



# General Assembly

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## Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Seventy-first session

### Summary record of the 729th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Monday, 5 October 2020, at 2.30 p.m.

*Chair:* Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve ..... (Belgium)

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General debate (*continued*)

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*The meeting was called to order at 2.30 p.m.*

**General debate** (*continued*)

1. **Ms. Paik Ji-Ah** (Republic of Korea), speaking via video link, on behalf of Mexico, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Turkey and Australia (MIKTA), said that the MIKTA countries were strongly committed to sharing responsibility for refugee response. The MIKTA countries wished to emphasize the importance of delivering humanitarian assistance in accordance with the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality, with priority given to supporting those in the most vulnerable situations. They acknowledged the importance of local and national responders in delivering timely assistance, especially in the context of the pandemic, and encouraged the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to develop close partnerships with them. States must make efforts to ensure sufficient humanitarian space for aid workers so as to secure access to humanitarian assistance for affected communities, and they must address the growing security risks and safety issues faced by such workers.

2. The pandemic had brought with it special protection challenges, including the suspension or denial of the right to seek asylum. She looked forward to the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges on protection and resilience during pandemics, which would provide a valuable forum for discussion of such issues. It was important to ensure that the pandemic would not prevent States from fulfilling their legal obligations under international human rights law to protect the rights of migrants and refugees. During the pandemic it was vital to ensure equitable and affordable access to medical care and supplies for all people in need. She endorsed the advocacy by UNHCR for the inclusion of persons of concern in national health and social protection frameworks and called for sustained support for the commitments undertaken in the global compact on refugees, the Global Refugee Forum and regional agreements.

3. The MIKTA countries fully supported Office's reform process, which was aimed at strengthening institutional and budgetary structures and improving its performance of its mandate. They stood ready to fulfil their collective responsibilities.

4. **Mr. von Ungern-Sternberg** (Germany), speaking also on behalf of Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Switzerland and Turkey, the co-convenors and co-hosts of the first Global Refugee Forum, held in 2019, said that the global forced displacement landscape continued to present a grim picture, with 26 million refugees among some 80 million displaced people around the world. Developing countries continued to host 85 per cent of the refugees. The COVID-19 pandemic had further worsened the socioeconomic challenges already facing them and had had a clearly negative effect on the situation of refugees, as the number of voluntary repatriations had declined. Reversing such trends would require acts of international solidarity and burden- and responsibility-sharing to reach durable solutions. The approach must shift from managing displacement to investing in conflict prevention and resolution.

5. He noted with satisfaction that 70 per cent of the more than 300 pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum were already being implemented and 22 per cent more were in the planning stage; 37 pledges, including those made at the Forum and at the 2019 high-level segment on statelessness, had already been fulfilled. Support platforms, an instrument established under the global compact on refugees to broaden the base of support for refugee assistance, had been launched and were attracting growing interest, and the Clean Energy Challenge, a multi-stakeholder engagement to provide clean energy to forcibly displaced populations, was another example of a new and welcome initiative.

6. States and other actors must strengthen their engagement and fulfil pledges to meet the needs of refugees and host countries in addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic. The global compact on refugees provided an important set of tools and arrangements to facilitate greater engagement.

7. **Ms. Rodríguez Mancía** (Observer for Guatemala), speaking via video link, also on behalf of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay, said that the Latin American and Caribbean region had been seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The overloaded

social protection and health systems in the region's host countries required concrete and immediate support.

8. She welcomed the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges. Recognizing the importance of the global compact on refugees in overcoming the effects of the crisis, she pointed out that the pledges made within the framework of the Global Refugee Forum reflected the commitment of the countries for which she spoke to the compact's implementation.

9. Noting that the Latin American and Caribbean region had in the past two years become the largest receiver of asylum applications in the world, she said that a commensurate adjustment should be made in the funds that the Office would allocate to the region in 2021. The Bureau for the Americas required funding to continue providing support, including through the comprehensive regional protection and solutions framework (known by its Spanish acronym, MIRPS) in Central America and Mexico, the Quito Process and the regional refugee and migrant response plan for refugees and migrants from Venezuela.

10. She supported the Office's budget reform, which should allow for greater flexibility and financial resilience in the face of a complex operating context involving exponential growth of needs and multiple economic challenges. At the same time, the percentage of UNHCR staff from the Latin American and Caribbean region was especially low, and she thus called for the Office to promote greater geographic diversity of its staff and to better take advantage of the potential of professionals from developing countries.

11. **Mr. Onek** (Uganda), speaking via video link, said that Uganda continued to be one of the countries most affected by forced displacement on the African continent, with over 1.4 million people who had arrived there. The World Food Programme had recently been forced to curtail food rations for refugees by up to 30 per cent owing to a financial crisis, which had seriously undermined nutrition and food security, especially for pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers and children. He called upon the international community to increase funding for refugee response projects in Uganda.

12. The services covered by the response plan developed under the comprehensive refugee response framework were critical and needed funding. Uganda was located in the middle of a very fragile region that continued to be affected by conflict and human rights violations, causing unending human displacement that had already lasted decades. More recently, tensions and fighting had continued in South Sudan, with over 1,000 persons displaced into Uganda as recently as the previous week. Uganda had also received over 3,000 Congolese refugees since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even when the whole world was in total lockdown, Uganda had been able to demonstrate that international protection and asylum, if well managed, could continue to be exercised, even during the pandemic. Investment in migration and health services was thus required now more than ever. UNHCR should directly support the Government of Uganda with prompt assistance to make it possible to test and treat refugees and humanitarian workers.

13. He wished to express thanks to UNHCR and to donors, in particular the Governments of the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Japan, Sweden and Norway, the European Union and the World Bank for their support for refugee relief projects in Uganda. He called upon them to do still more as Uganda sought durable solutions for the persons of concern in the country.

14. **Ms. Dlamini** (Observer for Eswatini), speaking via video link, said that Eswatini called upon the international community to provide the necessary support to host countries in order to enable them to face the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the Global Refugee Forum, the Government had pledged to strengthen the national refugee status determination system. The new system would be in line with the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. Eswatini was grateful to UNHCR for setting up an online platform for training decision makers on the asylum system. The Government of Eswatini had made great strides in the implementation of a national action plan to prevent and eradicate statelessness and to fulfil the pledges made during the high-level segment on statelessness held in 2019, including by collecting demographic information, with assistance from the Pretoria office of UNHCR, to determine the extent of the problem in the country. Eswatini was committed to dedicating

more resources to ensure an enabling environment in which asylum-seekers, refugees and stateless persons were treated with dignity and respect.

15. **Mr. Joseph** (Observer for Haiti), speaking via video link, said that the COVID-19 pandemic had placed enormous stress on national health-care and social support systems in the Caribbean region and had had uncountable adverse effects on the social and economic situation and the rule of law. The Government of Haiti had adopted measures to simplify and improve birth registration procedures in order to reduce the risk of statelessness in rural and remote areas and to honour its commitments under those instruments. Thus, a month after the high-level segment on statelessness, the President of Haiti had published a decree granting any person lacking a birth certificate a five-year period in which to regularize his or her civil status, thus extending provisions that had already been in place to encourage registration. The Government had also undertaken a programme to modernize its civil registration service.

16. The Government of Haiti was committed, working with the authorities of the Dominican Republic, to reducing the phenomenon of statelessness among migrants. Haiti remained attached to the principle of international protection of refugees and encouraged its partners to find durable solutions to implement integration policies, open borders and encourage resettlement, when necessary, so as to provide migrants with prospects for the future in the countries where they settled.

17. **Mr. Letsosa** (Lesotho), speaking via video link, said that the COVID-19 pandemic had made refugees and asylum seekers more vulnerable, posing an even greater protection challenge for the entire international community. The new difficulties had opened channels for traffickers and smugglers who preyed upon vulnerable people. With the pandemic, refugees who had already integrated into society in Lesotho had been forced to return to refugee houses and reception centres. Lesotho was also being affected by climate change, with an adverse effect on food security, contributing further to population displacements.

18. The Government of Lesotho had requested support to deal with displacement, which was caused not only by development projects, but also by violence and illegal mining activities in South Africa that had forced people to flee their homes.

19. Lesotho had in the past been a steadfast host of refugees in the most difficult circumstances and would continue in the same tradition. The Government of Lesotho would like to take part in the global academic interdisciplinary network that had been launched under the global compact on refugees, so as to ensure that the country's academics and people of concern could be empowered and contribute their knowledge on their specific situation. The Government had partnered with the national Olympic committee in order to allow refugees to be members of the country's Olympic team. It was committed to bettering the plight of persons of concern.

20. **Ms. Kayisire** (Rwanda), speaking via video link, said that Rwanda currently hosted over 148,000 refugees, most of whom had fled from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi; 92 per cent of them were living in refugee camps and were dependent on humanitarian assistance. In addition, under the emergency transit mechanism, 244 refugees and asylum seekers who had been evacuated from Libya were currently hosted by Rwanda and 63 refugees had been resettled to third countries. She thanked the African Union and UNHCR for their assistance with the mechanism and the countries of Canada, Denmark, France, Norway and Sweden for their solidarity in resettling refugees and financing the mechanism. The Government of Rwanda had adopted all the necessary preventive measures to protect refugees against COVID-19 in refugee camps. While the COVID-19 pandemic had affected the refugee response and returnee operations, mitigation measures were in place to help refugees and returnees in the recovery process.

21. The Government of Rwanda, jointly with UNHCR and the Government of Burundi, had begun the safe and dignified voluntary repatriation of refugees from Burundi who had been hosted in Rwanda since 2015. Since 27 August, over 2,000 such refugees had been safely returned to their place of origin. Moreover, an additional 11,000 had formally declared that they were willing to return to their country of origin. Rwanda had made progress in delivering on the commitments it had made on the eradication of statelessness and others undertaken at the 2016 Leaders' Summit on the Global Refugee Crisis and at the Global Refugee Forum. The socioeconomic inclusion of refugees and the prevention of

environmental degradation in and around refugee camps would nevertheless require joint efforts and shared responsibilities by the international community. She therefore called on UNHCR and development partners to continue contributing to humanitarian operations in order to cover refugee's basic needs, tackle environmental problems and empower refugees to achieve self-reliance.

22. **Ms. Mwitumwa** (Zambia) said that Zambia had continued to admit refugees, rather than imposing travel restrictions, as some countries had done, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The country's population of persons of concern to UNHCR had thus continued to grow and now stood at 92,000; of those, nearly 24,000 were Angolan and Rwandan refugees for whom the naturalization process had been initiated. The Government had worked tirelessly not only to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on refugees and asylum seekers, but also to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in those communities. As a result, no cases had been recorded in the refugee settlements. The Government, with support from UNHCR, had provided cash assistance to alleviate the hardships endured by refugees during the pandemic. Zambia urged the international community, in the spirit of the global compact on refugees and the comprehensive refugee response framework, to help it to maintain its response to displacement, in particular to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on displaced populations. Owing to the ongoing health crisis, the Government and its partners lagged behind in the implementation of refugee programmes and had had to suspend or cancel some programmes altogether. Nevertheless, Zambia remained committed to completing the local integration of Angolan and Rwandan refugees. With the support of UNHCR, her Government had completed a pilot project to issue 150 residence permits to former Angolan refugees and planned to issue an additional 2,000 by the end of 2020.

23. In connection with the pledges it had made at the Global Refugee Forum, the Government of Zambia had completed a feasibility study and cost analysis for connecting the three refugee settlements on its territory to the national electricity grid. The Government would undertake to contribute \$2 million through the rural electrification authority, but an additional contribution of \$1.5 million from partners would be needed to carry out the project. She further appealed to international partners to assist Zambia in delivering health, water, sanitation, education and protection services to refugees, especially in view of the growing numbers of arrivals, which had put further pressure on the country's already strained service delivery system.

24. **Mr. Grandi** (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that he welcomed the efforts made by States and their support for the work of UNHCR. He appreciated the reference made by the representative of the Republic of Korea, speaking also on behalf of Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey and Australia, to the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as to the importance of the safety and security of humanitarian workers. He also welcomed the support expressed for the inclusion of refugees and other persons of concern in any COVID-19 vaccination protocols, which would be an especially challenging issue. Referring to the statement made by the representative of Guatemala, he said that the growing numbers of displaced persons in the region were a source of grave concern. UNHCR would support the efforts of the countries which, in addition to their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, hosted large numbers of internally displaced persons thanks to the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform and the comprehensive regional protection and solutions framework in North and Central America. UNHCR would strive to ensure the geographical diversity of its workforce in all the regions where it worked. He welcomed the efforts of Haiti to overhaul the civil registration system and to combat statelessness and saluted the ongoing cooperation between Haiti and the Dominican Republic in the latter regard. He appreciated the efforts by Uganda, which remained one of the largest refugee-hosting countries not only in Africa but in the world. He looked forward to working with the Government of Uganda and others in efforts to resolve conflicts and to find solutions for those displaced in the region. He wished to highlight the excellent approach taken by Rwanda in repatriating refugees from Burundi in a voluntary, gradual and well-supported process and its hosting of the emergency transit mechanism for persons of concern from Libya, which required the support of the international community to continue its valuable work. Welcoming the statement made by the representative of Germany, speaking on behalf of the co-conveners of the Global Refugee Forum, he said it was indeed crucial to move from managing displacement to resolving conflict.

25. **Mr. Mavima** (Zimbabwe), speaking via video link, said that the international protection regime for forcibly displaced persons was woefully underfunded, a situation that adversely affected the protection of persons of concern, refugees in Africa being the worst affected. The funding issue was likely only to get worse in the light of the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. He therefore welcomed the High Commissioner's efforts to reach out to non-traditional donors, including the Bretton Woods institutions, and to consider other multilateral financing arrangements. Zimbabwe supported the involvement of multilateral financial institutions, the private sector and humanitarian actors in addressing challenges relating to refugee protection. He applauded the peacebuilding initiatives referred to by the High Commissioner. It was important to collectively invest in conflict resolution mechanisms to reduce the rising numbers of persons of concern to UNHCR. In addition, the international community needed to be better prepared to deal with the consequences of climate-induced natural disasters. An enhanced international protection regime must be premised on burden- and responsibility-sharing.

26. Zimbabwe remained committed to the protection of refugees and asylum seekers, as demonstrated by its inclusion of people of concern in its national COVID-19 health and socioeconomic response and recovery plan. Specifically, the Government had set up COVID-19 early screening measures for new arrivals at border entry points. Referral procedures were in place so that anyone who tested positive could be transferred to isolation or quarantine facilities before their subsequent integration into the refugee community. The Government had also set up a quarantine centre and an isolation centre at Tongogara Refugee Camp, which so far had hosted 38 individuals, including 1 who had tested positive for the COVID-19 virus. Zimbabwe remained committed to delivering on the pledges it had made at the 2019 high-level segment on statelessness and at the Global Refugee Forum. Nevertheless, it might not be possible, owing to the pandemic, to carry out all the activities needed to give effect to commitments by the end of 2021. The Government planned to work with the UNHCR country office and other partners with a view to having the deadlines extended.

27. **Mr. Solano Quirós** (Costa Rica), speaking via video link, said that the COVID-19 pandemic had exposed the systemic vulnerabilities of societies around the world. Multilateralism, cooperation, solidarity and the burden- and responsibility-sharing were key to overcoming the present challenges. The burden on refugee host countries was especially onerous, all the more so in the case of developing countries. The limited resources available and international indebtedness were additional hardship factors, making the support of UNHCR essential. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the number of persons of concern was ever-growing. Resources directed at helping the region must take into account the challenging situation on the ground, especially in the light of the heavy toll the pandemic was taking on health and social protection systems. Costa Rica itself hosted a large number of displaced persons. Since 2018, some 108,000 Nicaraguans had fled their homes; nearly 80 per cent of them were living in Costa Rica. Thus, with a population of barely 5 million inhabitants, Costa Rica had admitted at least 81,000 Nicaraguan refugees and asylum seekers over the previous two years. Costa Rica also hosted a large number of Venezuelans who had fled the serious political and humanitarian crisis in their country. Despite the pandemic and other challenges facing Costa Rica, the Government remained firmly committed to helping those in need of international protection. It was making considerable progress in connection with the pledges it had made at the Global Refugee Forum: it had taken steps to provide identification documents to migrants who had not been granted refugee status and to provide some 6,000 refugees and asylum seekers with health-care coverage.

28. **Mr. Derry** (Ghana), speaking via video link, said that the Government had responded efficiently to alleviate the suffering of refugees as well as Ghanaians as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It had made water free for all, including refugees, to promote compliance with the personal hygiene protocols prescribed by the health authorities for containing the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The Government had also made electricity free, until the end of 2020, for low-income users, a category that generally included refugees. Ghana had instituted practical measures to ensure that, despite stringent restrictions related to the pandemic, refugee status determination would continue uninterrupted. For example, videoconferencing technology had been used to allow government officials to review the cases of asylum seekers remotely. Ghana continued to seek durable solutions for refugees who found themselves in protracted situations. The Immigration Service renewed the

residence permits and work permits of former Liberian refugees affected by a cessation clause nearly a decade previously, but who remained in Ghana as Liberian nationals legally residing in Ghana. In an effort to expand livelihood opportunities for refugees, the Government was working towards making available the national identity card, the Ghana Card, to all refugees, in order to promote their social and economic inclusion.

29. **Mr. Huseynov** (Azerbaijan), speaking via video link, said that one of the goals of the operations undertaken by his country in response to the recent escalation of hostilities by Armenia in the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh region, in addition to ensuring the safety of its people and restoring its internationally recognized borders, was to restore the right of the more than one million refugees and internally displaced persons affected by the protracted crisis to return to their homelands. There was a clear need for a response by the international community that would end the occupation by Armenia, bring peace to the region and put an end to forced displacement.

30. Despite the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, social assistance projects targeting vulnerable groups and national asylum procedures had not been interrupted. Persons who had been denied refugee status prior to the pandemic had not been required to leave the country or forcibly placed in detention centres. Two of the three pledges made during the Global Refugee Forum – to include refugees and persons under the protection of UNHCR in the medical insurance system and to facilitate their legal employment and access to the labour market – had already been fully implemented, while the third – to grant scholarships for higher education to refugee students – would be implemented soon. Since January 2020, the Azerbaijani authorities had started to issue travel documents to refugees. As of July 2020, all asylum applications were being reviewed through the improved national asylum procedure. Concrete steps were being taken to naturalize stateless persons; countrywide public awareness campaigns and mobile documentation services had been introduced to that end. In the past year, approximately 20 per cent of the country's stateless persons had been granted Azerbaijani citizenship.

31. **Mr. Aye** (Observer for Myanmar), speaking via video link, said that, in its efforts to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Myanmar was striving to ensure that no one was left behind. In March 2020, the Government had allocated 2.1 billion kyats to implement an action plan to control the spread of COVID-19 in camps and temporary shelters for internally displaced persons. In August 2020, it had stepped up prevention, control and response measures as the number of cases of local transmission had risen rapidly in Rakhine State. The World Food Programme was providing food assistance at the quarantine facilities in eight townships in Rakhine. Although many of the Government's efforts had been hindered by the hostilities in Rakhine State, there was continuous coordination with United Nations agencies and other partners to ensure that the necessary humanitarian assistance was not interrupted. Despite the pandemic, the camp closure process was proceeding in accordance with the national strategy on the resettlement of internally displaced persons.

32. One of the keys to ending the conflict and ensuing displacement in Myanmar was the peace process. The fourth session of the Union Peace Conference had concluded in August 2020 with the agreement of five basic principles for the establishment of a democratic federal union and guidelines for the future of the peace process. A general election would be held in November 2020.

33. **Mr. Banda** (Observer for Malawi), speaking via video link, said that his Government was grateful to UNHCR for the support it had provided the country in managing refugee and humanitarian operations in the past year. Malawi had maintained open borders throughout the pandemic and, as of September 2020, was hosting more than 47,000 refugees and asylum seekers, the majority from the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa and accommodated at Dzaleka Refugee Camp.

34. Notable achievements in the past year included the establishment of the COVID-19 pandemic intervention facilities at Dzaleka Refugee Camp, the finalization of the draft national migration policy, which was pending cabinet approval, and the development of a comprehensive refugee response framework road map and implementation plan. A consultant was to undertake a study to better understand the situation of groups and individuals at risk

of statelessness. Refugee status had been determined in over 2,000 cases affecting some 6,000 individuals. However, as the pandemic had resulted in the suspension of most planned activities, the backlog of pending cases had increased.

35. Malawi remained committed to the effective management of refugees and other vulnerable migrants in the country together with UNHCR and other partners and looked forward to being accorded full membership of the Executive Committee in November 2020.

36. **Ms. Barnard** (South Africa) said that her delegation wished to congratulate the Office on the successful execution of its decentralization and regionalization process and its global efforts in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. South Africa urged UNHCR to protect all refugees, particularly those in the occupied Palestinian territories and Western Sahara, and to fulfil its role impartially, without fear or favour of the occupying countries. Her Government was grateful to UNHCR for its continued support in dealing with the backlog of asylum applications at the appeals level.

37. The pledges made by South Africa at the Global Refugee Forum and the processing of asylum services at all centres had been affected by the pandemic. Although it was acknowledged that lockdown regulations had affected protection pathways, the Government had responded in a responsible manner to curb the spread of the virus and protect and save lives within its borders. A number of measures aimed at protecting the lives and livelihoods of refugees and asylum-seekers had been introduced, including the provision of social grants. The Government was currently taking cautious measures to reopen the country; asylum and refugee services would resume fully as soon as it was safe to do so. The people and Government of South Africa continued to express solidarity and provide hospitality to those forcibly displaced from their countries and called for strengthened burden-sharing in refugee protection.

38. **Ms. Hagen** (Norway), speaking via video link, said that, in the face of the extraordinary challenges posed by COVID-19, it was more important than ever that the international community should remain committed to the global compact on refugees, work to promote inclusive refugee policies, improve international burden- and responsibility-sharing, and deliver on the commitments made at the Global Refugee Forum. Her Government was working with host States, UNHCR and other partners to fulfil the pledges made relating to energy, education and the search for lasting solutions. The Norwegian Government supported the UNHCR three-year strategy on resettlement, the High-level Panel on Internal Displacement and the UNHCR Global Action Plan to End Statelessness. Her delegation encouraged more Member States to offer resettlement places for refugees and urged those that had not yet done so to take action to end statelessness by 2024.

39. Norway commended UNHCR for its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially its commitment to “stay and deliver”. Safeguarding the health and welfare of personnel must be a key priority. The Office must also continue its work to prevent and react to misconduct. The humanitarian and socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic, including the increased prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence, were extremely worrying. Her delegation urged UNHCR to spare no efforts in preventing such violence, supporting survivors and ensuring the protection of children.

40. Norway supported initiatives that sought to improve refugees’ access to jobs and livelihoods, such as the development of a global UNESCO qualifications passport for refugees and vulnerable migrants. At the national level, integration-related efforts had been strengthened and COVID-19 measures targeting the refugee and immigrant populations had been implemented. To safeguard such inclusive policies and a credible, well-functioning asylum system, a good framework was also required for the return of those who were not in need of international protection.

41. Norway would continue to be a strong supporter of UNHCR and its mandate. As a member of the United Nations Security Council, Norway would give high priority to the protection of civilians, including refugees and internally displaced persons. The Government remained committed to providing un-earmarked and flexible funding to facilitate the provision of well-coordinated, rapid and effective assistance to persons of concern to UNHCR.



42. **Mr. Grandi** (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that it was important to mobilize international support to address the situation of Nicaraguan asylum seekers and refugees in Costa Rica. The measures taken by Zimbabwe, Ghana and Malawi to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees were taken into account in COVID-19 response efforts should serve to inspire other States. He had taken good note of the comments made by the South African delegation, but recalled that it was the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East that was responsible for refugees in the occupied Palestinian territories. The current crisis in Azerbaijan was a matter of serious concern; it was important to find solutions to the long-standing problems of displacement in the area through peaceful dialogue. As suggested by Norway, the Office continued to work on sexual and gender-based violence and had recently updated its policy and strategy in that area. While the developments in Myanmar were welcome, it was important for the Government to explain to refugees what exactly was being done to create the conditions for their return, particularly given the extraordinary burden on Bangladesh and the international community.

43. **Mr. Cornado** (Italy) said that the COVID-19 pandemic was having a huge socioeconomic impact on all countries, worsening the conditions of the most vulnerable populations. Italy had been at the forefront of the fight against the pandemic, mobilizing financial resources and providing support to UNHCR and other agencies engaged on the ground to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. His delegation wished to commend UNHCR for truly embodying the “stay and deliver” principle.

44. The pandemic had slowed down the Italian Government’s implementation of the pledges it had made at the Global Refugee Forum, but had not diluted its commitment. Despite severe operational problems, Italy had continued to implement part of its resettlement programmes and to offer humanitarian corridors for the safe transfer to Italy of particularly vulnerable refugees. It had also launched a new edition of the University Corridors for Refugees project, which provided access to university education in Italy for refugees in the Middle East and Africa.

45. Seventy years since the Office’s inception, its mandate remained as relevant as ever. The pandemic had further highlighted the need for such a skilled and competent entity to continue responding to new and protracted crises. His delegation encouraged UNHCR to continue to further expand its donor base by involving the private sector and relevant international financial institutions. Italy would continue to do its part to the best of its abilities.

46. **Mr. Moors** (Belgium), in a pre-recorded video statement, said that Belgium had responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by increasing its humanitarian budget to €197 million – its highest ever level. Belgium had also supported United Nations medical evacuation operations by providing intensive care in its hospitals for staff members with COVID-19. The country’s resettlement programme would shortly resume after an interruption due to lockdown measures. However, the pandemic continued to pose challenges, such as how Governments and international organizations would distribute and allocate vaccines once they became available. While it was expected that refugees and internally displaced persons would be included in the national vaccination programmes of host countries, it was unclear what the financial impact would be, or how international organizations would share the burden.

47. Even if Governments quickly overcame the health impact of the pandemic, the economic and social consequences would linger, bringing increased risks of poverty, food insecurity and unemployment, especially for refugees and internally displaced persons. The side effects of the pandemic were especially detrimental to women and girls, and included the loss of labour opportunities in the informal sector, an increase in gender-based violence in camps, a rise in negative coping mechanisms such as early marriage and prostitution, and the risk of poor girls dropping out of school.

48. Since the beginning of the crisis, the digitalization of work had become commonplace, allowing humanitarian organizations to continue providing services to persons of concern, in spite of restrictions. New ways of work should be maintained after the pandemic, since they allowed for economies of scale and cost savings. The digital divide should not be overlooked

in humanitarian work, and digital access should be seen as a basic need in the same terms as food, shelter, health and education.

49. Belgium welcomed the progress achieved by UNHCR in keeping to the Grand Bargain on humanitarian financing, made at the World Humanitarian Summit, particularly the increase in cash-based interventions and in support for local responders. It also welcomed the measures taken by UNHCR to minimize the risks of fraud and corruption in such interventions. Lastly, Belgium and its partners had increased their funding of programmes in the Sahel, where the number of people of concern had grown exponentially. He encouraged UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations to increase their presence in the region.

50. **Ms. O'Connell** (United States of America), speaking via video link, said that one of the noble purposes set forth in the Charter of the United Nations was to solve international problems of a humanitarian character. In that spirit, on the margins of the high-level week of the General Assembly, the State Department had convened a dialogue with the world's top 10 donor Governments and humanitarian agencies to discuss humanitarian leadership, burden-sharing and the role that all Member States must play in response to ever-growing humanitarian needs. At the event, the representative of Germany had suggested that an effort should be made to reach out to new humanitarian donors. The representative of the United Kingdom had pointed out that only two of the five permanent members of the Security Council were among the top 10 leading donors. Participants recognized the many small donors that made relatively large contributions, in contrast to some countries of means that claimed the mantle of global leadership but did not rise to the challenge when it mattered most.

51. In 2019, the United States had contributed more than \$9 billion in relief for humanitarian crises, including \$1.7 billion to UNHCR alone. On the day of the General Assembly event, the United States had announced a collective \$980 million in additional assistance to respond to crises in the Sahel, South Sudan and Syria, in addition to the \$348 million that had already been announced to assist displaced Venezuelans. Lastly, the participants had taken inspiration from the words of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on his recent trip to Syria, where he had spoken of the contrast between the complexity of politics in conflict situations and the simplicity of people's needs. The United States stressed the need for all actors to work together and for everyone to do their part and thereby have a profound impact.

52. **Mr. Kiran** (Turkey), speaking via video link, said that Turkey remained concerned about the living conditions of refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons. Considering that the suffering of the 80 million people who had been forced to leave their homes should not be ignored, Turkey had assisted persons in need in 154 countries and was determined to continue to do so. While the COVID-19 pandemic was a new challenge that required a collective effort from the international community, other problems included States' failure to process asylum applications in a timely manner and an increase in measures to force refugees and migrants back over the border, in clear violation of the 1951 Convention and international human rights law.

53. Turkey welcomed the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19. While short-term remedies such as cash assistance programmes were important for easing the impact of COVID-19 on developing countries, durable solutions for long-term recovery were also required. In that regard, Turkey considered that the safe and voluntary return of refugees should have priority and that a global effort should be made to facilitate return processes.

54. Given that the global compact on refugees offered useful guidance on protecting refugees by promoting equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing, it would be advisable to discuss ways of making better use of the compact and to share best practices with respect to refugee protection in the context of the pandemic. Protecting refugees and displaced persons was a moral and legal obligation and should be a shared goal of the international community, considering that refugee crises concerned all countries and not only those in the vicinity of the countries of origin.

55. **Ms. Gallach Figueras** (Spain), speaking via video link, said that Spain recognized that the situation of refugees and internally displaced persons had deteriorated as a result of the public health emergency. The Government had taken four steps to respond to the situation. Firstly, while remaining committed to the obligations it had assumed in 2019 at the Global Refugee Forum, it would continue its efforts to improve refugees' integration and their access to education and employment. Secondly, having noted with concern that UNHCR had scaled down or suspended some activities, Spain had increased its contributions to humanitarian organizations. Thirdly, it had acted with partners to alleviate the crisis caused by the exodus of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, organizing a solidarity conference that had mobilized more than €2.5 billion. Fourthly, it had responded to the dramatic situation in Central America by supporting efforts to find durable solutions through the comprehensive regional protection and solutions framework. In that context, Spain was seeking to mobilize the support of public- and private-sector actors, including development banks and corporations, and it planned to hold a training course for government officials on handling asylum applications.

56. **Mr. Apitonian** (Armenia) said that, as a result of the war unleashed by Azerbaijan against Nagorno-Karabakh on the morning of 27 September, he was obliged to inform the Executive Committee of an escalating humanitarian crisis that threatened global peace and security. He appreciated the High Commissioner's prompt public response to the crisis, and he shared his view that military action would only create new problems and new refugee flows. The overt, unprovoked and brutal action of Azerbaijan against the people of Nagorno-Karabakh, with the full and direct support of Turkey, was in flagrant violation of international humanitarian law. Schools, hospitals, communication systems and other essential facilities had been targeted and the civilian population had come under deliberate attack. Several towns and villages had been bombed or shelled. Azerbaijani artillery strikes on the capital, Stepanakert, had targeted its main humanitarian hub and emergency services centre. Azerbaijan had also specifically targeted journalists, killing some and seriously injuring others. Dozens of civilians, including children, had been killed and many more had been wounded. The ongoing military operation threatened the lives of 150,000 people. Moreover, the use of cluster munitions constituted unacceptable military aggression against peaceful civilians and was in violation of international law. With the encouragement and support of Turkey, Azerbaijan was also extending hostilities to the territory of Armenia.

57. The false statement delivered by the representative of Azerbaijan proved that people's lives were of no concern to the undemocratic regime of that country. Azerbaijan and Turkey continued hostilities with the aim of resolving the conflict by military means. They were also recruiting foreign fighters from Libya and Syria, thus seriously undermining regional security and hindering the international community's efforts to end the hostilities. Armenia remained committed to the peaceful resolution of the conflict and stood ready to re-establish a ceasefire based on the 1994–1995 trilateral agreements. Meanwhile, thousands of displaced families lacked access to food, water and medical care. Armenia was counting on their strength to prevent another humanitarian catastrophe. However, since the military action continued to unfold, the Government of Armenia requested the provision of humanitarian assistance to the population of Nagorno-Karabakh, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and international human rights and humanitarian law.

58. **Mr. Grandi** (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that only dialogue could avoid further humanitarian problems in Nagorno-Karabakh. UNHCR and other organizations stood ready to provide humanitarian assistance if required. He stressed that the Executive Committee's discussions must not be politicized, since that would not be helpful to the victims of the conflict.

59. He was grateful to Turkey, Spain, Italy and Belgium for their efforts on behalf of refugees in various parts of the world. He thanked Belgium and Switzerland for opening their medical facilities to UNHCR staff members affected by COVID-19. Regarding the question of vaccines, UNHCR had engaged in discussions in various forums and had encountered a clear awareness that persons of concern should not be excluded from those categories of persons who would be vaccinated as a matter of priority.

60. The substantial financial contribution by the United States of America was particularly appreciated and was indispensable for the operations of UNHCR around the world. Having attended the event organized by the State Department, he had heard the participants' views and recognized the need to intensify dialogue with development institutions and the private sector with a view to mobilizing additional resources.

*The meeting rose at 5.40 p.m.*