

Remarks for the 95th Standing Committee meeting
Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme
Kelly T. Clements, Deputy High Commissioner
24 to 26 March 2026

Mister Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

Welcome to UNHCR's 95th Standing Committee.

We meet at a time of profound instability. Of transition for the entire humanitarian community and, of course, for UNHCR. We are still very much emerging from the damage of last year's financial storm. And although we are in the early stages of recovery, we are recovering.

In these turbulent times, there is a quote by author Elizabeth Edwards that comes to mind: "She stood in the storm, and when the wind did not blow her way, she adjusted her sails." Our task is clear: adjust our sails – together – so protection and solutions for refugees and stateless people hold steady, even as the winds change.

That has been one of the few bright spots from last year's systemic shocks. UNHCR is determined and committed to delivering even in the most difficult circumstances. With your trust and your support, we keep moving. Because there is too much at stake not to.

Distinguished delegates,

We are deeply alarmed by the escalating conflict across the Middle East and beyond. Countries affected by the current crisis host 24.3 million forcibly displaced people and returnees. Families in Iran and Lebanon have been fleeing their homes, many of them already refugees, with nowhere safe to go and in urgent need of protection and support. In Lebanon, displaced families are sleeping in the streets of Beirut, as collective shelters are overflowing and aid stocks are depleted. As part of the government-led inter-agency flash appeal for Lebanon, UNHCR and partners are urgently seeking funding, to continue to deliver emergency shelter and core relief items, while reinforcing protection at borders and reception points. And we are revising refugee response requirements in the Islamic republic of Iran, where we are keeping reception centres and helplines open with demand increasing. You will hear more shortly from the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations and regional bureau directors.

In the shadow of the Middle East crisis, other wars and conflicts continue to burn with no end in sight – like Myanmar, Sudan and Ukraine to name a few. Without additional resources, we will simply not be able to reach all those in need of protection and life-saving aid.

Through this increasingly complex geopolitical landscape, at a time when conflicts burn hotter than ever, UNHCR's new High Commissioner, Barham Salih, has laid out a new vision, brought new energy, and is charting a path forward for the organization.

Excellencies,

We are guided by the High Commissioner's ambitious aim to reduce by 50 per cent the number of refugees in protracted displacement who are dependent on humanitarian aid by 2035. He has briefed you on this vision. We cannot achieve this alone of course. Partnerships remain crucial – with you, development actors, private sector and civil society, and critically, with refugees and stateless themselves. Thank you for standing with those forced to flee and with us, in making this ambition real.

The High Commissioner is moving quickly in these early days of his tenure. As you are aware, he has commissioned an independent management review which begins this week, and which is tasked with examining structures, processes, and decision-making. Conducted pro bono by Oliver Wyman, the review will run 12 weeks and focus on strengthening accountability, sharpening planning and budgeting, and aligning roles across headquarters, regional bureaux, and country operations. Its findings will guide the High Commissioner's reform efforts, building on evidence of past achievements, course correcting as necessary, while stabilizing the organization as much as possible. We look forward to engaging with Member States throughout this process.

Distinguished delegates,

In 2025, as you know, the sudden funding shortfall forced us to shrink our footprint by a third. We had to cut expenditures and make deep operational reductions, while relentlessly mobilizing resources. Despite these efforts, millions of refugees, internally displaced and stateless people were left without direct support, as services were scaled back or ceased. 185 operations changed shape – some closing, many downsizing, and others nationalizing. Our workforce also suffered: more than 6,500 colleagues have left since the beginning of 2025, and many teams are still carrying that loss. All of us continue to feel their absence.

Even after the painful downsizing, our current estimate shows a deficit of USD 102 million. As the Controller will explain later in this meeting, we are covering the shortfall through surpluses in the self-administered health insurance and the Working Capital Fund. Thanks in part to the advice of the Independent Audit and Oversight Committee and our auditors, we are confident that we will close the 2025 accounts on time and in full compliance. The lesson is clear: we must adapt, keep delivering for the millions who rely on us, and move forward in strong partnership.

In this shifting landscape, our budget model must evolve while preserving its strengths. Directors recently briefed you on the models used by other organizations, and we heard your call for concrete proposals by the time the Executive Committee meets in October so that a new budget model can take effect from the 2028 budget year. We are working toward that timeline, aligning our efforts with the independent management review and will take your advice as we proceed.

Distinguished colleagues,

Turning to 2026, the financial situation remains serious. The ExCom approved budget of USD 8.5 billion, is 20 per cent less than that of 2025. It reflects a smaller workforce, stronger solutions focus and stricter prioritization. We have recorded close to USD 1.9 billion in contributions, thanks in large part to your pledges and commitments last December and increased multi-year funding. Thank you again for that strong support. Yet with nearly half our

resources expected to be tightly earmarked, our ability to respond where needs are greatest and to surge when crises warrant is seriously restricted. At this moment, we need more flexible funding, not less.

We are therefore redoubling efforts to diversify our funding base. We are investing more in fundraising from the private sector, with a target of USD 725 million in 2026. The High Commissioner intends to launch soon a Global CEO Council to reinforce reform, bolster efficiencies, and mobilize resources, expertise, and advocacy.

To our donors: thank you for your continued trust and solidarity that makes our work possible in 128 countries and 385 operational contexts. To host countries: your generosity and the responsibility you carry daily are the backbone of our collective efforts.

Distinguished colleagues,

Our steadfast commitment to efficiency and reform is about responsibility to the people we serve and to those who place their trust in us.

The results are already tangible. In 2025 alone, the implementation of our Deliver Better Roadmap generated system-wide efficiencies and financial gains, of more than USD 60 million in cumulative savings and recovered value. This includes over USD 10 million through fleet rightsizing, close to USD 29 million reduced in surplus stock, and further gains through fleet optimization, procurement efficiencies and IT contract reform.

From 2026 onward, we are taking this approach to the next level by hard-wiring the Deliver Better Roadmap into programming and planning, ensuring that value for money, impact and cost-consciousness shape our decisions from the outset. Annual planning, budgeting, and mid-year reviews will incorporate the 4Es (economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity) and document how choices maximize impact, manage risks, and uphold non-negotiable protection standards. Our latest efficiency update will be shared today, and we welcome your feedback on it. We will supply you regularly with these updates.

These efforts go hand in hand with UN-wide reform. Within UN80, and the Humanitarian Reset, UNHCR is playing a leading role - through the High Level Committee on Management and the Business Innovations Group - on common back office and global shared services and contributing strongly to supply, data and technology. UN FLEET, the unbranded UN offering which we co-lead with the World Food Programme, now leases some 1,000 vehicles in over 100 countries to nearly 30 UN partners, cutting duplication and costs. The Digital Hub of Treasury Solutions connects 15 UN entities to the global banking system for quicker, more transparent payments. And in the UN80 supply workstream, we are pushing more integrated procurement, logistics and supply chains, including closer collaboration with International Organization for Migration. Through the Humanitarian Reset, we are also strengthening cooperation with OCHA and operational partners. And we are deepening partnerships with the private sector to bring both resources and know-how to our reform efforts.

Expect to hear more about our efficiency efforts throughout this Standing Committee.

Distinguished Delegates,

Transparency and accountability remain key priorities of this organization. And I want to acknowledge how exceptionally closely we worked with our independent oversight partners over the last tumultuous year. Thanks to the Office of Internal Oversight Service, the Board of Auditors, the Independent Audit and Oversight Committee and our Evaluation Office; whose work has helped us spot issues early and document good practice for scale up and replication. Their guidance has informed decisions on HQ realignment and office closures, and strengthened internal controls in high-risk areas. The High Commissioner wants to go further and launch a donor/transparency portal to give Member States near real-time visibility on how funds are allocated, disbursed, and used. The independent management review will provide recommendations in this regard.

In line with past reforms, risk management remains front and centre in our efforts. We conducted a Rapid Fraud Risk Assessment last summer to mitigate potential fraud risks during the organizational downsizing and realignment. This year, we are strengthening controls and training across high-risk functions with enterprise risk tools and webinars to drive prevention and early detection.

Across tough operational contexts, colleagues and partners keep UNHCR steady, focused on delivering for those forced to flee and for stateless people. But that steadiness has come at a high cost.

After a devastatingly difficult 2025, UNHCR colleagues are understandably tired and anxious about the future. Our focus now is on renewal and restoring trust. We are equipping teams with practical tools to support wellbeing, including the launch of the Psychosocial Risk Management tool in operations. At the same time, the High Commissioner's new integrity action plan is strengthening the foundations of trust: so colleagues feel safe to speak up, leaders are held consistently to account, and there is zero tolerance for inaction against fraud and misconduct, including sexual misconduct. You will hear more from the Inspector General's Office on our broader integrity work, including the efficiency efforts now in place such as advancing the use of AI to strengthen misconduct-intake processes.

Even amidst massive downsizing, we have protected and advanced workforce diversity. Today our colleagues represent over 150 nationalities, gender parity is sustained in the professional category, and nearly 80 per cent of our workforce is from the Global South. As the Director of People Management briefed recently, Member States can track these trends in real time through the Global Workforce dashboard. Looking ahead, we are applying last year's lessons to better match skills to needs and place the right people where they can make the greatest difference.

Mister Chair, Distinguished delegates,

Caring for our people and renewing trust within UNHCR is essential, but it is only part of the picture. The challenges that we face, and the solutions that we seek, depend on collective action beyond UNHCR.

This week, we will brief you on the Global Refugee Forum Progress Review last December, a powerful reminder that multilateralism works, and a clear signal of what is at stake without renewed momentum on responsibility-sharing. As we approach the 75th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention later this year, we have an opportunity to reaffirm the fundamentals of

protection and shape a more solutions-oriented path forward towards the Global Refugee Forum 2027.

In my opening, I spoke about adjusting our sails together. As we mark this anniversary, let us do exactly that by putting shared responsibility into practice, not just affirming its principle.

Together we will weather the storms and uphold the promise to provide protection, aid and find solutions for people forced to flee.

Thank you.