

**Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme
97th Standing Committee meeting**

**Statement by Catty Bennet Sattler
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**Agenda Item: 2 (b) Human resources, including staff welfare (EC/77/SC/CRP.19)
8 September 2026**

Mr. Chair, Excellencies,

The past two years have been among the most difficult for our organization. Faced with severe financial constraints, UNHCR has had to undertake one of the most significant workforce adjustments in its history.

As reflected in the video just now, more than 7,000 colleagues have left the organization since the beginning of 2025. This is not just a number; behind every one of these colleagues is a career, a family, and a humanitarian deeply committed to our mandate, as well as teams that have had to adapt and reprioritize; and often simply carry a heavier burden.

I would therefore like to begin by recognizing the extraordinary professionalism, resilience and dedication shown by all UNHCR personnel throughout this period. Standing before this Committee today, I would like to take a moment to speak directly to our colleagues: thank you. Time and again, I have been humbled by your commitment, your courage and your unwavering focus on the people we serve, even in the face of significant uncertainty.

When I addressed this Committee last year, I asked for your patience and partnership as UNHCR navigated a profoundly challenging period of change. Over the past year, our focus has been on three interconnected priorities directly related to those challenges.

First, supporting our people through an unprecedented workforce transition, while completing the difficult but necessary task of rebalancing our workforce, a precursor to laying the groundwork for a more sustainable model for the future.

Second, delivering this work while the people function itself was undergoing significant transformation. Like the wider organization, the Division of People Management was significantly impacted by the reductions, specifically 60% since 2025. Nonetheless, despite operating with substantially reduced capacity, we kept showing up to support our colleagues at a time when demand for assistance increased significantly amid heightened uncertainty and anxiety about the future.

And third, ensuring that, even in the midst of immediate challenges, we did not lose sight of the future. We continued investing, albeit modestly, in the foundations that will enable UNHCR to become more agile, more efficient and more resilient, in support of our workforce and our mandate in the years ahead.

Allow me now to share some reflections on the progress we have made in each of these areas:

Supporting our people through this transition has remained our highest priority. We have continued to prioritize workforce communication, career transition support, and psychosocial wellbeing services for both departing and remaining colleagues. Throughout this period, we

have worked closely with managers and staff representatives to ensure that difficult workforce decisions were implemented as transparently and respectfully as possible.

As Member States are aware, UNHCR's rotation and mobility framework remains one of the organization's defining strengths. However, following the financial contraction of 2025, the number of available positions reduced significantly, creating a structural imbalance between approximately 3,000 international staff and 1,800 available posts that could not be resolved through normal assignment processes alone, despite various special measures introduced since 2023.

For this reason, in May 2026, the High Commissioner activated the contingency policy, the Staff Placement and Reduction in Force Policy, developed in spring 2025 for such circumstances. Approximately 1,150 unassigned international colleagues participated in the process and were offered two pathways: consideration through a dedicated placement exercise covering all vacant international positions across the organization, or an agreed termination package.

The placement exercise, which was very carefully coordinated with managers, the Division of People Management and our Joint Review Board, concluded last week with 181 colleagues placed. 92 colleagues chose agreed termination and separated from the organization at the end of June. Most unfortunately, around 800 colleagues who were not placed in this exercise will separate at the end of September, or upon completion of temporary assignments by 31 December 2026 at the latest to ensure operational continuity.

Let me be very clear, these have been extraordinarily difficult decisions for everyone involved. For every colleague who hopefully applied and participated in a selection process, there was a manager faced with impossible choices and an HR colleague who carried the burden of both supporting the manager and engaging with the impacted colleagues.

This kind of pressure is difficult to sustain under normal circumstances but knowing that the outcome would lead to separation for so many has weighed heavily on all of us as we worked to complete the exercise fairly and transparently. Painful as these decisions were, maintaining this imbalance indefinitely was neither financially sustainable nor fair to colleagues.

Most importantly, I want to reiterate a message that I have shared directly with affected colleagues. Participation in this process, and its outcome, is not a reflection of performance, commitment, or value. The colleagues affected by these measures have made extraordinary contributions to UNHCR, often in some of the most challenging circumstances and will remain an important part of UNHCR's legacy. As I will also say in every single letter I sign in the coming days: on behalf of UNHCR I thank you for your service to the most vulnerable and to our incredible organization.

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Excellencies,

While managing the immediate consequences of the financial contraction and acknowledging its human impact, we now pivot to the future.

The workforce adjustments of recent years have accelerated a broader transformation of how UNHCR manages and supports its people. Our objective is clear: to build a workforce that is fit

for an increasingly complex and volatile operating environment while ensuring that every available resource is directed toward protecting and assisting the people we serve.

As we have reflected on the lessons of the past two years, one thing has become clear: while UNHCR's rotation and mobility remain the organization's greatest strengths, the realities we face today require us to adapt some of the mechanisms that support it. For this reason, we have undertaken a review of our mobility and contractual framework, with the objective of creating a system that is clearer, more predictable and better able to support both operational needs and our people.

The changes, issued last week, introduce earlier redeployment mechanisms, clearer accountabilities and timelines, and greater transparency around potential outcomes when no future assignment is available. The so-called staff in between assignment framework has been discontinued. At the same time, we have sought to preserve stability where it matters most, including maintaining pathways for longer-term appointments for eligible colleagues with strengthened criteria.

As a transitional measure, and to maximize opportunities for colleagues separating in the coming months, they will retain their internal applicant status and be eligible to compete in internal vacancy advertisements until the end of March 2027, providing an additional avenue for experienced colleagues to continue contributing to the organization.

Throughout this process, we have worked closely with staff representatives and consulted widely across the organization, recognizing that these policies shape not only workforce planning, but also colleagues' careers and lives.

Alongside these reforms, together with the Division of Resource Management, we are also introducing greater fiscal discipline into temporary assignments, helping us align staffing decisions more closely with operational priorities and available resources. In the current environment, this level of discipline is essential if we are to avoid creating future imbalances and provide greater certainty to colleagues.

At the heart of all these efforts is the development of a skills-based workforce model, fully aligned with the 50by35 vision. I spoke about this ambition with you last year, but the past twelve months have only reinforced its importance. While much of our attention has necessarily been focused on placement, reassignment and workforce rebalancing, we have continued laying the foundations for a fundamentally different approach to talent management.

We are developing a common skills architecture, enabled by enhanced workforce data, technology and AI-driven tools. This will strengthen our ability to identify critical capabilities across the organization and ensure that decisions on recruitment, mobility, learning and career development are increasingly guided by the skills needed to deliver our mandate.

Concrete application has started: one example is the Skills in Action programme, which focuses on nationally recruited colleagues who make up the majority of UNHCR's workforce and have increasingly assumed leadership responsibilities as part of the organization's nationalization efforts. The programme supports colleagues leading multi-functional teams, managing complex stakeholder relationships, or representing UNHCR with government counterparts and partners for the first time.

We have also often exchanged with you on representation, to which we remain firmly committed. Despite the significant organizational changes of recent years, I am proud to say that UNHCR has maintained its gender parity across the international professional category and continues to benefit from a globally diverse workforce, with the majority – around 80% of personnel originating from the Global South. While we know there is always more work to do, these achievements are important as reflections of the inclusive, globally representative organization we are committed to sustaining.

Since launching the Global Workforce Dashboard for Member States, I have also had increasingly strategic discussions with many of you and your feedback to continue in this regard is well received. As some of you have suggested we have also shared our examples with other organizations in the UN system, to encourage more comparable, data-based benchmarks and hopefully make your lives a bit easier as well.

We also recognize that organizational recovery is not only about policies and frameworks. It is about trust, wellbeing, and culture. As we move forward, we will continue strengthening engagement, psychological safety, leadership accountability, and duty of care across all workforce categories. These investments are essential to sustaining an effective and healthy organization.

These broader changes have also accelerated a transformation of the people function itself that was already under way. Following the Headquarters restructuring in 2025, the former Division of Human Resources was reconstituted as the Division of People Management. This required difficult decisions about what we could continue to do, what we needed to do differently, and where we had to focus our limited resources.

As validated by the Independent Management Review and following the transition of HR transactions to Global Shared Services, including the centralization of personnel administration for locally recruited staff from operations, we continue reviewing opportunities for further centralization to free up and streamline HR field capacity and reinforce the strategic and oversight focus of the Division of People Management. At the same time, investments in digital tools, workforce analytics and artificial intelligence are enabling simpler processes, efficiencies, and better-informed decision-making.

While the transition has required difficult trade-offs and has not been without challenges, it has also been made possible by the extraordinary commitment of HR colleagues across UNHCR. Many have supported workforce changes, career transitions and organizational restructuring while experiencing the impacts of those same changes themselves. Often working behind the scenes and with significantly reduced resources, they have continued to serve colleagues with professionalism, compassion and resilience. Their efforts have not only helped the organization navigate this period of uncertainty, but have also laid the foundations for a people management model that is leaner, more agile and better equipped to support UNHCR's workforce in the years ahead. For this, I thank them and owe them my deep gratitude.

Finally, these efforts are firmly anchored within the broader reform conversations taking place across the United Nations system. UNHCR continues to play a leading role in shaping people management across the UN system, including through my role as co-chair of the CEB HR Network and our contributions to ongoing discussions on compensation, workforce composition, efficiencies and the future workforce, in alignment with UN80 efforts.

These contributions reflect our conviction that the challenges we face are not unique to UNHCR, and that the solutions we develop must strengthen not only our organization, but the wider humanitarian and United Nations system.

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Mr. Chair, Excellencies,

UNHCR's people remain our greatest strength.

The challenges of recent years have been profound, but they have also reinforced the importance of building a workforce that is agile, skilled, inclusive, and sustainable. Our focus now, with your continued support and partnership, is to ensure that the difficult decisions taken in response to financial realities translate into a stronger, more resilient and hopefully more stable organization for the future.

This is the best recognition for colleagues, former and active, who have dedicated their career to delivering on this mandate, and most importantly we owe it to those who depend on us most.

Thank you.