

Remarks of Mr. Francois Reybet-Degat, Deputy Director of the UNHCR MENA Bureau

71st Meeting of the Standing Committee

Geneva, 6 March 2018

Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an **honour for me to address this distinguished audience today** on behalf of the Bureau Director for the Middle East and North Africa, Mr. Amin Awad, who asked me to convey his personal appreciation for the fruitful cooperation between UNHCR and Member States in the region.

Year after year, we remain **appalled by the scale and the magnitude of suffering** experienced by civilian populations displaced by conflict both within their own countries and across borders. **At present, more than 18 million people are in need of UNHCR's assistance in the Middle East and North Africa.** The most vulnerable of the vulnerable refugees and displaced are among them, women, children, stateless people and minorities.

But we are also witnessing **impressive levels of solidarity and compassion.** It is largely thanks to **the unwavering support of host communities and host governments** that refugees have found not only relief and but also the courage and resilience to overcome their immense daily challenges.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Syria continues to be the largest humanitarian and refugee crisis in the world today, with some 6.1 million Syrians internally displaced and nearly **5.5 million refugees** hosted in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt.

Over 2.6 million people were displaced inside Syria in 2017 alone, many multiple times. **Civilians continue to bear the brunt of major military confrontations.** The people of Syria

have been **waiting too long** for a solution to the crisis. We **continue to place our hope in the UN-led Geneva peace process to soon bring an end to their unspeakable suffering.**

UNHCR continues its **large-scale response inside Syria despite operational challenges** such as insecurity and constrained humanitarian access. In 2017, over **6 million** people were reached and provided with protection services, shelter, basic relief items, and health assistance, including cross-line and through cross-border interventions from Turkey and Jordan.

At the same time, fragile ceasefires and shifts in conflict dynamics have **restored relative calm to some parts of the country.** Many internally displaced people and a small number of refugees have returned home this year. **However, significant obstacles to return persist** – including ongoing military operations; insecurity; lack of legal status and documentation; housing, land and property challenges; destroyed shelters; lack of services and livelihood opportunities, contamination by unexploded ordnances and mines and other protection risks. **UNHCR strongly believes that the overall conditions for safe, dignified and sustainable returns are not yet in place in Syria.**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

During this uncertain period, international protection and support for Syrian refugees in neighboring countries must be sustained. The countries neighboring Syria remain at the forefront of the crisis and continue to **shoulder the greatest burden.** Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt, generously continue to host millions of refugees while stretching their economies, community and social services to the limits. **Host countries need predictable and multi-year funding** to enable them to look after such large number of refugees, while protecting development gains for their own citizens. **The refugees deserve predictable protection and assistance;** to be able to live in dignity, learn, grow, and contribute economically to their host countries, while waiting to return to home. **In this respect, the importance of successive international conferences from the onset of the crisis, in Kuwait, London, and Brussels, is fully recognized.**

Yet, despite all these efforts, the living conditions for Syrian refugees across the region are deteriorating. Forty-three per cent of the 1.7 million school-age refugee children do not have access to schooling. Over 90 per cent of refugee households in Lebanon and approximately 50 per cent of refugee households in Jordan show some level of food insecurity. 58 per cent of households in Lebanon are now living in extreme poverty – on less than USD 3 per person per day, while around 80 per cent of Syrians outside of camps in Jordan and Lebanon are living below the national poverty lines. In 2017, these were among the drivers pushing refugees to leave the region, as had been the case in 2016. **It is our collective responsibility to ensure that the years of suffering under these conditions will not negatively impact future generations.**

The **2018 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP)** was released in mid-December calling for USD 4.4 billion to assist over 9 million people, including 5.3 million refugees and 3.9 million host community members. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to over 270 government, NGO and UN partners who continue to work together under the 3RP. However, funding for refugee and resilience programmes remain precarious and uncertain. As you focus on the different paths hopefully leading to peace in Syria, **I urge the Member States here to not lose sight of the continuing need to support refugees and countries hosting them.**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I turn now to neighbouring **Iraq**, where despite very important developments on the military side, **grave protection challenges must be overcome to prevent further displacement and allow for return in safety and dignity.** Although all are heartened by the prospect of IDP returns, UNHCR is particularly concerned by the risk of **further displacement, forced evictions and revenge attacks against communities, and have issued ‘alerts’ on the high risks of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence** against women and girls.

UNHCR has assisted 1.2 million Iraqi IDPs, returnees and host community members in 2017. As Iraq transitions towards early recovery and more large-scale reconstruction efforts following the recent Kuwait Conference, UNHCR will gradually adapt its country response. Throughout 2018, UNHCR will continue its support through a significant core-relief item and

camp management programme, timely protection monitoring outreach to assess needs, legal assistance and civil documentation support, and referrals for specialized services urgently needed by IDPs, returnees and other conflict-affected Iraqis.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The depth of human suffering **in Yemen** has reached catastrophic levels. A country-wide escalation of violence in 2017 resulted in **an additional 3.4 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in just over one year, bringing the total to 22.2 million people, representing 75% of the population – a staggering proportion by any standard.** In addition, the threat of famine is ever present, and in the past few months alone, some 80,000 Yemenis have been forced to flee escalating hostilities. These people join the 3 million Yemenis who have already been displaced from their homes since 2015.

Despite restrictions to humanitarian access in Yemen, **UNHCR and partners continue to deliver life-saving assistance in the field and address cross-cutting shelter and protection needs.** As temperatures plummeted during the winter, UNHCR distributed **cash assistance to over 12,000 displaced Yemeni** households together with rental subsidies and multi-purpose cash grants to 17,000 households.

In spite of these worsening security conditions, an estimated 100,000 people reached Yemen from the Horn of Africa in 2017 alone, and there are approximately 280,000 refugees and asylum seekers currently in Yemen. Last year, UNHCR – in coordination with IOM – **supported almost 1,000 Somali refugees to achieve their desire to return to Somalia, with the programme of voluntary repatriation set to continue in 2018.**

UNHCR also goes beyond conventional practice by delivering regional information campaigns in the Horn of Africa Region. As a means of awareness raising, UNHCR and partners launched a second phase of the **“Dangerous Crossings” campaign** to inform refugees of the situation in Yemen and the protection risks faced by individuals during their journeys by sea and upon arrival. Powerful testimonies of victims of trafficking and of those who experienced horrendous suffering are on TV, radio, social networking platforms, print media and posters accompanied by messages from celebrities, and other influential figures.

In an effort to scale up the collective response, the 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan for Yemen appeals for a record amount of USD 2.96 billion. We strongly encourage the **international community to respond to this call for support** and welcome the recent generous commitment made by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for nearly USD 1 billion towards the humanitarian response in Yemen. But above all, we call for a **political solution to the conflict and an end to the suffering of the Yemeni people**.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Libya, UNHCR has now evacuated over 1,300 vulnerable refugees from the country. Although this is an important achievement and an encouraging breakthrough, **thousands of refugees and migrants remain trapped in abhorrent detention conditions.** UNHCR continues to advocate for their release while also seeking resettlement opportunities for the most vulnerable in third countries and providing basic assistance to refugees and asylum seekers. In 2017, UNHCR and partners conducted over 1,000 visits to 35 detention centres, obtaining the release of more than 1,350 detained refugees and asylum seekers. **Tens of thousands remain trapped in the country in poor conditions and in need of dignified solutions.**

Even as we strive to improve the quality and coverage of the humanitarian response, we must acknowledge that **these efforts alone will not fully respond** to the **complex migration dynamics and its root causes** that compel so many to make the perilous journey to Libya in the first place.

With the return of UN international personnel to Tripoli, UNHCR will further reinforce its operational presence and expand its capacity to reach those most in need.

Despite a significant decrease in the number of new sea arrivals, **tragically, nearly 3,000 people were reported missing or dead at sea last year.** **The Central Mediterranean route** remains the most frequently used, with in 2017 approximately 119,000 arrivals to Italy, primarily from Libya.

In the face of this challenging operational context, UNHCR continues to search for answers **Focus group discussions and a survey on mixed migration** in Algeria, a profiling exercise in Tunisia, research in southern Libya, and expanded presence in Niger and the cross-road town of Agadez helped UNHCR build a more comprehensive picture of migration routes and populations of concern along the Central Mediterranean Route. General findings indicate that **Europe is not necessarily the intended destination upon departure from countries of origin, but rather insecurity and violence experienced along migration routes push refugees and migrants to move onwards.**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Eritrean and Sudanese nationals are in dire need of international protection in Israel. **UNHCR has expressed concern over Israel's policies that compel these asylum-seekers to 'voluntarily' relocate to third African countries or face indefinite detention in Israel.** UNHCR has urged Israel to halt this policy and ensure the adequate and effective protection of refugees and asylum-seekers, and we stand ready to work with the State to find alternative solutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The **protracted situation of Sahrawi refugees in the camps located near Tindouf in Algeria** requires greater attention. For 42 years, entire generations have been born and raised in the camps without the proper means of securing the necessities of life. Along with partners, we continue to invest in livelihood opportunities, particularly for Sahrawi **youth who deserve better prospects for the future.** However, **funding shortages continue to hamper** the provision of essential assistance, including food.

Meanwhile, UNHCR's operations are evolving to rapidly employ new and innovative ways to improve assistance to those in need. In **Mauritania and in Tunisia**, UNHCR launched a new biometric identity management system to improve registration procedures and prevent fraud. In Mauritania, over 50,000 Malian refugees represent just one example of the many refugee populations for whom we have more credible data thanks to the introduction of biometric systems.

Inclusive and long-term partnerships also save lives in the midst of sharp increases in new displacement. **As widespread insecurity in northern Mali and in the region continue to trigger displacement into Mauritania**, UNHCR maintains essential infrastructure in Mbera camp for refugees and host communities. A Multi-Year Multi-Partner Protection and Solutions Strategy (MYMP) is in place to consolidate the efforts of all stakeholders, including UN agencies, bilateral and multilateral partners, civil society, host communities and the Government of Mauritania.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to stress that, across the region, access to safety and protection continues to be a key objective.

With a view to supporting **the development of legislative and administrative asylum frameworks**, UNHCR continues to advise countries developing legislation, in particular in Iraq, Morocco and Tunisia. UNHCR and League of Arab States (LAS) concluded the draft of the Arab Convention on the Situation of Refugees in Arab Countries which, later this year, will be submitted to the respective Ministerial Councils for adoption. In parallel, the Office continued to work closely with LAS on a number of thematic issues including child protection, sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) and statelessness.

Introduction of **biometric registration, community based approaches, age, gender and diversity sensitivity** in protection programming are all essential tools to ensure refugee-centred program implementation.

Community centres and various other community engagement activities play a vital role in several operations, including in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Syria and Turkey, allowing communities to receive services and information within their own locations. Over 250 community centres were in place across the region to provide displaced and vulnerable host communities with psycho-social support, skills development as well as legal information on documentation, land and property and counselling.

Child protection remained a cornerstone of UNHCR's protection response in 2017 and over 694,000 girls and boys in countries neighbouring Syria benefited from UNHCR's child protection and psycho-social support programmes. UNHCR also continued to prioritize the **prevention of and response to sexual and gender-based violence**. From January to September 2017, over 135,000 survivors and persons at risk of SGBV, including men and boys, received multi-sectoral services in the countries neighbouring Syria.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We continue to encourage **responsibility-sharing** with countries hosting Syrian refugees through **resettlement opportunities** and **other legal pathways for admission** to third countries, including humanitarian visas, community-based private sponsorship, labor mobility schemes and family reunification. In addition to meeting pressing protection needs, legal channels for safe relocation offer a counterbalance to irregular onward movements and negative coping mechanisms.

UNHCR is actively engaged with actors beyond the region seeking **durable solutions** for those who are most in need. In 2017, approximately 44,000 refugees from the region were submitted for resettlement, including 37,000 Syrian and 2,800 Iraqi refugees. **The total 2017 submission accounted for only 7.5 per cent of the overall resettlement needs in the region.**

The need for resettlement is greater than ever, yet opportunities remain limited. In line with the goals set out in the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, **we urge new resettlement states to participate in responsibility sharing with host countries.**

Ladies and gentlemen,

UNHCR continues to support partnership policy analysis and design across the region. The Office has been working on the development of the **MENA Civil Society Network for Displacement**, whose official launch is planned for early 2018.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

By their **sheer magnitude and complexity**, displacement levels in the Middle East and North Africa have **challenged humanitarian actors and governments alike**. We hope that in the face of conflict- and displacement- related human suffering on such a scale, global **solidarity and compassion will prevail in the fairest and most equitable terms**.

Thank you.