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President: Mr. Massari (Vice-President).....(Italy)

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In the absence of Ms. Stoeva (Bulgaria), Mr. Massari (Italy), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Agenda item 9: Special economic, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance

(continued)

Panel discussion: “Addressing protection risks, needs and challenges in humanitarian emergencies, particularly the disproportionate impact on women and children”

1. **The President** said that there had been serious setbacks to women’s rights in 2022. Restrictions on the work of women humanitarian workers in Afghanistan and similar trends in Yemen had undermined humanitarian response efforts and had made it even more difficult for women to participate in and access essential services, education and livelihood opportunities. Appalling levels of gender-based violence persisted, and children continued to be disproportionately affected by armed conflict, famine and food insecurity.

2. He invited the Council to view a short video presentation of children’s experiences in the context of armed conflict.

3. *A short film showing the testimonies of children in places of armed conflict was projected.*

4. **Ms. Wosornu** (Director, Operations and Advocacy Division, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), panellist, said that some 160 million people were in need of protection in humanitarian contexts in 2023, a staggering 42 per cent increase over the previous two years. Conflict and a lack of respect for international humanitarian law remained the leading causes, but the impact of climate change, economic fragility, record levels of displacement and the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic had further exacerbated the need for protection. Almost 17,000 civilian deaths had been recorded in 12 armed conflicts in 2022, a 53 per cent increase since 2021. The urbanization of warfare and the use of explosive weapons in populated areas had had devastating impacts. The destruction of critical infrastructure had also had far-reaching consequences, disrupting access to electricity, health care, water and sanitation services and driving high levels of sexual violence. In 2022 alone, the United Nations had received reports of more than 3,300 cases of sexual violence in conflict areas; the actual numbers were probably much higher. Crises also increased the risks to women and girls of other forms of abuse, including trafficking, and often drove communities to adopt negative coping strategies such as child marriage. Increased displacement also exposed women and girls to heightened risks.

5. Attacks continued on women’s rights and against their meaningful participation in society and decision-making. The limitations placed on women in Afghanistan provided a vivid example. Children were particularly at risk of harm. Thousands of children had been killed and injured in 2022 by guns, landmines, explosive remnants of war and the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. In Somalia, children accounted for 95 per cent of casualties of explosive remnants of war. Attacks against schools and teachers interrupted education, robbed children of safe spaces, made them more vulnerable to recruitment and exploitation and undermined their futures. Children had been abducted and forcibly deported; they had spent months and years on the move from one internally displaced persons’ camp to another; they faced hunger, malnutrition and disease.

6. Member States and many organizations had recently made commitments to tackle those challenges and, during the current panel discussion, participants would consider how the humanitarian community could address such trends. In her view, first, the international community must continue to call on all parties to conflict to uphold international humanitarian law and protect civilians, repress sexual violence and facilitate humanitarian access and, in all contexts, must push for the respect of human rights. Secondly, Member States must reinvigorate advocacy and the implementation of existing international agendas on protection issues, such as the avoidance of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, the protection of civilians and measures to prevent sexual violence. Third, in line with the independent review of the implementation of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) protection policy carried out in 2022, the humanitarian community must do more to

ensure that protection was placed at the centre of humanitarian action and that it involved meaningful engagement with affected persons during all phases of activities.

7. **Ms. Al-Nashif** (United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)), panellist, said that comprehensive responses were required to ensure that preparedness and prevention measures were in place prior to emergencies and to strengthen resilience and the promotion of solutions once they arose. To that end, protection must be at the very core of any humanitarian response, as violations of international human rights and humanitarian law were often the root causes or drivers of crises and conflict. Specifically, that meant adopting holistic approaches to situation analysis and policy action and implementation, ensuring the inclusion of all groups, especially the most vulnerable populations, and identifying the root causes of protection risks. In Somalia, with the support of OHCHR, the humanitarian country team had been able to roll out a strategy to enhance data collection and to identify protection gaps, including where disability, ethnicity or clan affiliation gave rise to exclusion from access to aid. The team had thus been able to recalibrate the locations it was targeting.

8. Secondly, better use had to be made of the limited resources available. The gap between humanitarian needs and available funding kept growing, and donor funding was not fairly allocated across sectors and contexts. Protection activities remained particularly underfunded, and there were many forgotten crises, for example in Haiti, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. Humanitarian actors must amplify the voices of all in need of assistance and ensure that their concerns were kept on the international agenda. Meaningful participation and avenues for feedback, including through complaint mechanisms, must be integrated across all strategies, plans and programmes from the outset of an emergency.

9. Third, the best form of protection was prevention. United Nations mechanisms provided information to support early analysis and warnings of crises in the offing. Crises generally resulted not from small rights violations, but from recurring, systemic and widespread violations of sets of rights. Monitoring was thus of prime importance. The gathering, verification and analysis of information on violations of human rights helped to identify past and present violations and to anticipate and thus prevent escalation. The way action was taken in response to early warning analysis had to be improved. Alarms had been sounded on the actions of gangs in Haiti since early 2022. It was necessary to draw attention to such situations to ensure an effective response.

10. OHCHR stood ready to increase its presence and commitment to humanitarian action as a full member of IASC and as an organization mandated to provide protection, with complementary expertise. Since the beginning of the armed attack on Ukraine, OHCHR had been publishing civilian casualty updates, which had become a point of statistical reference for the Government, international agencies and others. The human rights monitoring mission in Ukraine closely monitored conflict-related arbitrary detention, ill-treatment and sexual violence, thus helping to shape protection responses, deter further violations and ensure accountability. Such action demonstrated how current challenges could be met by anchoring humanitarian response and human rights, preserving normative frameworks and actively advocating together for greater respect for international human rights and humanitarian law.

11. **Mr. Chaiban** (Deputy Executive Director for Emergencies, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)), panellist, said that it was currently estimated that some 400 million children across the globe were living in or fleeing from conflict zones and that there were more children in need of humanitarian assistance than there had been in the previous eight decades. In 2021 and 2022, there had been 5,000 reports of attacks on schools and universities and over 1,000 attacks on health care facilities in emergency-affected areas and fragile settings in 2021 alone. Preventing violations and protecting women and children in humanitarian need was of the utmost importance to UNICEF. Providing access to services such as interim care, family tracing for unaccompanied children and safe spaces and response services for victims of gender-based violence played a vital role in ensuring children's and women's well-being.

12. In 2022, UNICEF had worked with partners to support some 4.7 million children who had experienced violence. It had assisted children through actions to mitigate the impact of gender-based violence, and the number of beneficiaries of community-based mental health

and psychosocial support services had more than doubled from the previous year, to 25.2 million.

13. In Haiti, acts of armed violence against schools and schoolchildren, including shooting, ransacking, looting and kidnapping, had increased dramatically over the previous year. Safe access and a return to learning could be strengthened through the provision of school supplies and advocacy to prevent and end such attacks. Cash transfers could be provided to allow vulnerable children to enrol in school and to improve educational infrastructure and capacity for teachers.

14. To improve the provision of protection, the first action would be to place the protection of women and children at the centre of humanitarian interventions. All emergency needs assessments must systematically include analyses of the conflict situation, protection needs, risks, threats and vulnerabilities, with responses targeted and prioritized. Second, there must be a focus on violence prevention and protection from the very beginning of crises, as protection concerns, notably for women and children, often spiked at the onset of a crisis. Third, protection risks, needs and challenges must be addressed across all sectors of humanitarian action, including education and the provision of water, sanitation and health care. Education and medical facilities were designated safe spaces providing a sense of normalcy and served as starting points in identifying the most vulnerable children requiring protection services. Gender-based violence was addressed, including through safety audits in all sectors, and women and girls were empowered through tuition in literacy and numeracy and assistance with income-generating activities.

15. Fourth, there was a need to engage with anyone who could influence the perpetrators of violations, including by systemically speaking out in a principled matter when rights were infringed. Fifth, it was essential to engage with parties, including non-State groups and de facto authorities, for example in Afghanistan, to secure safe and sustained access to persons in need in hard-to-reach areas. Lastly, it should be recognized that social welfare and justice systems could serve to protect children and women and that investment in them could be beneficial, including in emergency contexts.

16. **Mr. Petersen** (Deputy Executive Director (Management) of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)), panellist, said that the vast majority of the over 100 million displaced people in the world were women and children. When the numbers of conflicts and disasters rose, so too did their risk of being exposed to violence, exploitation, gender-based violence and abuse. There was a brutal protection crisis in the world, with the same patterns observed in numerous countries and regions where millions were suffering from armed conflicts and the actions of armed groups.

17. The breakdown of the social fabric of communities led to other forms of violence, and climate change was causing still more displacement, exposing women and girls to unsafe coping practices and creating further barriers to access in services. Climate change amplified and accelerated pre-existing gender inequalities that affected the ability of women and girls to adapt to or recover from climate-induced emergencies. There was growing statistical evidence that showed that extreme water events were driving gender-based violence. When women and girls faced food insecurity, they were the last to eat and they ate the least, which had huge impacts on their health and well-being. They also had to walk further in search of food and water, placing them in increased danger.

18. Gender-based violence must no longer be seen in isolation from other factors driving humanitarian needs; it must be considered in the context of anticipatory action and taken into account right from the start in any crisis response and the provision of all life-saving assistance, including medical treatment, mental health care, psychosocial support, livelihood support, legal assistance and cash and voucher distribution. Humanitarian actors must respond with urgency and compassion, hand in hand with communities and local women's groups, and must also work to influence policy. Their response must be centred on the needs and wishes of survivors of gender-based violence and they must also press for the prosecution of perpetrators.

19. Great strides had been made towards ensuring that addressing gender-based violence was considered the collective responsibility of all humanitarian partners, right from the start of an emergency response. It was now included in needs analyses, overviews and response

plans, but did not receive sufficient funding. So far, just 4 per cent of the funding required by humanitarian organizations to address gender-based violence in 2023 had been mobilized and received. Even against the background of the widening gap between humanitarian needs and available funding overall, that shortfall was particularly extreme. The lack of funding reflected a lack of prioritization, and the consequences were dire. It left over 100 million people without any chance of receiving support or protection, and it meant that mechanisms and programmes were not in place to prevent and mitigate gender-based violence, even in contexts where it was known that the risks were severe.

20. UNFPA, as the lead agency for the coordination of action against gender-based violence in emergencies, worked closely with local women's organizations, as they had the best knowledge of risks and solutions. Such organizations were the front-line responders when crisis struck. UNFPA provided 40 per cent of its funding directly to local and national organizations, much of it allocated to women-led organizations. Such organizations continued to face persistent barriers, particularly in relation to access to funding. Without dedicated leadership on the ground, efforts to combat gender-based violence risked running up against pushback, and programme delivery would be inconsistent.

21. **Ms. Triggs** (Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)), panellist, said that there were currently 110 million forcibly displaced persons in the world; the number had increased significantly in recent weeks as a result of the crisis in the Sudan. In 2022, around 82 per cent of those displaced by conflict had been women and children. Women in conflict areas, particularly older women, single women with children and women trying to protect their families, were frequently subject to sexual violence. The increasing disregard for human rights law and refugee protection norms and the persistent impunity for perpetrators of gender-based violence were matters of critical concern to UNHCR.

22. Placing protection at the centre of humanitarian work across the United Nations system meant adopting a collective approach to protection risks that would involve a joint analysis and the prioritization of such risks. UNHCR led the work of IASC on the centrality of protection in humanitarian action and, while progress had been made in the form of new benchmarks and an action plan, the critical challenge was putting that work into practice at the country level to improve the situation of displaced persons. It was also essential to work with the private sector and international financial institutions. For example, UNHCR had been working with the World Bank to enable the International Development Association to release funds to address protection challenges, with a particular focus on women and girls fleeing conflict.

23. On the ground, UNHCR was running 580 operations worldwide and its presence was vital in areas such as the Ukrainian border, where men, women and children, including persons with disabilities and unaccompanied minors, were struggling across into Poland and the Republic of Moldova. However, guaranteeing that presence required funding, which meant that protection work had to be focused on delivering measurable outcomes to demonstrate to donors that their money was yielding results.

24. Engaging meaningfully with women and girls meant listening to them and working with them, rather than simply talking about them. Accordingly, consultations with women's groups needed to be an integral part of policymaking. UNHCR had previously encountered difficulties in providing funding for unregistered groups representing women and girls, but, over the previous year, had been able to establish 71 grant agreements for such groups so that they could receive money even in cases where they faced obstacles in registering or accessing a bank account.

25. UNHCR was trying to promote innovation in its work and, to that end, had established the NGO Innovation Award, through which it funded and supported non-governmental organizations offering innovative approaches to protecting forcibly displaced persons. The outcomes of the initiative had been positive and meant that UNHCR could focus on community-based and local approaches that would ensure that women and girls were included in its work.

26. **Ms. Ashing** (Chief Executive Officer, Save the Children International), panellist, said that the 468 million children living in conflict-affected countries were exposed every day to

the threat of grave rights violations, and their rights to education, health, family life and a normal childhood were indirectly undermined. Children caught up in other forms of crises also faced protection risks. For example, children accounted for 41 per cent of the globally displaced population, putting them at risk of exploitation, trafficking and abuse. During food security crises, children had been withdrawn from school and sent to work. Girls were exposed to additional risks of gender-based violence and child marriage, as families were sometimes forced to marry off their daughters in order to reduce the number of mouths they had to feed.

27. The world was currently grappling with a child protection crisis: in 2022, just 19 per cent of the funding requested for stand-alone child protection services had been allocated, leading to a shortfall of \$650 million. As a result, 18 million children and caregivers had been unable to receive protection or access the services they required to overcome the effects of the violence, exploitation and abuse they faced. Furthermore, the ability of Save the Children International to access children and their communities was being adversely affected by bureaucratic obstacles, direct attacks on aid workers and other restrictions such as the requirement for female staff to be accompanied by a man.

28. In order to address the situation, it was first necessary to increase compliance with the relevant international standards and ensure that the perpetrators of grave rights violations affecting children in conflict, which were underinvestigated, underreported and underprosecuted, were held accountable. To that end, the establishment of mechanisms that took account of factors such as the victim's age, gender and disability status was crucial. Furthermore, States needed to strengthen their commitment to upholding international humanitarian law and human rights law.

29. Secondly, there was a need for increased investment in specialized and stand-alone services for the protection of children in times of crisis. As long as children remained unprotected from violence and abuse, any investment in education, food security, health and nutrition would fail to have the desired impact.

30. The third priority was protecting aid workers delivering humanitarian assistance, who should be able to carry out their work without fear. It was crucial for Member States to continue working with Save the Children International to provide timely and needs-based assistance while tackling the bureaucratic obstacles that could prove fatal for children and their communities.

31. Guaranteeing protection for the millions of children affected by crises would only be possible if those three issues were addressed jointly; it was thus essential to reflect on what measures could be taken to achieve that objective.

32. **Mr. Cardon** (Chief Protection Officer, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)), panellist, said that, although the issue of protection was gaining more attention, many actors still required clarification as to its meaning, and discussions would be in vain unless States showed the political will to uphold their clear obligations to protect the most vulnerable and steps were taken to improve funding for the protection sector.

33. On the ground, ICRC continued to witness conflict-affected children being recruited by armed forces, wounded or killed. Others were displaced, stranded in camps, separated from their families, detained under harsh conditions and exposed to abuse, including sexual abuse. The plight of children in the Hawl camp in the Syrian Arab Republic, who endured extremely tough living conditions and were then transferred to prison upon turning 12 years of age, was one example.

34. To improve the situation, concrete action could be taken before, during and after a conflict. Prior to the outbreak of conflict, it was important to ensure that the armed forces fully understood the obligations assumed by all High Contracting Parties to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Protocols and the consequences of any violations. During conflict, ensuring humanitarian access, which parties to conflict were increasingly reluctant to grant, was key. ICRC had recently evacuated some 280 children from an orphanage in the Sudan, and difficulties accessing the children had made the operation extremely challenging. Once conflict had ended, it was important to pay special attention to women whose husbands were missing and provide them with enough support to play an effective role in society.

35. Coordination among organizations was improving but should be enhanced further. It was also crucial to consult the people facing protection challenges, who had sometimes identified their own solutions, to ensure that humanitarian action was helping to reinforce what already existed.

36. **Mr. Tall** (Observer for Burkina Faso) said that, since 2019, Burkina Faso had been grappling with an unprecedented humanitarian and security crisis that had led to the internal displacement of 2 million persons, more than 75 per cent of whom were women and children. To help children affected by the crisis, the Government had established a directorate to combat violence against children and protect them in emergencies, developed a handover protocol and created a manual on caring for children found during operations to secure territory. As for women, in addition to tackling gender-based violence and empowering them through a fund supporting their income-generating activities, the Government was developing a national action plan to increase the involvement of women and girls in conflict prevention and management and peacebuilding.

37. The national recovery strategy for 2023–2027 was based on improving access to basic social services and promoting decent living environments, reviving the local economy, empowering people affected by the conflict and preventing conflict and building peace in areas facing significant security challenges. It was accompanied by a three-year operational action plan worth 810 billion CFA francs.

38. His delegation called upon bilateral and multilateral partners to support the country's efforts to implement the initiatives as part of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

39. **Mr. Boutadghart** (Observer for Morocco) said that he would like to know how the United Nations humanitarian agencies and other stakeholders could work together to avoid duplicating efforts and wasting resources when responding to humanitarian crises. In addition, he wished to hear from Ms. Ashing regarding which mechanisms or means the partners in Geneva might use to ensure that humanitarian actors were able to carry out their mission in the safest conditions possible.

40. **Mr. Gómez Ocampo** (Colombia) said that the report by his country's commission for the clarification of truth had concluded that the armed conflict had disproportionately affected women. He wished to draw attention to the plight of women and children crossing the Darién Gap, who were at risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

41. The Colombian Government was working to ensure that programmes and policies took account of ethnic, cultural, age and income differences among women. For the first time in the country's history, its foreign policy was geared towards promoting gender equality, women's empowerment and political participation and the protection of the rights of all women and girls. It would aim to address the specific needs of all women in humanitarian emergencies, acknowledging the disproportionate impact that such emergencies had on them and the role they played as agents of change and peace. The policy would be pacifist in nature, recognize the multiple and interrelated forms of discrimination faced by women and foster dialogue in bilateral and multilateral forums.

42. His delegation called for the continuation of joint work, based on the principle of shared responsibility, to tackle all dimensions of the multiple humanitarian emergencies.

43. **Mr. Chimbindi** (Zimbabwe) said that it was unclear how humanitarian actors coordinated their activities to avoid duplication and competition for resources. He wondered how it was possible to focus on the protection of women and children in lawless situations in which there was no protection at all. As protection was primarily the responsibility of States, it would be useful to learn what measures were taken by humanitarian actors to ensure that States complied with their obligations. Lastly, he wished to know whether there was a mechanism for taking stock of what had been achieved in the humanitarian sector and identifying the challenges that remained.

44. **Ms. Castello** (Canada) said that her country strove to place the protection of civilians, particularly women and children, at the heart of its responses to humanitarian crises. Canada remained committed to ensuring full respect for international law, human rights and democratic principles for the creation of just and accountable institutions and, through the international rules-based system, would continue to support gender-responsive humanitarian

action and address the drivers of crises. Canada would continue to uphold its commitments under the Grand Bargain on humanitarian financing and prioritize gender-responsive humanitarian action spearheaded by women-led organizations. The efforts made by IASC to develop a road map for action towards a coordinated, system-wide approach in which protection occupied a central position were to be welcomed. With the deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals fast approaching, the international community needed to act swiftly and decisively to address the drivers of humanitarian crises, strengthen compliance with international humanitarian law and ensure the centrality of protection in humanitarian action. In that connection, she would be grateful for further information on the measures that Member States could take to engage with the parties to conflicts.

45. **Ms. Chandra** (Observer for Australia) said that the protection, inclusion and empowerment of women and girls was paramount to effective humanitarian action. Australia continued to prioritize gender-responsive approaches, which included steps to address gender-based violence. In that context, women and girls should be recognized as leaders, first responders and agents of change, not only as victims and survivors. Placing the experiences, perspectives and leadership of women and girls at the heart of humanitarian action was crucial. Mechanisms that allowed persons affected by crises to participate meaningfully in decision-making needed to be integrated into the planning, implementation and monitoring of the humanitarian response. The need for humanitarian assistance would continue to increase unless gender inequality was addressed. For that reason, gender equality was integrated across preparedness, response, recovery and disaster risk reduction efforts. She wondered what more could be done by the international community to encourage humanitarian, development and peace actors to work together on gender equality and intersectionality, particularly during protracted crises.

46. **Ms. Toutkhalian** (Observer for Armenia) said that women and children bore the brunt of the impact of armed conflict. Since 12 December 2022, Azerbaijan had been blockading Nagorno-Karabakh, in a blatant violation of international humanitarian law and the 2020 ceasefire agreement. The blockade severely reduced access to essential goods and services and, as reported by Amnesty International, disproportionately affected women. Cargo and supply chain disruptions had had a major impact on families with young children, putting them at risk of malnutrition and starvation. The previous week, in a sign of impending ethnic cleansing, Azerbaijan had halted even the limited humanitarian transfers that ICRC had been organizing. Armenia urged all humanitarian actors across the United Nations system to mobilize their efforts and ensure a presence on the ground in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor, with a view to helping those in need, ensuring protection, including for women and children, and preventing further violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

47. **Mr. Gürber** (Observer for Switzerland) said that breaches of international humanitarian law had a direct impact on affected populations, in particular women and children. It should be recalled that, for States, compliance with international humanitarian law was a legal obligation and a moral responsibility. In addition, there was a need for renewed focus on the centrality of protection in humanitarian action. Engaging with warring parties to prevent or end violations of international humanitarian law was the essence of humanitarian action and, short of peace, the most effective way of reducing the need for humanitarian assistance. Switzerland therefore supported the independent review of the implementation of the IASC protection policy, which had led to recommendations to address gaps between policy and practice. Switzerland urged United Nations agencies, other participants in the work of IASC and Member States to remain focused on protection. He would be grateful if the panellists could indicate what single action on the part of Member States would have the greatest impact on improving the protection of persons affected by conflict.

48. **Ms. Widstam** (Sweden) said that, through its humanitarian assistance, her country was committed to ensuring the centrality of protection and prioritized efforts to address and mitigate protection risks. Sweden supported humanitarian interventions that helped to prevent violence and abuse, reduce the vulnerability of affected populations and strengthen their agency. Sweden advocated flexible and multi-year funding and compliance with international law and standards. Fundamental to effective protection were efforts to identify

and understand protection risks. Only then could a more targeted humanitarian response be mounted while the escalation of acute needs was reduced. In addition, a shared understanding and analysis of risks allowed actors to design multisectoral programmes to strengthen communities and, ultimately, change the behaviour of those responsible. It also provided an opportunity for humanitarian actors to work in complementarity with development and peace actors and deliver on protection outcomes collectively. Communities and affected populations, including women and children, should be part of the decision-making process at all stages of humanitarian action. Sweden looked forward to continued discussions on how States and donors could systemically incorporate protection and protection risks into strategy and programming to inform policy, funding allocations and actions.

49. **Ms. Hasselfeldt-Sepe** (United States of America) said that protection was central to her country's humanitarian mission to save lives, uphold dignity, stabilize volatile populations and provide critical assistance. Protection must be mainstreamed in humanitarian programming and strong accountability mechanisms established. The factors behind the increase in protection risks and needs were varied and compounding.

50. The United States was committed to preventing and responding to gender-based violence, including through the protection and empowerment of women and girls. Since the 2013 fiscal year, the United States had provided over \$192 million to support "Safe from the Start", its flagship initiative to respond to gender-based violence in emergencies. An expanded version of the initiative, "Safe from the Start ReVisioned", had recently been launched to promote collective action to prioritize gender-based violence prevention and response and shift power towards crisis-affected women and girls.

51. Children were at increased risk of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect in humanitarian settings. Child protection was not only essential for survival and well-being but also ensured healthy long-term development. To provide child protection throughout the humanitarian response required quality case management, access to safe spaces, family tracing and reunification, and psychosocial support for healthy development. Like efforts to combat gender-based violence, child protection was cross-cutting and had to be integrated into all aspects of emergency response. The United States supported local, community-led approaches to protection and called for the protection and empowerment of women and children in emergencies to be prioritized in humanitarian action.

52. **Ms. Advani** (United Kingdom) said that the seventy-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in 2023, was a reminder of the value of the international human rights framework. It was all too clear that, in humanitarian emergencies, women and children suffering from pre-existing inequalities, for instance as a result of disability, were disproportionately affected by increased violence and barriers in access to essential services and humanitarian assistance. Protection was therefore one of the key pillars of her country's humanitarian framework, demonstrating its continued commitment to improving the protection of civilians in armed conflict. The United Kingdom had used its permanent membership of the Security Council to call for the protection of all civilians and, as penholder, had played a key role in driving forward the protection of civilians in armed conflict agenda in the Security Council.

53. The United Kingdom supported efforts to improve leadership on protection and welcomed the independent review of the implementation of the IASC protection policy. Through its "payment by results" funding framework, it worked with humanitarian agencies to promote and incentivize more inclusive approaches to humanitarian action and hold agencies accountable for their commitments to leave no one behind. Continued efforts would be made to engage closely with humanitarian delivery partners to protect and support women and girls during crises. The United Kingdom would work in tandem with allies and partners through the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-based Violence in Emergencies. The country also supported women's leadership in crises as a way of ensuring that women-led organizations influenced humanitarian decision-making and helped to deliver responses that better met the specific needs of women and girls.

54. **Mr. van Mens** (Observer for the Netherlands) said that, in recent years, various steps had been taken to ensure that mental health and psychosocial well-being were recognized as a prerequisite for effective people-centred emergency preparedness, response and recovery.

The importance of that commitment had been underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic and later events, including the war in Ukraine and the recent earthquakes in Türkiye and the Syrian Arab Republic. Mental health and psychosocial support needed to be integrated into all stages of crisis response. Despite some progress in that direction, there remained a lack of predictable and global capacity. The Netherlands was committed to ensuring the integration of mental health and psychosocial support into crisis response efforts and called for concerted action to capitalize on the steps taken so far and to address the urgent need for such support among those affected by war and natural disasters.

55. **Ms. Lucas Molina** (Observer for Spain) said that her country was convinced of the need to incorporate a humanitarian perspective into foreign policy. In recent years, Spain had therefore been working to promote the protection of civilians, respect for international humanitarian law, training for peacekeeping troops and the provision of humanitarian assistance. Spain had fostered substantive progress on the protection of civilians in armed conflict agenda and the women and peace and security agenda, including through Security Council resolutions. Those and related initiatives were of clear relevance to the children and armed conflict agenda, which was a priority for her country, given the magnitude of the serious violations of children's rights that were taking place in the many active conflicts around the world. Attacks against populations and critical civilian infrastructure were, regrettably, all too common and had a massive direct impact on women and children.

56. Spain was organizing its actions around four priorities: health protection in armed conflict; protection of education; protection of the rights of women and girls and, above all, efforts to combat sexual and gender-based violence; and humanitarian access and the protection of humanitarian workers. One of the areas of focus of the country's four-year humanitarian diplomacy strategy concerned the situation of children in armed conflict and included a commitment to support the mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. Spain would continue promoting those priorities during its presidency of the Council of the European Union, which would begin in July 2023.

57. **Mr. Soda** (International Organization for Migration (IOM)) said that IOM had worked closely with UNHCR in leading the Global Protection Cluster Task Team on Anti-Trafficking, which had carried out a global stocktaking exercise on trafficking in persons during crises. IOM was committed to continuing and strengthening that work and developing more robust measures to counter trafficking. The IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix provided information on key trafficking risks and vulnerability factors, related protection issues and contextual shifts as they arose on the ground. Efforts to improve data and research were a priority for effective prevention and protection. Beyond counter-trafficking, IOM was promoting sector-wide investment in protection management with a specific focus on results-based protection. It was working to enhance its own capacity in that area and that of the protection sector as a whole.

58. **Ms. Wosornu** (Director, Operations and Advocacy Division, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)) said that, in her experience of working on the ground in natural disaster settings and complex emergencies, the need for assistance was greatest among women and children. With regard to the coordination of humanitarian assistance, in 1991, the General Assembly had adopted resolution 46/182 on strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations, and OCHA operated within that framework. Ongoing efforts were made to strengthen coordination and minimize duplication. Measures were taken to ensure that, despite their distinct mandates, humanitarian actors were able to complement one another's work. IASC had been established pursuant to General Assembly resolution 46/182, and its members included a range of humanitarian actors. The humanitarian system was facing major challenges because the need for assistance continued to increase. In recent weeks, she had chaired the Emergency Directors Group, which brought together the leaders of United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations in the humanitarian sector. OCHA regularly briefed the Security Council, which had adopted resolutions on humanitarian issues, for example resolution 2417 (2018). With regard to food security in conflict situations, the level of need was highest among women and children.

59. **Ms. Al-Nashif** (United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)) said that cooperation among humanitarian actors had been strengthened in recent years. Human rights had come to be regarded as central to humanitarian efforts, and the activities of IASC had improved the work of OHCHR on the ground. Following the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine, OHCHR had participated in several missions to the Republic of Moldova. As well as visiting temporary placement shelters and interviewing Ukrainian refugees, the participants had devoted attention to at-risk groups, including persons with disabilities and Roma persons. Transnistria had been a specific focus. The assessments organized by OHCHR in that context had paved the way for the work of UNHCR and other agencies in the region.

60. Member States chose to become parties to international treaties, and there were systems in place to promote compliance. The universal periodic review and capacity-building and technical cooperation activities helped to deepen understanding of obligations and ensure that national laws reflected international standards and that those laws were properly applied. The Human Rights Council had also established various commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions which performed a monitoring function and provided guidance on corrective action. The humanitarian sector needed the support of Member States to address cases in which international standards were not respected.

61. Beginning in 2014, the OHCHR human rights monitoring mission in Ukraine had published reports setting out recommendations for all the parties to the conflict. Their implementation might have mitigated many of the challenges that were now being faced.

62. **Mr. Chaiban** (Deputy Executive Director, Humanitarian Action and Supply Operations, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)) said that the humanitarian system was well coordinated. Under the cluster system, each cluster had a lead agency. UNHCR was the cluster lead for protection, and UNICEF was the cluster lead for nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, and education. The role of the lead agency was to coordinate the cluster with a view to reducing duplication of efforts and promoting coherence and alignment. The cluster system required the continued support of Member States.

63. There was no substitute for government leadership at the country level. Humanitarian actors could not achieve anything at scale, including in situations of humanitarian need, if they had nothing on which to build. For example, humanitarian actors could not work on addressing gender-based violence if case management could not be embedded within national systems. States bore primary responsibility for the situation of their populations.

64. There was a clear need for greater funding. Child protection appeals were significantly underfunded compared to the average for all UNICEF appeals. The level of funding was lower still for appeals relating to gender-based violence. States could assist the humanitarian sector by continuing to support the protection-related agendas that they advanced and sustaining their efforts to find political solutions to conflicts. In the Sudan, for example, UNICEF had experienced supply bottlenecks, visa delays, wide-scale looting and a lack of access to West and Central Darfur. The discussions under way at the United Nations and within the framework of the Jeddah process could remove some of those barriers and thereby ensure that protection needs could be addressed.

65. **Mr. Petersen** (Deputy Executive Director, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)) said that, in its role as lead agency of the subcluster on gender-based violence of the protection cluster, UNFPA had worked with partners in Ukraine to carry out a needs mapping exercise, which had facilitated coordination. The humanitarian system needed more funding in general – flexible and multi-year core funding was helpful, as was non-earmarked funding. Psychosocial support, which was part of the Fund's response to gender-based violence, was high on the agenda for the system as a whole. UNFPA worked with mobile health teams to ensure that initial psychosocial support was available to victims.

66. During a recent trip to Afghanistan, he had visited some of the UNFPA-supported health centres that provided maternal health services and services for victims of gender-based violence. It should not be forgotten that the lives of the women concerned could not be reduced to different sets of needs to be addressed separately by each humanitarian actor. In

response to signs of undernutrition among new mothers, UNFPA had worked together with UNICEF to ensure that midwives were supported by nutrition experts.

67. **Ms. Triggs** (Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)) said that, with the reductions in funding, humanitarian actors could not afford to overlook the need for coordination. UNHCR led the protection cluster, which brought a number of partners together. Coordination was strongest at the local level. That said, all humanitarian actors were ultimately trying to achieve the same objectives.

68. Extreme cases notwithstanding, movements of people were typically mixed in nature. Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrined the right to seek and enjoy asylum, but migrants included both those seeking refuge from conflict and persecution, who had the right to seek asylum, and those seeking opportunities. The Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration reflected a “whole of society” approach. Instead of imposing legal obligations, they embodied the aspiration to share the burdens and responsibilities of refugees. While States bore primary responsibility for protection, particularly for their own nationals who were internally displaced, it was overwhelmingly the case that displaced persons and refugees were hosted by the very poorest countries. The global community had a responsibility to support them.

69. **Ms. Ashing** (Chief Executive Officer, Save the Children International) said that the parties to conflicts did not always understand or accept the role of aid workers, even though such workers were specially protected under international humanitarian law. Attacks against aid workers often went unpunished. Although Security Council resolution 2286 (2016) addressed the protection of medical staff, it was poorly implemented. Member States needed to enforce its provisions and strengthen support for aid workers and international humanitarian law. While the humanitarian sector would continue to respond to immediate needs, primary responsibility lay with States and parties to conflicts. Member States should step up diplomatic efforts, strengthen commitments to preventive measures and champion peacebuilding initiatives. There was an urgent need to close the funding gap. Flexible and multi-year funding was crucial.

70. Aid organizations needed to put children’s rights at the centre of their humanitarian response. It was in situations of lawlessness that women and children were most in need of protection. Their views, experiences and context had to be taken into account in any response. She had witnessed first-hand the incredible resilience of affected communities. In Mozambique, for example, she had met a 14-year-old girl who, as a result of conflict and internal displacement, had become the primary caregiver for her three siblings, yet still dreamed of being able to play a role in solving her country’s problems. While the current global situation was very challenging, resilience was not in short supply. With the right support, those affected could be part of a positive change.

71. **Mr. Cardon** (Chief Protection Officer, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)) said that, under article 1 common to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, States parties were required “to respect and to ensure respect for” international humanitarian law. States should invest in prevention even before a conflict had begun. The role of ICRC was to support those efforts through the promotion of international humanitarian law and the sharing of experience. Secondly, inadequate funding was a constant challenge. In that connection, States needed to understand the difficulty of measuring protection outcomes. Efforts to improve conditions of detention, for example, could not be measured in the same way as the distribution of food. Third, States and parties to conflicts should ensure that those involved in the protection of civilians had the necessary access to the civilians.

The meeting rose at 12.25 p.m.