

47th Meeting of the Standing Committee

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Statement by Janet Lim

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Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I am happy to be participating, for the first time, in this session of the Standing Committee as Assistant High Commissioner for Operations and to focus on the operational side of UNHCR's work. Since my appointment seven months ago, I have made it a priority to delve into the diverse operational challenges that we face across the world, and especially to understand perspectives in the field globally, going beyond Asia, which I know well. My recent missions to Yemen and Chad have given me an opportunity to review two of UNHCR's more challenging operations. Immediately after the Standing Committee takes place, I will leave for Colombia and Ecuador; I plan to visit Georgia in the months ahead to gain a better view of UNHCR's work across the regions.

It is clear that we are faced with two converging trends. First is the increasing complexity of our operating environment, in which the fast-changing nature of conflict and politically-charged situations are reducing protection and humanitarian space, making operational delivery more challenging for UNHCR. In this context, security threats to both our beneficiaries and staff are an ever-growing concern. Second is the expanding scope of UNHCR's operational activities as we move to fulfill responsibilities, more predictably and systematically, for groups of concern beyond refugees in traditional settings, to implement an expanded urban refugee policy, meeting our commitment to stateless populations and internally-displaced persons (IDPs) and responding to requests for support in natural disasters. Simply said, we are called on to do more at a time when conditions on the ground are increasingly more difficult. These are the challenges of our times, and we must rise to the occasion.

In many ways, UNHCR has oriented its organizational reform by asking: How do we remain an efficient and effective agency amidst the multitude of additional and complex challenges in today's humanitarian world, rather than be paralyzed by these challenges? And in this regard, how do we best consolidate changes resulting from reform in the last two years and work towards the impact that we expect to achieve from our initiatives?

In operations, we aim to improve our delivery on the ground, to be timely and results-oriented, not only in quantity but also in quality. As part of reform, we have set up two new divisions to provide direct support to operations: a Division of Emergency, Security and Supply (DESS) and a Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM). The Office has re-organized these support functions to maximize synergies and focus on consolidating tools, which have been developed, and all with the purpose of improving implementing mechanisms to enhance delivery. We want to ensure that we work in an integrated manner both at headquarters and in the field. Hence, we have established strong horizontal linkages with other parts of the organization, notably protection and management. The Directors of DESS and DPSM will elaborate on their respective work in sessions that follow.

In the field, we have been particularly preoccupied with operations that are at the epicenter of highly-complex and insecure environments: Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Chad, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Colombia, Iraq, Yemen, and Georgia, to name the most current ones. These operations challenge us to rethink our approaches and adjust to new realities in which access and security have become serious limiting factors. In my view, we need a systematic institutional response to the new operating realities if we wish to continue programme delivery responsibly and effectively – responsible vis-à-vis our staff and partners and effective vis-à-vis our beneficiaries. The dedication and courage of our staff and partners in these operations are truly admirable in that they continue to risk their lives on a daily basis to assist beneficiaries, working under conditions that in the past would have necessitated a withdrawal. Last year, we were hard-hit by the deaths of three colleagues in security incidents. It is imperative that institutionally we ensure the best possible support to operations, and minimize security risks even if we cannot eliminate them.

We have identified key areas where support is required:

First, we must ensure effective security measures that go beyond the provision of hardware – a security approach that does not isolate us from the environment but can help us to analyze and better understand ground situations and to be able to respond with appropriate mitigating measures. Assigning security officers with specific profiles and skills and developing training that emphasizes, among other things, soft skills such as cultural awareness and sensitivity to community perceptions are areas of focus. At headquarters, we recently established a Security Steering Committee at the senior level that is chaired by the High Commissioner. Counterpart committees have also been established in high-risk field operations. The committees have been an effective mechanism to ensure the engagement and support of senior management on security issues, both in the field and at headquarters.

The second area of institutional support required for complex operations is the predictability to deploy experienced staff who are well-prepared, mentally, physically and professionally, to handle difficult working environments. The irony is that the most insecure duty stations are understandably not the most

sought-after; it is often difficult to deploy the best suited staff members to these operations. We may need an institutional arrangement that allows us to pre-identify experienced and suitable staff who would be given special preparation and dispensation to serve in such operations. Moreover, national staff have a particularly important role to play in these operations; we need to pay particular attention to supporting them with training and administrative arrangements that alleviate hardships caused by the working environment.

A third area we would like to work on is the identification of operational modalities that would enable staff to work effectively in challenging environments. “Necessity is the mother of invention,” and so it is that our staff in some of these challenging operations have themselves already developed innovative approaches to access beneficiaries and carry out monitoring without over-stepping the bounds of UN security regulations. It is amply clear that in insecure environments we need added focus on changing the way in which our services are delivered, on increasing community outreach and improving relations with local and host populations, on expanding local partnerships and empowering national staff. In Chad I was made acutely aware of the danger of excluding the local population from assistance when they are worse off than refugees and IDPs living in their midst. We need better strategies to fund assistance for host communities and manage perceptions of humanitarian work, neutrality and impartiality; we need robust advocacy of protection and human rights issues. We are gathering best practices from experience gained in complex high-risk operations and are packaging and developing them into an operational approach that can be replicated through training. As an example, the Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES) has been tasked to conduct a review of operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan to examine the way in which we have executed programme criticality and reduced our international footprint without affecting service delivery.

The last but not least area of focus in our concerted effort to improve effectiveness in highly-challenging operational environments is the capacity-building of national and local partners. It is time to re-examine the lack of investment that has been made in this area and to change our mindset vis-à-vis local partners by recognizing their ability to assume greater responsibility for operations management. It is noteworthy that the NGO Evaluation of UN Humanitarian Reform concluded that reform measures had not fully taken into account either the critical role that could be played by national partners or their special needs. Yet, it is obvious that in today’s environment, national and local partners often have a comparative advantage, an advantage that we can maximize in the interest of our beneficiaries. Much has been said over the years about the need to build the capacity of national and local partners. Perhaps it is time to think about establishing a dedicated fund for this purpose.

Just as UNHCR must adjust to new realities in our operational approach, so too must donors take into account circumstances which may necessitate adjustments in the traditional way of meeting monitoring and reporting requirements. It is important to bear in mind our moral imperative not to abandon those in need of humanitarian assistance. We must also

contemplate the ramifications of not getting aid to vulnerable persons in very difficult situations who may otherwise have no alternative but to come under the sway of undesired influences.

Mr. Chairman, UNHCR is redefining and re-tooling its operational approaches to meet new challenges. In so doing, the office is not only working internally to strengthen institutional support in critical areas of operations, but it is also looking to outside partners, both UN agencies and NGOs, to join together in developing initiatives that would arrest the shrinking of humanitarian space. As we move forward with these endeavors, we count on the committed support of the Executive Committee.

In presentations that follow, Bureau Directors will paint for you more explicitly a picture of how the office is meeting the many challenges in their regions.

I thank you for your attention.