartite and quadripartite fora.

In addition to 1.5 million conflict-induced displaced Afghans and those affected by drought, hundreds of thousands of families across the country are hoping to be able to return to their areas of origin.

The humanitarian needs of returnees must be linked with development actions. Only then can sustainable solutions be achieved. A comprehensive refugee response begins with strengthened partnerships for sustainable support for Afghan refugees as well as displaced populations inside Afghanistan. While commending our excellent relationship with your office in Afghanistan, we look forward to working with the international community, notably as relates to investments in the education and skills of the displaced Afghan population.

Availing the opportunity, I would like to thank the E.U. for its contributions towards our National Development programmes, the United States of America for \$190 million to address the needs of returnees and other vulnerable populations, as well as other donors and hosting countries such as Pakistan and Iran.

We recognize the increasing global figure of 70 million displaced people worldwide calls for more international cooperation. It is in this spirit that Afghanistan has committed itself – as the first country in Asia and one of the first countries of origin globally – to the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework. We have taken effective measures to implement the key objectives of the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees that are very much in line with the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework. Afghanistan's pledges and contributions towards the Global Refugee Forum will be made on 17-18 December, here in Geneva.

In 2019, with E.U. financial support and ICMPD technical assistance, we also developed a comprehensive migration policy that provides a comprehensive roadmap for migration and asylum issues until 2050.

Mr. Chair Ladies and Gentlemen,

As Afghanistan continues to fight the war on terror and is paying a high price every day, it remains equally committed to combating trafficking and addressing irregular migration in line with the UN's sustainable development goals. Concerned about the situation of refugees and migrants in transit countries, especially on some islands, I would like to invite countries of origin, transit and destination for a coherent joint effort against trafficking in persons.

Yet, there are still some 6 million Afghan refugees and migrants in Pakistan and Iran. They constitute the largest protracted displaced population in the world. The majority are young people whose contribution to the future of Afghanistan is key.

The Government of Afghanistan is more than ever committed to helping the millions Afghan refugees and migrants still living in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran to return home voluntarily, just like the more than 10 million Afghans have done over the last 18 years.

Before I conclude, I would once again like to express our deep appreciation to the Governments of Pakistan, Iran, E.U, Turkey and all the countries that have generously hosted and supported Afghan refugees. Noting that Afghanistan is not ready yet for forced deportation of migrants, and that there is still need for exercising tolerance, patience, and solidarity until the peace process delivers. Thank you.

