

Opening remarks for the 97th Standing Committee meeting  
Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme  
8 to 9 September 2026  
Assistant High Commissioner for Operations

Madame Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

It is an honour to be here with you for my first Standing Committee as Assistant High Commissioner for Operations. I am joined by my colleague, Edem Wosornu, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection. Our new Deputy High Commissioner, Tressa Rae Finerty, is unfortunately not with us today. As our High Commissioner noted in his briefing to Member States last Friday, she is currently on leave while she clarifies the application of post-employment restrictions arising from her previous service as a senior U.S. Government official in particular as it relates to her participation in multilateral meetings that U.S. Department of State officials attend. She has requested a partial waiver from the U.S. authorities, with our support and agreement, and we are hoping for a speedy and favorable resolution to this matter.

Dear delegates,

We meet at a time of profound change. Around the world, conflicts continue, displacement remains at historic levels, and humanitarian needs outpace available resources. The humanitarian system itself is undergoing significant transformation, driven by financial pressures, evolving geopolitical priorities, and rapid technological advances.

In this environment, we must change how we work.

While our shared commitment remains unchanged: to protect, to find solutions, and to support people forced to flee and stateless persons in shaping a better future.

Distinguished Delegates,

Despite severe funding constraints, UNHCR colleagues and partners continue to deliver. Last year, UNHCR supported close to 31 million people, with a workforce one third smaller than before. In the first half of this year alone, we provided protection services to nearly 8 million people and responded to 16 emergencies across 15 countries, including the South Sudan and Middle East situations – to name but a couple.

Meanwhile, under the High Commissioner's 50 by 35 initiative, we are supporting efforts around the world to promote solutions and self reliance with the objective of reducing by half the number of refugees that rely on humanitarian assistance. Some major gains have been achieved working hand in hand with Governments – for example in Thailand, 80,000 refugees can now work legally. In Mexico, over 600 companies now employ refugees. 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. These are but a handful of the tangible ways self-reliance is being put into practice around the world.

We also continue to make progress in reducing statelessness, with important legal advances in countries including Botswana, Portugal, Syria and Zambia.

These achievements reflect the extraordinary dedication of our colleagues, partners, and host communities around the world. Today, 88% of our colleagues are in host countries and on the frontlines, we remain a field-oriented organization, including 41% serving in hardship duty stations.

Chair, Distinguished delegates,

UNHCR continues to navigate an uncertain financial landscape. As of August, UNHCR's budget of USD 8.5 billion was 33 per cent funded. In four years, we have moved from a USD 6 billion-funded organization to one funded at around USD 3 billion, a stark contrast to the fact that one in every 70 people worldwide is now forcibly displaced.

We are deeply grateful to Member States and partners that have maintained or increased their support, for the organization, for refugees, particularly those providing flexible and unearmarked funding, which has provided stability for the organization. I also want to recognize the extraordinary generosity and continued support of host countries and communities where solidarity remains at the heart of the international refugee response.

Yet the outlook remains uncertain. More than half of our projected funding for 2026 remains tightly earmarked, limiting our ability to respond where needs are greatest.

These realities require difficult choices. We must focus on where UNHCR can have the greatest impact, providing protection and lifesaving assistance while also ensuring people are provided with the means to rebuild their lives, until they can return home safely and with dignity. That focus will be reflected in the renewed Strategic Directions currently under preparation. The Strategic Directions will be guiding both our operational priorities and the reforms now underway across the organization. At this stage, we are organizing the document around four closely connected priorities: protection, solutions, emergency response, and self-reliance. We look forward to discussing this in greater detail during a meeting with Member States on this topic scheduled for later this month.

Nevertheless, protection remains the foundation of our work and a key priority from end to end, while solutions and self-reliance must receive renewed urgency.

The 50 by 35 ambition cuts across these priorities. By 2035, we aim for over eight million refugees in protracted displacement to move beyond dependence on humanitarian aid through greater self-reliance or durable solutions including returning home and resettlement. A technical briefing with Member States will take place next week to discuss how this ambition is being translated into country-specific pathways. I look forward to meeting you or your colleagues at the briefing and to exchanging views on this strategic initiative.

These priorities are also shaping the next phase of organizational change. Last Friday, the High Commissioner briefed Member States on the recommendations of the Independent Management Review.

As a new senior management team, we have mobilized quickly around a shared priority: turning the review's recommendations into concrete action and results.

We have assessed the recommendations against operational realities, the financial outlook, and wider UN reform efforts – the UN80 and the Humanitarian Reset and moved forward with a strategic review of our country operations, Regional Bureaux, and Headquarters footprints. As recommended by the Independent Management Review, we are undertaking an ambitious strategic repositioning exercise starting with our posture in the field, closest to refugees and operational realities. Allow me to reiterate, we remain a field focused organization. We are trying to define what UNHCR needs to do, where, and how. Based on these questions, our structures and presence should follow those strategic choices, not the other way around. The objective is not simply to reduce our footprint. It is to ensure that we have the right presence, capabilities, and operating model for each context.

While preserving the unique specificities of each region, regional bureaux will be leaner, less transactional, and more strategic, concentrating on the functions where a regional perspective really adds value— regional analysis and diplomacy, resource prioritization across operations, performance and oversight, partnerships, cross-border coherence, and support to country operations.

We are also reviewing our Headquarters to ensure that it supports the field, not the other way around.

Across all three levels — country operations, Regional Bureaux, and Headquarters — the objective is the same: clearer responsibilities with more predictable roles, responsibilities and accountabilities at the right levels, fewer unnecessary layers, less duplication, greater efficiency and cost-effectiveness, and stronger support to operational delivery.

This transformation builds on efficiency measures already underway. Travel expenditure has come down by roughly 50% over the past two years. Our Global Shared Services now deliver around 30% efficiency gains in the functions they have taken on, and we are expanding their scope further. We are realigning responsibilities after the drastic staffing cuts, so that support to operations is strengthened while retaining strong

oversight and assurance functions in headquarters in line with the size of the organization we now are.

We are also scaling up the use of data, generative AI and other digital tools to reduce routine work and enable faster, better-informed decisions. Last week, we made Gemini available to every member of our workforce, worldwide. And we have just concluded a partnership with Anthropic to strengthen our protection systems and processes and support from technology partners, applied where it adds real value to the people we serve.

These reforms are about ensuring that more of our effort and resources are directed to where they matter most: protection, solutions and operational delivery – as close as possible to the people and the communities we serve. These broader shifts are also reflected in the 2027 programme budget proposal that we will be discussing.

Distinguished delegates,

Let me turn to our budget and funding outlook. Our proposed needs-driven budget for 2027 is approximately US\$7.1 billion, around 16 per cent lower than the 2026 budget. But let me be clear, this does not mean that needs have fallen. It reflects a smaller and more streamlined organization, and sharper prioritization of where protection risks are greatest, where UNHCR has a distinctive role, and where our resources can have the greatest impact.

UNHCR's budget remains needs-driven, but the financial environment we face requires us to make clearer choices about the activities and capacities most essential to our mandate and where we share responsibilities. We are committed to making those choices in a transparent manner.

Partnership remains central to our approach. We will continue to work closely more than ever with UN agencies, development institutions, governments and peace actors to strengthen protection and expand solutions in both countries of asylum and countries of origin. Crucially, we are also enhancing partnerships with national systems and local actors.

Fundraising remains one central priority. Looking ahead, we need continued support from traditional donors while broadening our financing base through deeper engagement with the private sector, philanthropy, faith-based organizations, development institutions, and international financial institutions. We look forward to discussing the proposed 2027 programme budget with Member States.

We have also taken steps to address the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions' observations on the gap between needs and available funding. From 2028 budget cycle, we propose maintaining the needs-driven budget while introducing an income-aligned presentation. We look forward to continuing our Member States consultations on this during the fall. We also propose strengthening financial

resilience through a broader Operational Reserve of approximately one and a half months of expenditure, supported by amendments to the Financial Rules effective 1 January 2028, subject to Member State approval.

Distinguished delegates,

Let me turn now to one of UNHCR's greatest strengths, if not its greatest: its workforce. While I already had the chance to meet many of them in my previous capacity, in my first three weeks, I have been deeply impressed by the dedication and resilience of colleagues across the organization. They continue to deliver for refugees with the same passion, commitment and professionalism despite a period of significant change and uncertainty.

In recent weeks, we concluded the Staff Placement and Reduction in Force process. This marked the end of a very difficult and challenging but necessary phase of workforce realignment and provides greater clarity as we move forward in building a staffing structure that is better aligned with our operational priorities and financial realities.

A significant number of valued colleagues will leave the organization in the coming months, and this is painful. We are deeply grateful for their service, commitment, and contribution to UNHCR. Their departure reflects the financial circumstances we face, not the value of what they have brought to the organization. I know this loss is felt deeply across UNHCR. As senior managers of this organization, we should not lose sight of the human dimension of all these difficult decisions.

Looking ahead, we are committed to building a more sustainable workforce model, with greater focus on skills, mobility, talent development, and workforce planning, while preserving the diversity that defines UNHCR. Despite significant workforce reductions in recent years, close to 80% of our workforce continues to come from the Global South, and we remain committed to protecting geographic diversity and gender parity. Our Director of People Management will speak about this in more detail later.

Distinguished delegates,

As we reshape the organization to ensure it continues to be fit for purpose in a rapidly evolving global landscape, maintaining trust is essential.

Strong integrity, accountability and risk management are therefore fundamental to maintaining the confidence of those we serve, Member States, donors and our own teams around the world.

The High Commissioner's internal integrity action plan provides an important framework for this work, and we look forward to discussing this in more detail under the dedicated agenda item.

I would also like to express our sincere appreciation to the Board of Auditors, and I am pleased to report that UNHCR received an unqualified audit opinion for 2025, demonstrating sound financial stewardship during an exceptionally challenging period.

Thank you also to the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), the Independent Audit and Oversight Committee (IAOC), the Inspector General's office and our evaluation function for their valuable guidance, support and leadership.

The new senior management team is strongly committed to the core principles that underpin trust: transparency, accountability and a clear focus on effectiveness, efficiency and results. You can count on us.

Going forward, we will take a more strategic and disciplined approach to implementing the various recommendations from oversight bodies, with stronger accountability, closer monitoring, and a greater focus on translating findings into concrete improvements in how we operate and deliver for those we serve.

Distinguished delegates,

The world around us is changing rapidly, and UNHCR must change with it.

This organization has a clear mandate and a clear purpose. Our mandate remains our compass. But, as the High Commissioner underlined last Friday, we must reform to prepare UNHCR for the future and strengthen our ability to deliver that very mandate: providing international protection, responding when lives are at risk, and pursuing durable solutions with much greater urgency.

Working together, I am confident that we can build a stronger and more strategic UNHCR, one that is even better equipped to serve forcibly displaced and stateless people in the years ahead.

Thank you.