



# 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 728th meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Monday, 5 October 2020, at 9 a.m.

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

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*The meeting was called to order at 9.05 a.m.*

### **Opening of the session**

1. **The Chair** declared open the seventy-first session of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He said that he wished to welcome all participants, in particular the delegations of Burkina Faso, Iceland, Mali and Malta, the newest members of the Executive Committee. The participation of those new members would further enrich the Executive Committee's discussions and help it to provide judicious advice and support to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

2. There were more than 79.5 million displaced persons around the world; of those, over 30 million were children. In 2019 alone, an estimated 11 million persons had been displaced. Although protection efforts had been complicated by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, vital support had nevertheless been provided under the global compact on refugees. He encouraged States and other stakeholders to keep up the momentum, including by honouring the commitments made at the Global Refugee Forum in 2019.

### **Adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters (A/AC.96/LXXI/1)**

3. *The agenda was adopted.*

4. **The Chair**, after outlining the speaking arrangements for the general debate, said that he wished to emphasize the purely humanitarian and non-political nature of the Executive Committee's discussions.

5. *A short film entitled We do not falter: UNHCR operations in the time of COVID-19 was projected.*

6. **The Chair** said that it was his pleasure to introduce Ms. Fore, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), who had been instrumental in driving forward a transformative partnership between UNICEF and UNHCR in order to secure refugee children a fair deal in life.

7. **Ms. Fore** (Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund), speaking via video link, said that few people were as inspiring as people on the move, who showed strength and hope, despite all they had endured. During a visit to Lebanon with the High Commissioner two years previously, she had met many remarkable young people on the move, whose hopes and dreams had remained undimmed by the violence, poverty and loss that they had suffered. Millions of refugee children around the world were being denied their right to develop and prosper. One third of refugee children were not enrolled in school. In most refugee settings, fewer than half the households had a toilet and each water tap was shared by over 350 people. The COVID-19 pandemic was an additional challenge, threatening not only the health and survival of refugees but also their protection, education and economic security. Never had it been more important for UNICEF and UNHCR to join forces. The two agencies were working together to deliver life-saving supplies and services, to support the provision of online education and to build capacities at all levels of government. They were using their expertise and their strong relationships with Governments in order to ensure that refugee children received the same treatment as other children.

8. At the Global Refugee Forum, the two agencies had committed to redoubling their efforts. They had developed a blueprint for joint action in order to help countries to live up to their pledge to leave no one behind. The blueprint would initially be implemented in a group of 11 countries, before being evaluated, refined and rolled out more widely. The process was an opportunity for the agencies to share processes and resources in order to improve the agility and cost efficiency of the United Nations. The two agencies also needed to reach out to other stakeholders, such as businesses and civil society organizations, who were a source of ideas and innovation, as well as funding. Together, they were aiming to keep the world's focus on the needs of refugees, both during the pandemic and in the long term.

**Statement by the High Commissioner**

9. **Mr. Grandi** (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), recalling the unprecedented support shown for refugees and their host communities by Governments, development institutions, the private sector and civil society during the Global Refugee Forum, said that solidarity of that kind was needed now more than ever, as the COVID-19 pandemic had had a dramatic impact on refugees, displaced persons and stateless persons. The seventy-first session was an opportunity to reflect on the work of UNHCR through the prism of the pandemic. Although UNHCR was used to emergencies, responding to the pandemic had been a challenge unlike any other, owing to the scale of the crisis and the necessary restrictions on movement. Nevertheless, the agency had stayed and delivered: it had, for example, stepped up health, water and sanitation responses, supported refugee education and created less congested areas of shelter. Major outbreaks in large refugee settings had so far been prevented, but UNHCR could not let its guard down.

10. Meanwhile, the pandemic had not stopped wars: conflict, human rights violations and political crises had pushed the number of forcibly displaced persons up to almost 80 million. One of the most worrying situations was in the central Sahel region, where more than 600,000 persons had been forced from their homes in the previous year alone. It was important to restore a sense of urgency in the Sahel response and to support the affected States through governance reforms, investment and humanitarian action. UNHCR and other agencies had significantly expanded their response, but they needed financial support. The upcoming pledging conference would be an opportunity for donors to demonstrate their commitment before it was too late. The escalation of tensions and military action between Armenia and Azerbaijan was another source of concern; he joined the Secretary-General and others in calling for dialogue to resume in order to prevent further displacement. Clashes between non-State armed groups and government forces in Mozambique had driven some 300,000 persons from their homes, while the conflict in Yemen had displaced more than 140,000 persons in 2020 alone.

11. Governments around the world had taken tough measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. He called on States to ensure that all restrictions were temporary, non-discriminatory and in line with their international human rights obligations. Border closures must not violate the principle of non-refoulement. UNHCR could help States to find practical solutions for managing their borders while upholding their legal obligations. Over 110 States had found ways to keep their asylum systems operating while taking the necessary health precautions. UNHCR had also worked with States to ensure refugee protection when large influxes occurred; in Uganda, for example, measures had been taken so that new arrivals could undergo an isolation period before entering refugee settlements.

12. Although human displacement mainly affected countries with limited resources, some refugees had continued to move towards the global North, often taking dangerous routes that exposed them to traffickers and criminal gangs. The solution was not to close the door. Xenophobic reactions should not be allowed to shape responses to challenges that were complex but manageable. Some of the world's richest countries were considering externalizing asylum beyond their borders in a manner that would violate international law, put lives at risk and set a dangerous precedent. Mothers and children fleeing gang violence in northern Central America had been pushed back, while boats loaded with Rohingya refugees had been turned away from port after port in South-East Asia. A few weeks previously, in the Mediterranean, a boat carrying just 27 people had been unable to dock for over a month, as States had failed to live up to their responsibilities.

13. People would continue to flee unless the root causes of their flight were addressed. He therefore welcomed the new pact on migration and asylum that had been proposed by the European Commission. It was a unique opportunity to determine how responsibilities would be shared along all external European Union borders in a spirit of solidarity and with due respect for legal obligations. Similarly, the issue of the prompt and safe return of persons who were found not to be in need of international protection must be dealt with more effectively; failure to do so would continue to undermine trust in the institution of asylum.

14. COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns had dramatically reduced the income of refugees, rapidly exhausted their limited savings and increased food insecurity. Demands for assistance

had grown everywhere. The fallout particularly affected women and girls, with reports of increasing gender-based and domestic violence, forced marriage and exploitation. Poverty forced other difficult decisions. For instance, more than 100,000 Venezuelans were estimated to have returned to their country because livelihoods in host countries had been destroyed by lockdowns. Substantial resources had been pledged at the recent International Donors Conference in Solidarity with Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants. That support was now more urgent than ever.

15. However, humanitarian assistance alone was insufficient as a response to the poverty pandemic emerging from the health crisis. Accordingly, UNHCR continued to insist on the inclusion of refugees and internally displaced persons in national responses until they could return to their places of origin. Those efforts should not ignore stateless persons, and he encouraged all those who had made pledges at the high-level segment on statelessness in 2019 to fulfil their commitments. States had generally included refugees in their response to the health aspects of the pandemic, a practice that must continue into the next, complex phases of the public health response, namely systematic testing and vaccination.

16. Inclusion must also apply to social services, safety nets and measures to counter food insecurity, which were crucial for refugees, their hosts and the stability of regions with large displaced populations. The presence of large refugee populations must be a serious consideration when sizeable fiscal stimulus packages were rolled out for host countries. To that end, much progress had been achieved in the past year in deepening the necessary partnerships, including with the International Monetary Fund.

17. In response to the pandemic, the World Bank had made \$1 billion from the International Development Association refugee window available on request to refugee-hosting countries in the form of grants rather than loans. The African Development Bank had contributed over \$20 million towards the response to forced displacement in the central Sahel. The Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank had together pledged \$2 billion in support for Venezuelan refugees and their host communities. Those were key efforts that must be expanded and strengthened.

18. The pandemic had prompted refugees and displaced people to make the difficult decision to go home before the stage at which UNHCR would promote or even facilitate repatriation. For example, during a recent visit to Syria, he had observed that conditions remained harsh and would worsen during the winter. Shelters were being rehabilitated, but destruction was widespread in some areas and there was little access to electricity, clean water, health services or education. Security remained critical in the north-west and fragile in the north-east. It would therefore be premature to promote repatriation, but some Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons were choosing to return, so their humanitarian needs upon return must be met. Nevertheless, the international community must imperatively stay the course in supporting the almost 6 million Syrian refugees and their hosts in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq.

19. Global uncertainty should not deter efforts to seek solutions to forced displacement. The three regional platforms established at the Global Refugee Forum offered valuable tools, and UNHCR looked forward to the recommendations of the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement.

20. He welcomed the very recent Juba peace agreement. It was positive that the Governments of the Sudan and South Sudan had agreed to pursue comprehensive solutions for displaced populations. UNHCR would work with both States to develop an ambitious yet realistic regional plan. In the meantime, support, including for solutions for internally displaced persons and refugees, had been stepped up in the two countries, thanks in part to a generous contribution from the Central Emergency Response Fund.

21. He encouraged Bangladesh and Myanmar to facilitate more exchanges, so that refugees were aware of the conditions in their villages of origin and were assured of being able to return there. Along with the United Nations Development Programme, UNHCR had renewed its memorandum of understanding with the Government of Myanmar for one year. Work on 75 of 115 quick-impact projects in Rakhine State was under way, but the players must move faster. He welcomed the decision by Bangladesh to facilitate the formal education of Rohingya refugee children, though implementation had been delayed because of the

pandemic. He thanked the United States of America, the United Kingdom and the European Union for co-hosting a pledging conference in support of Rohingya refugees in late October 2020.

22. Most refugees preferred to return home, but some simply could not. Integration in countries of asylum, though a difficult option in many places, should be pursued with adequate resources and innovative strategies. Resettlement in third countries remained a vital alternative, at least for the most vulnerable, and he was deeply disappointed with the overall levels of available resettlement places. Fewer than 64,000 refugees had been resettled in 2019, or less than 0.5 per cent of the world's refugees. Travel restrictions during the pandemic had seriously affected resettlement. Nevertheless, he appreciated that some countries had kept an open door for emergency cases, thus saving hundreds of lives. He was especially grateful to Canada, the largest resettlement country in 2019 and a champion of innovative approaches. However, it was not enough, and he appealed to Governments to do more to help resettle the most urgent cases. In 2019, UNHCR had launched a three-year strategy, generating nearly 80 pledges at the Global Refugee Forum.

23. One key lesson learned from the pandemic was the importance of better risk forecasts, not only for health threats but also the threat that loomed large over everyone: the climate emergency. In 2019, he had updated the Executive Committee on the climate action undertaken by UNHCR. Since then, it had launched a sustainable energy strategy and a clean energy challenge to provide access to affordable, reliable and clean energy to displaced person settlements by 2030. Climate-induced displacement would continue to increase. The question was how to prevent, mitigate and prepare for it. For example, by harnessing the power of artificial intelligence and predictive analytics, UNHCR was working with 20 organizations to forecast such displacement in the central Sahel, thus enabling targeted responses before displacement occurred.

24. Regarding the UNHCR reform undertaken in 2016, moving the regional bureaux from Geneva had proved useful in the COVID-19 response. The pandemic had provided a stress test for regionalization and decentralization from which valuable lessons for improvement had been drawn. The new results-based management tool was a key priority, allowing UNHCR to better measure how it was contributing to improving lives.

25. However, reforms would not be complete without focusing more urgently on the simplification of business processes, such as making transactions with non-governmental partners speedier and more flexible. Furthermore, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNHCR was committed to achieving better results for people and the planet through more responsive delivery. Its joint leadership of the Business Innovations Group was one contribution to that collective effort.

26. In spite of the challenges brought by 2020, there had been an extraordinary outpouring of solidarity from and between refugees and their hosts and from civil society, religious leaders, faith-based organizations and the private sector, as well as a level of cooperation within the humanitarian system that he had rarely seen. Donors continued to contribute generously to its programmes. Income had been \$4.2 billion in 2019, and 52 per cent of the annual budget had been covered so far in 2020. The agency was also very grateful for the nearly \$460 million received so far in response to its COVID-19 appeal. He particularly wished to thank the United States of America, whose contribution was its most substantial in a long history of generous support. He also thanked the European Commission and Germany for their extraordinary funding. He also wished to mention the donors that had provided the largest unearmarked contributions, namely Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark, the United Kingdom and, significantly, the Spanish Committee for UNHCR.

27. Lastly, he wished to touch on the debate over racism, discrimination and the need for more equality. The killing of George Floyd had sparked outrage and had compelled institutions and individuals not only to look at discrimination and racism as something coming from outside but also to look at the phenomena from within themselves. Thus, he had launched an internal process of reflection that had led to sometimes difficult but necessary discussions. A global advisory group on inclusion and diversity would shortly be established, and an independent race equity and equality review had been commissioned and would make recommendations in the first half of 2021.

28. Those who worked with refugees and displaced and stateless people knew that it was their courage and resilience that drove the dedication of UNHCR staff. So, as UNHCR grappled with the pandemic, the climate emergency and unrelenting conflict, it drew from refugees much strength. Even in what was a bleak year, they inspired hope, which had been reflected at the Global Refugee Forum in 2019. Such strength and hope had proved that, by working together, a difference could be made.

### General debate

29. **Mr. Stevens** (Observer for the European Union), speaking also on behalf of the candidate countries Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia; the stabilization and association process country Bosnia and Herzegovina; and, in addition, Armenia and Georgia, said that the European Union had been at the forefront of the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the “Team Europe” approach, it had mobilized a package of more than €36 billion to address the emergency response and humanitarian needs, strengthen health, water, sanitation and nutrition systems and mitigate the economic and social impacts of the pandemic worldwide. Refugees, forcibly displaced persons and other persons of concern to UNHCR were among those who felt the effects of the crisis most acutely and risked being left even further behind. Supporting them and their host communities through inclusive approaches wherever possible had been part of the European Union’s global response.

30. Saving lives, supporting those in need of international protection while ensuring the effective return of those ineligible for it, and combating migrant smuggling and human trafficking, were all aspects of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum proposed by the European Commission in September. Keeping in mind the need to safeguard the fundamental right to seek asylum and comply with European Union acquis, the European Union reiterated the need to prevent abuses of its asylum system. It stood by its responsibilities as a global actor, including through active engagement in multilateralism and with the United Nations family, and would continue to support refugees, displaced persons and their host communities as the leading provider of humanitarian and development assistance.

31. The fire at the Moria reception centre on the island of Lesbos, Greece, was a stark reminder that long-term, sustainable solutions were needed. The first priority, however, had been to ensure shelter, safety and dignity for the people affected. Voluntary relocation efforts were also well under way through responsibility-sharing among a number of member States. The European Commission was working on a plan with the Greek authorities to build a new reception and identification centre on Lesbos and would establish a dedicated task force to help improve the situation on the Greek islands in a durable way.

32. While the last six months had been overshadowed by the coronavirus crisis, the international community must not lose sight of earlier achievements. The first Global Refugee Forum in December 2019 had been a historic step and, although the pandemic had delayed implementation of some of the pledges, it had clearly demonstrated how important solidarity and burden-sharing were to an effective global response.

33. The European Union supported the High Commissioner’s internal reform initiative, including the decentralization process, the increased emphasis on fostering development-focused approaches and on linking humanitarian and development work, and the steps to give a greater voice to displaced persons and their host communities. The European Union encouraged UNHCR to continue pursuing strong oversight, transparency and a collaborative approach.

34. **Mr. Litim** (Algeria), speaking on behalf of the African Group, said that the Group thanked UNHCR for its tireless efforts to respond to the needs of the growing number of refugees and other persons of concern across the world and assist displaced persons affected by the recent devastating floods in the Sudan and the Sahel region.

35. The Group called on UNHCR to continue working with States and partners to ensure that refugees and other persons of concern had free access to basic services and treatment. It was particularly vital to strengthen the humanitarian capacity of African countries, which, despite the additional burden currently weighing on their economies, continued to show

solidarity towards forcibly displaced persons in keeping with the African tradition of hospitality and generosity.

36. Although the COVID-19 pandemic had demonstrated the importance of the global compact on refugees, there was also an urgent need to address the root causes of forced displacement through comprehensive, durable and inclusive solutions.

37. As voluntary repatriation remained the preferred durable solution for refugee situations, the Group was concerned by the 46 per cent decrease in voluntary repatriation in 2019. It nonetheless commended UNHCR for its engagement with countries of origin to support conditions for safe, dignified and sustainable return and for adopting the Three-Year Strategy on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways. In particular, it welcomed the tripartite agreements on voluntary repatriation signed in 2019 with a number of African countries.

38. Despite the strong political commitment of African countries to increasing opportunities for durable solutions for forcibly displaced persons, the current level of funding for UNHCR activities in Africa was not commensurate with the number of persons of concern in that region. The Group was deeply concerned at the serious impact of underfunding in 2019 on the delivery of protection and assistance programmes in many African countries and reiterated its appeal to the international community to secure adequate and flexible funding for UNHCR operations in Africa. It further appealed to the international community to increase unearmarked funds with a view to fully covering the 2020–2021 biennial programme budgets.

39. **Mr. Sadiqov** (Azerbaijan), speaking on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, said that the Movement was deeply concerned at the rising number of refugees, an issue it had addressed at a summit in Baku in 2019, where Heads of State and Government had examined various specific cases of conflict and displacement around the world.

40. A COVID-19 task force had been established at the summit of the Non-Aligned Movement held in May 2020 to create a database of the basic humanitarian and medical needs of member States, including those stemming from the pandemic, which would then be submitted to donor countries, international humanitarian organizations and other such entities. Any assistance received would also go towards helping those most vulnerable, chiefly refugees and their host communities.

41. Refugees remained at the core of the work of UNHCR, but the Non-Aligned Movement also recognized its engagement and assistance for the protection of internally displaced persons. The Movement reaffirmed that States bore the primary responsibility to promote durable solutions for internally displaced persons in situations of armed conflict, including their voluntary, safe and dignified return, and to ensure respect for their human rights.

42. **Mr. Dačić** (Serbia), speaking via video link, said that, as the COVID-19 pandemic had aggravated the hardships faced by displaced persons, the work of UNHCR had become even more important. Regrettably, the numbers of both forcibly displaced persons and migrants had increased.

43. He wished to thank all those who had contributed to the Regional Housing Programme to find durable solutions for displaced persons in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Thanks to the joint efforts undertaken, 5,143 families in Serbia had been provided housing thus far.

44. In addition to refugees from the former Yugoslavia, there were also approximately 200,000 internally displaced persons from Kosovo and Metohija in Serbia. Twenty-one years after their displacement, the conditions for their sustainable return had still not been created, resulting in one of longest-lasting internal displacements in Europe. The rate of return for those persons was 1.9 per cent, the lowest in the world. It was high time for concrete measures to be taken to help them. The models and tools developed under the Regional Housing Programme to resolve protracted refugee situations could be modified and applied to the situation of protracted displacement in Serbia. Government programmes were already in place to assist internally displaced persons and were funded under the State budget and with donations and European Union pre-accession funds.

45. **Mr. Gulaid** (Somalia), in a pre-recorded video statement, said that his country had faced multiple concurrent crises, such as locust infestations and frequent droughts brought on by climate change that had led to large-scale displacement. As a result, the country remained in one of the world's most protracted humanitarian crises, despite progress made in the areas of peace, security and sustainable development. The Government remained committed to protecting the rights of the displaced and had adopted guidelines and policies on matters such as land distribution for eligible refugee returnees and internally displaced persons, social protection and disaster management. It had signed the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa in November 2019 and had deposited it in March 2020. It was now working to incorporate the provisions of the Convention into domestic legislation.

46. Efforts to address displacement in Somalia and elsewhere should move away from the traditional focus on short-term protection objectives and towards a long-term, integrated, sustainable development approach that would get to the root causes of displacement. The Government had applied that approach in its assessment of the root causes of the drought of 2016 and 2017, which had led to the development of a recovery and resilience framework. Somalia called for enhanced support for that framework, for climate change adaptation actions and for investment in durable solutions.

47. **Mr. Lauber** (Switzerland) said that the COVID-19 pandemic had revealed the importance of protection in crisis situations. UNHCR staff who found their movements restricted because of the pandemic had adopted innovative solutions in order to reach the most vulnerable, giving a central role to the refugees themselves and to local partners. Those solutions should continue to be applied even after the pandemic. Although the temporary closure of borders to halt the pandemic had significantly affected resettlement, Switzerland, a co-chair of the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement, was pleased to announce that it had resumed resettling refugees.

48. With migration routes becoming increasingly dangerous, Switzerland was working with the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Organization for Migration and other States and partners to draft standards and develop cooperation mechanisms to identify persons who went missing along the routes and communicate with their families. The country had made progress on its commitment, undertaken at the Global Refugee Forum, to create a hub on education in emergencies, in Geneva, that would promote a dialogue between universities, international agencies, States and civil society. In connection with its commitment on refugee inclusion, Switzerland was helping young refugees to participate in the drafting of national policies to ensure that their needs and views were taken into account. Through the Global Youth Advisory Council, the young refugees had raised donors' awareness of their needs during the pandemic.

49. **Ms. Khamisa Wani** (Observer for South Sudan) said that the conflict that had begun in South Sudan in December 2013 had led to 1.6 million people becoming internally displaced and to 2 million becoming refugees in neighbouring countries. The Government was committed to bringing lasting peace to the country and was working to implement the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, signed on 12 September 2018. Recent unprecedented levels of flooding had also displaced over 600,000 persons, and the worst still lay ahead, with more displacement, loss of livestock and spread of disease expected.

50. Despite those challenges, South Sudan was committed to delivering on its pledge to find durable solutions for refugees. The country hosted over 300,000 refugees from neighbouring countries and issued identity cards, travel documents and birth certificates to refugees. Refugees were also granted complete freedom of movement, lived in safe and secure accommodation and had access to a free primary and secondary school education. To encourage self-reliance, the Government allocated agricultural land to refugees on a temporary basis and authorized them to work.

51. The progress already made by the Government in implementing the peace process had led to the spontaneous return of some 330,000 South Sudanese refugees. As the voluntary return of many more was expected, the country needed support from UNHCR and the international community to implement the comprehensive refugee response framework.

Humanitarian agencies had been granted access to all areas of the country, although infrastructure remained a challenge.

52. South Sudan effectively and consistently implemented the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and, despite the short-term official closure of the country's borders to curb the spread of COVID-19, the Government's national COVID-19 response plan had designated key border entry points for use by asylum seekers and refugees. She wished to thank UNHCR, humanitarian agencies and partners for their support in ensuring the seamless provision of services, and the neighbouring countries of Uganda, Kenya, the Sudan, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic for hosting large numbers of South Sudanese citizens.

53. **Mr. Coveny** (Ireland), speaking via video link, said that the fact that several UNHCR staff members had lost their lives to COVID-19 while working with families who had lost their homes and livelihoods was testament to the extraordinary challenges facing humanitarian workers in 2020. Because refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR were among the most vulnerable to the pandemic, Ireland had provided 3 million euros in additional unearmarked support to the agency's COVID-19 response. The country's financial support to UNHCR, at its highest level in more than a decade, was driven by its confidence in the agency.

54. At the Global Refugee Forum, Ireland had committed to resettling 2,900 refugees over the following four years. It would resettle an additional 50 persons from the Moria camp in Greece, which had recently suffered a fire. The country had also committed to rolling out a national community sponsorship scheme where Irish families and communities would come together in solidarity with refugees and host countries worldwide and play a role in burden- and responsibility-sharing. Although the pandemic had hindered the scheme and the country's regular resettlement programme, he wished to reassert his country's commitment to resettlement and acknowledge the generosity of countries that hosted large numbers of refugees despite their own development challenges.

55. As co-chair of the Priority Situations Core Group, Ireland advocated thinking globally and acting locally. The current global public health crisis had led to a better understanding of the message that no one was safe until everybody was safe. As a recently elected member of the Security Council, Ireland would focus on peacebuilding, conflict prevention and accountability, which were of vital importance for displaced persons, and take a principled approach to the deeply interconnected root causes of displacement, including armed conflict, political instability and climate change. He wished to thank UNHCR staff. Humanitarian workers embodied the best of human endeavour.

56. **Mr. Gakosso** (Congo) said that his Government was grateful to UNHCR for the assistance it provided to the refugees who had found protection in the Congo. The COVID-19 pandemic had taken a toll on economies worldwide and caused the situation of the 43,000 refugees in the country to deteriorate considerably. Despite the difficult context, the Government was committed to assisting the refugees. It had held sessions on eligibility and applying for refugee status, the parliament had adopted a law establishing the right to asylum and refugee status and the Council of Ministers had adopted a decree introducing a Convention travel document for refugees. Those steps were in line with recommendations of the Global Refugee Forum held in December 2019 and demonstrated his country's commitment to strengthening refugee protection mechanisms.

57. With respect to statelessness, his Government adhered to its international commitments. It had thus far issued more than 1,925 birth certificates to refugees born in the Congo. Decrees had also been adopted on the ratification of the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. While he commended UNHCR for its efforts to find durable solutions and was grateful to donor countries and other humanitarian actors, the pandemic had placed a financial burden on the country's fragile economy. He therefore could not but appeal to the generosity of donors and to the multidimensional assistance of the United Nations to support his country's efforts to support refugees.

58. **Mr. López Chávarri** (Peru), in a pre-recorded video statement, said that, in numerical terms, the humanitarian crisis in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela was the second largest

in the world. Almost a fifth of the 5 million people who had fled that country in recent years had entered Peru. Of those, around half had requested refugee status, making Peru the country that had received the highest number of applications for refugee status from Venezuelan nationals in the world. As the national capacities of host countries were insufficient to cope with the scale of the crisis, it was essential for the international community to show solidarity with them. In that regard, it was necessary to ensure that resources, including non-reimbursable funds, were distributed in a timely and effective manner and in accordance with the needs of host countries.

59. **Mr. Eheth** (Cameroon) said that, in Cameroon, the COVID-19 pandemic had affected victims of forced displacement, refugees and the communities that were hosting them. As soon as the first case had appeared, the Government had taken urgent measures to limit the spread of the virus and ensure that free health care was provided to persons who had contracted the disease, irrespective of their status.

60. The pandemic had had a serious impact on the global economy as a whole and on donor countries in particular, which had considerably reduced their contributions to humanitarian agencies. The World Food Programme had recently announced that, owing to the lack of funds, it would be reducing the food assistance granted to around 200,000 refugees living in rural areas in Cameroon, which would further increase the burden on the Government. Cameroon was currently home to around 430,000 refugees and asylum seekers from the Central African Republic, Nigeria and a number of other countries. The majority of those persons were living in host communities while others were living in camps, where they benefited from sanitation, education and health-care facilities provided by the Government, UNHCR and humanitarian organizations. The additional strain placed on host countries by the COVID-19 pandemic had increased the need for international solidarity and cooperation, without which it would not be possible to resolve the refugee crisis. In view of that situation, the Government of Cameroon called on the international community to provide additional emergency funding to support refugees.

61. **Mr. Zalkaliani** (Georgia), in a pre-recorded video statement, said that the COVID-19 pandemic had had a disproportionate effect on displaced persons, the majority of whom had already been living in vulnerable situations. The Government of Georgia was particularly grateful to UNHCR for the valuable support that it had given to vulnerable households in the occupied territories of Georgia before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. The Government cooperated closely with UNHCR to ensure that asylum applications were processed efficiently and that socioeconomic assistance was provided to persons who required it. Despite the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government was making considerable efforts to protect forcibly displaced persons and reduce the number of stateless persons residing in Georgia.

62. Over the past 30 years, hundreds of thousands of Georgian nationals had been forcibly removed from their homes in the Russian-occupied territories. While the Government continued to promote their socioeconomic integration and improve their living conditions, it was unable to extend its protection to persons living in the occupied territories and the adjacent regions, who were stripped of their rights to freedom of movement, health and property and of the right to be educated in their native language. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, 15 persons had died because the occupying authorities had blocked access to emergency medical care. Against that backdrop, the Government wished to express its appreciation for the efforts made by UNHCR to meet the humanitarian needs of persons affected by the conflict.

63. **Mr. Radman** (Croatia), in a pre-recorded video statement, said that, during the Croatian presidency of the European Union, the European Union had engaged in one of the greatest acts of solidarity in its history, that is, the establishment of the “Team Europe” package to provide financial support to partner countries in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences.

64. The Government of Croatia was committed to safe, well-managed migration and to saving lives and supporting those in need of international protection. As the European Union member State with the longest external border with non-member States, Croatia faced a number of challenges in protecting its territory from illegal immigration. In order to ensure

that international human rights standards were upheld, the Government had established several mechanisms for monitoring the conduct of the Croatian border police towards migrants. In cooperation with the European Commission, it had also launched an independent monitoring mechanism that all European Union member States would be required to implement. Croatian police officers also received training on the fundamental rights of migrants and persons in need of international protection.

65. The Government was completing arrangements to receive 12 girls from the Moria refugee camp in Greece. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the Government had taken steps to prevent the spread of the virus in migrant centres and detention centres. To date, not a single person in those centres had shown any symptoms of COVID-19. All applicants for international protection benefited from ongoing medical supervision.

66. **Mr. Bainimarama** (Fiji), in a pre-recorded video statement, said that the COVID-19 pandemic had increased the financial burden on Pacific small island developing States, which had already been facing the challenge of having to strengthen their infrastructure and relocate entire communities to higher ground to escape rising sea levels. Despite the difficulties, regional efforts were being complemented by the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, which had allocated seed funding for a project aimed at enhancing the protection and empowerment of migrants and communities affected by climate change and disasters in the region. That project would enable Governments in the Pacific region to work together to address the multifaceted challenges associated with climate change, disaster-related migration, displacement and planned relocation in the region.

67. The Government of Fiji had developed comprehensive national guidelines on relocation and displacement to ensure that fair and consistent support was provided to persons displaced by natural disasters. It was also working with the Operational Satellite Applications Programme of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research in order to strengthen its ability to forecast the effects of climate change. Lessons had been learned from the eight tropical cyclones that had struck Fiji in recent years. The Government was investing in resilient infrastructure and was taking steps to ensure that appropriate mechanisms were in place to enable all levels of society to recover from natural disasters and adapt to climate change.

68. **Mr. Grandi** (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) said that he welcomed the reference made to the issue of forecasting population displacement and wished to draw attention to the work on forecasting that UNHCR was carrying out in the Horn of Africa, Bangladesh and parts of the Sahel. It was important to note that both internal and cross-border displacement were caused by events related to climate change.

69. In order to address the issue of migration from sub-Saharan Africa through North Africa and into Europe, it would be necessary for African countries to cooperate not only with each other but also with European countries. It was important to ensure that refugee operations in Africa were properly financed and, in that regard, he highlighted the key role played by UNHCR in arranging funding for such operations in recent years.

70. He commended the Governments of the Sudan and South Sudan for including solutions for refugees and displaced persons in their peacebuilding efforts. He also thanked the Republic of the Congo for drawing attention to the issue of statelessness and Cameroon for including refugees in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. He welcomed the ratification by Somalia of the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa.

71. He also welcomed the establishment of the European Commission's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which represented an opportunity for the Commission to take an entirely fresh approach to the issue of migration. With regard to the question of migration into Croatia, it was important to note that controlling borders was not incompatible with providing protection for refugees.

72. Given that political solutions would need to be found for the unresolved issues surrounding displacement in the Western Balkans, he encouraged stakeholders in the region to accelerate their political dialogue. For its part, UNHCR would continue to work on strengthening asylum systems, managing populations on the move and providing humanitarian assistance. Lastly, he wished to thank Switzerland for hosting the meeting in difficult circumstances.

*The meeting rose at noon.*