

Standing Committee of the Executive Committee of the  
High Commissioner's Programme (95th meeting)

24 March 2026

Chairperson,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to address the ninety-fifth meeting of the Standing Committee, which in March, as in previous years, focuses on regional activities and global programmes.

Over the past twelve months, both new and protracted conflicts, human rights violations, insecurity, political instability and deepening socio-economic fragility have continued to drive displacement at a pace far greater than the solutions available.

As you will hear from Regional Bureau Directors and from the Director of the Division of Emergencies and Programme Support, the concerns we raised a year ago about major funding shortfalls have materialized. The consequences for refugees, internally displaced persons, stateless persons and other people we serve have been severe. In 2025, we received around 26 per cent fewer resources than in 2024 resulting in a forced and rapid scale down of our response over the course of the year.

While reductions were felt across all operations globally, efforts were made to protect emergency responses, lifesaving activities and operations supporting a large number of forcibly displaced persons.

Despite efforts to firewall the most vulnerable of populations, impact has been felt across sectors and across regions. Allow me to mention just three sectors:

UNHCR-supported health programmes were reduced by 35 per cent globally, limiting access to essential services and increasing the risks of untreated illness and preventable deaths. Refugee outpatient consultations declined by 14 per cent compared with 2024.

Education programmes were cut by 34 per cent globally. This meant that in Mali for instance, education came to a halt for 11,500 refugee children.

Funding cuts also forced UNHCR and partners to scale back core protection services. This has left millions of refugees and internally displaced people without timely assistance and has widened already critical gaps.

Our global presence, which is essential to delivering our protection mandate, has also been affected. A total of 119 offices were closed across all regions. Overall, staffing was reduced by around one third.

Refugee populations highly dependent on humanitarian assistance in camp settings such as Cox's Bazar, Dadaab and Zaatari have been especially affected. In some places, community cohesion has come under strain as pressure on already scarce resources has increased, leading to tensions. In certain contexts, wood-cutting for firewood has resumed, with consequences for the environment and, at times, for relations with host communities.

#### **Chairperson, distinguished delegates,**

In response, we have accelerated cost-saving measures already under way at local, regional and global levels, to reduce the proportional impact on operations compared with administrative and personnel costs.

Governments in a number of asylum countries are also taking steps to mitigate the impact of these cuts, assuming some of the activities in health and education for instance, thus far supported by UNHCR.

But it is equally clear that, as we begin this year with fewer resources than were available in 2025, incremental adjustments will not be enough. A more fundamental shift is required.

At the heart of this shift is the objective announced by High Commissioner Barham Salih: to reduce by 50 per cent, by 2035, the number of refugees in protracted situations who depend on humanitarian assistance.

This objective is fully in line with the spirit and purpose of the Global Compact on Refugees, affirmed by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2018. Achieving it requires that we act on several fronts at once.

1. First, greater emphasis must be placed on creating the conditions for voluntary return in safety and dignity.
2. Second, support to refugees must, from the start, be designed with self-reliance as a long-term objective.
3. Third, development resources must be mobilized and invested in refugee-hosting communities so as to reduce dependency on humanitarian assistance for both refugees and their hosts.
4. And fourth, responsibility-sharing must also be demonstrated through resettlement and complementary pathways, including labour mobility, education visas, family reunification and community sponsorship, for those who cannot safely return and for whom local options remain limited.

This direction reflects the discussions we have been having on sustainable responses which is now increasingly visible in all regions. This new objective will now serve as an organizational principle.

In the MENA region, the Syrian refugee situation remains one of the largest displacement crises in the world. Since 8 December 2024, some 3.4 million refugees and internally displaced people have returned. For returns to continue and to be sustainable, significant investment in areas of return will be essential. During the Global Refugee Forum progress review last December, the Syrian Government, in its first-ever pledge, committed to enable the voluntary, safe and dignified return of IDPs and refugees by providing transparent information on return areas and available services; strengthening cooperation with UNHCR through joint programmes; and working with international partners to rehabilitate infrastructure and essential services.

In Asia and the Pacific, Thailand announced at the last Executive Committee session its decision to allow more than 77,000 Myanmar displaced persons, who have lived in temporary shelters for over four decades, to work outside the camps.

In Europe, host countries have consistently favoured programmes that promote self-reliance and employment, including early inclusion in national systems. In Poland, for example, this has enabled Ukrainian refugees to meet around 80 per cent of their needs within two years, reducing pressure on social services and accelerating labour market participation. A study by Deloitte indicates that Ukrainian refugees contributed 2.7 per cent to Poland's GDP in 2024.

In the Americas, Colombia is adopting area-based and inclusive approaches that connect refugee-hosting areas to broader development strategies, helping to transform those areas into economic hubs that benefit both refugees and host communities. Brazil is advancing private-sector partnerships that expand access to employment, financial services and value chains for refugees and their hosts, in line with the sustainable responses approach. Mexico is also consolidating its asylum system and, with the support of the private sector, accelerating and scaling labor insertion programmes for thousands of refugees. Depending on how the situation in Venezuela evolves, voluntary repatriation could also become possible, potentially helping to bring one of the world's largest displacement crises closer to resolution.

In Eastern and Southern Africa, the Shirika Plan in Kenya is guiding the transition from camps to municipalities. In Ethiopia, the Makatet roadmap, developed through legal reform and stakeholder consultation, is facilitating refugee inclusion in health care, education and the labour market. In Rwanda, similar area-based and inclusive approaches linked to national development strategies are being adopted to support self-reliance and solutions for refugees and host communities.

In West and Central Africa, although hampered by limited resources and the lack of services in areas of return, the repatriation of refugees to the Central African Republic is progressing. Ghana, where refugees are being enrolled in the national health system, offers an important example of inclusion in public services. Other coastal countries are also including refugees into national systems and development plans, demonstrating how inclusive national policies can both ease pressure on host communities and advance solutions.

Several factors have been critical to the progress made in these contexts: changed circumstances and commitment to voluntary return in safety and dignity; political will and leadership; legal and regulatory reforms that support inclusion; engagement by United Nations country teams under the leadership of Resident Coordinators; strong partnerships with bilateral and multilateral development actors; greater involvement of the local private sector beyond philanthropy; and most importantly the involvement of refugee communities themselves.

**Chairperson, distinguished delegates,**

The World Bank is a key partner in this effort. Since 2017, it has invested some US\$ 5.5 billion under the dedicated IDA window for refugees and host communities in 21 refugee-hosting countries, helping to strengthen national systems and infrastructure in refugee-hosting areas.

Since 2016, the Global Concessional Financing Facility (GCFF) has also provided nearly US\$ 1 billion in grants to generate concessional loans, unlocking a total commitment of around US\$ 8 billion for seven middle-income countries hosting large numbers of refugees.

These are concrete examples of how development finance can be brought to bear - at scale - in refugee situations. During a meeting in Washington on 11 March, High Commissioner Barham Salih and President Ajay Banga agreed that the World Bank's jobs agenda and the objective of reducing refugee dependency are mutually reinforcing.

Other key development partners include the International Finance Corporation, the African Development Bank, the European Union Directorate-General for International Partnerships, BMZ, JICA and other bilateral actors.

At country level, partnerships with United Nations agencies, particularly UNICEF, WFP and UNDP, under the leadership of Resident Coordinators, remain essential to efforts to move away from aid dependency.

A year ago, I referred to the private-sector roundtables on forced displacement that we had organized in Nigeria and Afghanistan. In July, we organized a third in the Central African Republic and a fourth last month in Nigeria. These events have demonstrated the

dynamism, innovation and investment that local the private sector can bring, from creating jobs and apprenticeships, to supporting digital connectivity and financial inclusion, to impact investing, in areas hosting refugees and internally displaced people.

**Chairperson, distinguished delegates,**

At the same time, since we last met, new displacement crises have emerged or deepened.

The ongoing war in Iran, one of the countries hosting the largest number of refugees globally, has led to a review of the needs in country. The war in Lebanon has caused the internal displacement of more than one million people, including refugees, and has led 180,000 people, mostly Syrians, to cross into Syria. You will hear more from my colleague Ayaki Ito, the Cross Regional Refugee Coordinator, about our response and preparedness activities.

The Sudan crisis remains one of the most complex and far-reaching displacement situations in the world. More than 11 million people are displaced inside Sudan, and close to 4.3 million have sought safety in neighbouring countries. At least seven countries are directly affected, bearing heavy social and economic costs while struggling with underfunded responses. Chad, one of the most affected countries, received close to 100,000 people over the past twelve months alone.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the protracted conflict in the east has forced a new wave of more than 236,000 people to flee into Burundi and other neighbouring countries and caused the internal displacement of an additional 500,000 people.

In the Sahel, persistent conflict and insecurity continue to drive both internal and cross-border displacement. The region is currently hosting more than 2.3 million refugees, 300,000 of whom crossed borders in 2025 alone. In the Lake Chad Basin, extremism, intercommunal violence and climate-related shocks continue to uproot communities. The Basin still hosts roughly 343,000 refugees, while Nigeria alone had around 3.5 million internally displaced persons by the end of 2025.

The ongoing war in Ukraine, which by early 2026 had forced approximately 5.9 million Ukrainians to seek refuge globally, has prevented sustainable returns.

These crises underline a central reality. Even as we pursue more sustainable responses, emergency response remains indispensable. The severe funding shortfalls I described earlier make this challenge even more acute. Adequate funding for the appeals we have launched for 2026 will therefore be essential. Reducing by 50 per cent by 2035 the number of refugees who depend on humanitarian assistance may, over time, reduce humanitarian needs but during that transition, sustained and adequate humanitarian funding remains vital.

**Chairperson, distinguished delegates,**

The shift we are pursuing to provide better protection and assistance to refugees is being strengthened by the commitments and pledges made by both traditional and new partners at the Global Refugee Forums of 2019 and 2023.

In this regard, regional solutions frameworks such as MIRPS and the Chile Plan of Action in the Americas, the IGAD Solutions Platform in the Horn of Africa, the SSAR for the Afghanistan situation, and the CAR platform launched at the Global Refugee Forums continue to show how countries of origin, host States, development partners, international financial institutions and private sector actors can come together around concrete strategies for solutions.

Before concluding, let me reiterate our commitment to responding to the needs of internally displaced persons, who represent the larger share of the forcibly displaced, both as the organization leading the Global Protection Cluster and as one of the three Solutions Champions Agencies. Alongside UNDP and IOM we support affected Governments through Resident Coordinators and United Nations country teams around the world.

**Chairperson, distinguished delegates,**

Despite the scale and seriousness of the challenges before us, there is a credible way forward.

It lies in combining effective emergency response with solutions from the start.

It lies in supporting returns when conditions permit.

It lies in putting in place the policies and investments that allow people to stand on their own feet where they are until they can return home safely and with dignity.

It lies in moving beyond care and maintenance where possible, without ever losing sight of protection and life-saving assistance where they remain indispensable.

And finally, it lies in enhanced support for refugee host countries.

Allow me to conclude by thanking you for your continued political, financial and policy support, and by commending my colleagues around the world for their dedication and professionalism in exceptionally difficult conditions.

**Thank you.**