

1. Chair, Distinguished Delegates,

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you on major developments in Europe.

As we meet today, we must **reckon with the fact that, despite peace talks, the war on Ukraine persists and** has now entered its fifth year. Ukraine is experiencing a sharp escalation in attacks, with nearly 1,000 drones launched yesterday, killing civilians in central and western regions far from the frontline.

Millions of people across Ukraine find themselves with continued humanitarian needs at a scale that is hard to convey.

According to OHCHR, 2025 was the deadliest year for civilians since 2022, a trend that tragically continues into 2026. **Daily strikes** target civilian infrastructure and challenge humanitarian delivery. Just last Friday, 20 March, an evacuation vehicle operated by our partner NGO Proliska – last year’s recipient of the regional Nansen award - was struck by a drone in the Donetsk region while evacuating elderly civilians, killing two women and injuring two others. The incident underscores the grave risks faced by civilians and humanitarian workers, who should never be targeted.

This past winter, some 2.5 million families in Ukraine were left without appropriate shelter, enduring the lowest temperatures in over a decade amidst widespread power outages.

During my **recent mission** to Ukraine accompanying the High Commissioner, I witnessed the impact of our collective efforts. Last year, as part of the UN inter-agency response, UNHCR provided **1.3 million multi-sector services** to displaced and war-affected people and, by the end of February, we had supported nearly 200,000 people in frontline oblasts with cash assistance **for**

specific winter needs that 90% of recipients used specifically to heat their homes. In 2026, we plan to reach **over 2 million people**, working mostly with local partners.

As we deliver life-saving aid, **recovery** efforts are crucial to strengthen national systems for Ukraine's broader reconstruction – and voluntary returns are a critical dimension of recovery. Within the inter-agency response, UNHCR continues to support authorities in creating conditions for those who strive to **return and rebuild their lives and their country**. To inform recovery planning, UNHCR has partnered with the Brunel University on a returns simulation model. However, the challenge is immense: Ukraine is by now the most mined country in the world, with 25% of its territory contaminated with explosive remnants.

This is why **continued protection** and assistance to those fleeing the war remains an imperative. Out of the nearly 6 million refugees from Ukraine, **5.3 million** are generously hosted in the Europe region. In the face of heightened hostilities, we welcome the EU's decision to **extend Temporary Protection** until March 2027. We remain engaged in discussions with States on **simplified options for longer-term stay**. A coordinated approach on this matter will avoid uncertainty for millions as well as potential secondary movements

Refugee-hosting States have made admirable efforts to protect and include refugees in their national systems, and many self-reliant refugees are now contributing to local economies. In its last year, the **Regional Refugee Response Plan** brings together 190 partners in 10 refugee hosting countries to support the inclusion of over 1.7 million refugees in national systems and assist the

most vulnerable, with a focus on transitioning the response coordination to governments and civil society.

2. Distinguished Delegates,

The situation for Syrian refugees also reflects a **tension between the hope for return and the reality of a fragile transition**. In 2025, 2 million IDPs and 1.3 million refugees returned – over 600,000 from Türkiye alone since December 2024. I want to recognize Türkiye’s generously hosting and protecting 2.3 million Syrians as of today, and facilitating support for those choosing to return.

However, in 2026, returns stalled due to the security situation and the limited national basic services available in Syria. Our latest intention surveys reveal a cautious "wait and see" approach among Syrians in Europe. While the "hope to return" remains high at **80%**, only a few plan to do so within the year. For those who cannot voluntarily return now, continued protection remains essential.

As we look beyond Syria, the volatile situation in the **Middle East** has also engaged the Europe region in preparedness efforts. We are closely monitoring the potential for population movements and, **as of yesterday**, border crossings to Armenia and Türkiye remain open with no indication of large-scale displacement. We are coordinating with national authorities and other agencies on contingency planning.

3. Chair, Distinguished Delegates,

Last year saw a 22% decrease in **sea and land arrivals to Europe** – to fewer than **155,000 people, though trends vary across routes**. While arrivals in **Italy** remain stable, new and similarly dangerous routes are emerging, such as

crossings from **Libya to Crete in Greece**. Sudanese were among the main groups on some of these routes, reflecting the difficult choices faced by people fleeing conflict. In 2025, boat arrivals across the English Channel reached record numbers of irregular arrivals and reportedly claimed 40 lives. UNHCR remains committed to engaging constructively with States on mixed flows as well as onward and secondary movements of people in need of international protection.

In 2025, first-time **asylum applications in the EU+ dropped by 25%** compared to last year to 697,000, attributed in part to the regime change in Syria. Over a quarter of claimants came from Afghanistan and Venezuela.

Acknowledging the challenges presented by irregular and mixed movements, UNHCR continues to support Member States and the European Commission in preparing for the implementation of the **EU Pact on Migration and Asylum**. Adequate safeguards that provide protection to those who need it - while ensuring returns of those who don't - will be critical elements to strengthen the management of mixed movements and reinforce public confidence.

In addition, we recall that safe and regular avenues, such as **education and labour pathways**, along with family reunification, can leverage skills of people on the move and complement the response to irregular movements. This is an area with strategic potential, in which we see scope for continued cooperation with partners, notably IOM. Similarly, we continue to support a **route-based approach** to addressing mixed population flows.

The Pact implementation also offers an opportunity to mainstream **disability inclusion** and opportunities to ensure identification and protection of **stateless people**.

Beyond the developments related to the EU Pact, we are witnessing a concerning **debate regarding the fundamental value of the international protection framework itself**. At the core, the issues raised relate to aspects of implementation, rather than the fundamentals of the legal instruments, including the 1951 Convention. UNHCR will continue to engage with States in these dialogues.

4. Chair, Distinguished delegates,

I must be direct about the consequences of the funding situation and cuts. As in other regions, we were forced to downsize in Europe— operationally and through a workforce reduction of more than 40% by January 2026, which warranted heart-wrenching trade-offs.

The impact is mostly felt by the displaced we are here to protect. Reductions in cash assistance, community-based protection, and inclusion activities have already diminished the reach of services. In Moldova, where a third of the refugees are older people or living with disabilities, and 90% are women and girls, we reached 60% fewer people in 2025.

Funding cuts have constrained our ability to advance localization. Many of our local partners, including refugee-led organizations, struggle to sustain activities, and we risk losing local capacity and expertise at a time when we should be empowering and relying more on their leadership.

To mitigate impacts, we also continue to **adapt our ways of operating**, in line with the UN80 initiative and the Humanitarian Reset. With IOM and UNDP, we work to catalyse solutions, including on labour mobility, voluntary returns or recovery. We **work extensively with local actors**, particularly in the Ukraine response, one of the most advanced **localization** models. Across 11 refugee hosting countries, the response plans are co-designed with local authorities and civil society. Despite the cuts in 2025, we supported some 30 community-based, refugee-led, and women-led organizations because their expertise is indispensable for tailored services and community engagement.

Thank you for your attention Chair and Distinguished Delegates

I look forward to your comments and questions.