



**European Union**

**UNHCR Executive Committee 71<sup>st</sup> Session  
5–9 October 2020**

**Agenda item 3: General debate**

**Statement by the European Union and its Member States**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

Thank you Chair,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union and its Member states. The Candidate Countries the Republic of North Macedonia\*, Montenegro\*, Serbia\* and Albania\*, the country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidate Bosnia and Herzegovina, Armenia and Georgia align themselves with this statement.

The year 2020 has been clearly marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to a considerable increase in needs and affected in particular already vulnerable populations. It has disrupted livelihoods, triggered economic backlash, and heavily impacted our daily lives. The virus knows no borders, and no country or region has been spared its effects. Once again we have been reminded that global challenges require a truly global response and international solidarity.

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\*The Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

The EU and its Member States have been at the forefront of the global response to this pandemic. Under the ‘Team Europe’ approach, we have mobilized a package of more than 36 billion EUR – combining resources and expertise from the European Commission, the Member States and the EU financial institutions – to address the emergency response and humanitarian needs, strengthen health, water/sanitation and nutrition systems and mitigate the economic and social impacts of the coronavirus pandemic worldwide. This is one of the greatest collective mobilizations in the EU’s history.

While the virus does not discriminate between countries or people, its effects do. We have seen how the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities and know that refugees, forcibly displaced and other persons of concern to UNHCR are among those that most acutely feel the effects of this crisis and risk being left behind. Supporting them and their host communities through inclusive approaches wherever possible has been part of our global response. The EU and its Member States commend UNHCR for quickly adapting its response to the new situation and express our deep gratitude to the staff of UNHCR and its partners for their commitment to deliver under extremely challenging circumstances. We underline the importance of a UN-wide response to this global challenge and advocate for full cooperation among UN agencies and with humanitarian partners in this endeavour. We commend UNHCR for consistently advocating for the inclusion of persons of concern in national health responses as well as other necessary services and support, and urge UNHCR to pay particular attention to address the needs of women, children and persons with disabilities, who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

The EU and its Member States recognize the importance to safeguard the right to seek asylum and the principle of non-refoulement, as enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, also in the context of a global health emergency. It is essential that fundamental principles continue to apply globally so that those in need can continue accessing procedures for international protection and finding shelter from war, conflict or persecution.

Saving lives and supporting those in need of international protection, while at the same time ensuring effective return of those determined not eligible for international protection and combatting migrant smuggling and human trafficking, are all aspects of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum proposed by the European Commission in September. These goals will be pursued

through balanced, tailor-made, mutually beneficial and comprehensive partnerships with partner countries. Keeping in mind the need to safeguard the fundamental rights to seek asylum and compliance with EU acquis, the EU and its Member States reiterate the need to prevent abuses of the EU asylum system. The EU will work towards further strengthening engagements beyond its borders and stands by its responsibilities as a global actor, including through active engagement in international and multilateral context and with the United Nations family.

The EU will continue to ensure support for refugees and displaced people and their host communities, remaining the leading donor in humanitarian and development assistance. The EU will support capacity building in partner countries, including on providing protection and developing and strengthening asylum and reception capacities. We will continue with the humanitarian evacuations and voluntary resettlement efforts – in solidarity with countries hosting large numbers of refugees – and further develop complementary pathways.

The fire at the Moria reception centre on the island of Lesbos is a stark reminder that we need long term and sustainable solutions. The first priority, however, has been ensuring shelter, safety and dignity to the people affected. The Greek authorities and the EU have been working closely to make the best use of all the relevant instruments, including the EU funding and the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. Voluntary relocation efforts are also well under way thanks to responsibility sharing and solidarity of a number of EU Member States. UNHCR's work and support to Greece is of utmost importance, and we thank you for the ongoing assistance. The Commission is now working on a plan for a joint pilot with the Greek authorities for a new Reception and Identification Centre on Lesbos. As announced, the European Commission will also establish a dedicated taskforce – in close collaboration with EU Agencies and international organisations on the ground – to help improve the situation on the Greek islands in a durable way.

Mr Chair,

While the last six months have been overshadowed by the Corona crisis, we must not lose sight of earlier achievements. The first Global Refugee Forum last December was a historic step, bringing together a new, wider group of stakeholders dedicated to the refugee cause and generating

important commitments. Although the pandemic has delayed implementation of some pledges, it has clearly demonstrated how important solidarity and burden sharing are to an effective global response. We encourage UNHCR to maintain the momentum generated by the first Global Refugee Forum in December, to continue forging new partnerships, involving refugees themselves, and broadening the donor base in order to mobilize greater global solidarity and burden- and responsibility sharing for refugees.

Mr Chair,

In order to respond to the growing challenges and needs for its persons of concern, UNHCR must continue to demonstrate trust and efficiency in the way the organization operates. We fully support the UN reform process and system-wide initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The EU and its Member States also support the High Commissioner's internal reform initiative, including the decentralization process by moving the regional bureaux closer to the field, the increased focus on fostering development-focused approaches, linking humanitarian and development actors' work to help prevent protracted refugee situation, as well as steps to ensure greater participation and to give voice to the displaced and their host communities.

We encourage UNHCR to continue to pursue strong oversight and transparency and to focus on results - prioritizing the most vulnerable. We welcome the different cooperation initiatives UNHCR has undertaken with UN agencies and other actors such as the World Bank. We strongly encourage UNHCR to continue building this collaborative approach in all its areas of work. This is crucial to be able to address collectively the magnitude of needs in an efficient and effective manner and therefore jointly make a difference for the lives of people in need.

Thank you!