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Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Sixty-fourth session

Summary record of the 672nd meeting

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Thursday, 3 October 2013, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Arango Olmos (Colombia)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

General debate (continued)

1. **The Chairperson**, summing up the general debate, drew attention to the importance that Committee members and UNHCR attached to international solidarity and burden-sharing. The issue had been brought home with particular force by the Syrian refugee crisis. The Office had undertaken efforts to: strengthen its emergency response capacity; improve children's education; mainstream age, gender and diversity; promote birth registration; and tackle gender-based violence. Management systems had also undergone welcome reform. Members had encouraged the Office to build on strategic partnerships with other agencies. Many had highlighted the importance of: resettlement and voluntary repatriation as durable solutions; synergies between humanitarian responses and long-term development aid; and the promotion of self-reliance among refugee populations from the outset of emergencies. An overview of their initiatives designed to assist UNHCR and people of concern had been provided. The initiatives included the development of a European Union common European asylum system, a regional housing programme in the Balkans and the "Out of Camp" policy implemented by Ethiopia. The need for more unearmarked funding had also been emphasized.

Consideration of reports on the work of the Standing Committee

(a) International protection (A/AC.96/1121, 1122, 1123, 1129 and 1131)

2. **Mr. Türk** (Director of International Protection, UNHCR), introducing the international protection segment of the session, said that refugees, stateless persons, IDPs and other persons of concern must be guaranteed the broadest possible array of human rights and fundamental freedoms. They must be supported in the areas of access to justice, registration and documentation, determination of asylum requests, reunification of children with their families, voluntary repatriation, resettlement, and advocacy for those who were stateless. UNHCR must intercede on behalf of persons of concern held in detention or exposed to the possibility of refoulement. The notion of protection should be mainstreamed into all of the Office's initiatives.

3. The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol had been supplemented with various tools throughout the years, the note on international protection (A/AC.96/1122) being one of them. To help deal with mixed migration flows, UNHCR worked with Governments to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers were not caught up in controls of persons migrating for other reasons. The protection of refugees and asylum seekers needed to be balanced with legitimate concerns about border security, and more practical arrangements were needed to facilitate the rescue of asylum seekers and refugees in distress at sea.

4. More than 80 per cent of persons of concern to UNHCR had fled armed conflict, and population displacement had increasingly become an objective of warring parties. A 2012 study had revealed that most individuals or groups fled from their homes on account of a well-founded fear of persecution. In order to assist decision makers involved in refugee status determination procedures, UNHCR would issue guidelines by the end of 2013 on the application of the 1951 Convention.

5. UNHCR conducted refugee status determination in more than 60 countries and in 2012 had been solely responsible for such procedures in 50 of them. The overarching goal for UNHCR is to have States take ownership of those procedures. States should also ensure that conditions in reception centres for asylum seekers were adequate; there was a growing tendency to hold asylum seekers in detention, often in poor conditions. UNHCR was preparing a global strategy to provide Governments with advice on alternatives to

detention. One goal was to ensure that no children seeking asylum should be held in detention anywhere in the world by 2018.

6. UNHCR had adopted an age, gender and diversity approach and attached critical importance to protecting children and survivors of gender-based violence and to providing education. Indeed, education funding was its fourth largest budget item. Children who spent time in school were kept safe from violence, child labour or recruitment by armed groups. They were also less likely to marry early. UNHCR accorded high priority to preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence against persons of concern. The “Safe from the Start” initiative was a welcome contribution in that regard.

7. Cessation of refugee status was an important step towards return but local integration was often preferable. Zambia, for instance, was currently integrating 10,000 Angolan refugees. The number of refugees being permanently resettled was rising, and Switzerland had recently joined a group of 27 countries that had a regular resettlement programme. UNHCR was grateful to those countries that had announced an increase in their resettlement quotas for 2014. UNHCR was planning to hold a global forum on statelessness in September 2014, and its objective was to eliminate statelessness within the coming 10 years.

8. **Mr. Hilale** (Morocco) said that more equitable burden-sharing and flexible legislation were keys to dealing with refugee flows. Morocco had recently established a new asylum system and an action plan would be developed in line with modern standards. The authorities in Morocco had begun to distribute identity cards to persons with refugee status.

9. **Ms. Pollack** (United States of America) said that the Syrian crisis highlighted several international protection challenges. The principle of non-refoulement must be upheld and borders kept open in crisis situations. Almost half of the world’s refugees were children. The United States supported the UNHCR Framework for the Protection of Children and its 2012–2016 Education Strategy. Efforts to protect the best interests of children, especially those who were separated from their families or unaccompanied, must be stepped up. Meeting the needs of survivors of gender-based violence was another key concern. The “Safe from the Start” initiative was designed to intervene where gender-based violence took place, to mitigate the risks of such violence and to increase accountability. There was a pressing need for greater investment in refugee protection and assistance outside camps.

10. **Mr. Krishnamra** (Thailand) said that his country would continue to care for the refugees from Myanmar that it was hosting until they could return home. To date, around 1,400 persons requiring protection had been fast-tracked for resettlement in third countries. States that offered resettlement should improve their clearance and related procedures. Thailand was working with UNHCR to close gaps between its nationality laws and other legislation in order to facilitate assessments of the status of stateless people. Around 7,600 children born of displaced parents and other persons of concern in Thailand had been issued with birth certificates. A new subcategory of people in transit whose children had been granted nationality but who did not qualify for it themselves should be established. Thailand wished to see UNHCR working more actively in countries of origin.

11. **Ms. Lindblad** (Sweden) said that her country expected to have received around 45,000 asylum applications by the end of 2013. To date, 9,000 applications had been filed by Syrian nationals. Syrian refugees arriving in Swedish territory would be granted permanent residence, regardless of their immigration status. The resettlement quota for refugees in Sweden had been set at 1,900 annually. It was one of the highest in Europe and was intended to address protracted refugee situations. It had been decided to allocate 400 resettlement places to Syrian refugees. Sweden supported efforts by UNHCR to deal with

security risks in refugee camps, to promote community-based protection and to address gender-based violence.

12. **Ms. Golberg** (Canada), noting the efforts by UNHCR to leverage development partnerships and funds in support of solutions and self-sufficiency programmes, said that solutions needed to be adequately resourced and to uphold the human rights of all individuals. Sexual violence against displaced women and girls remained a concern, as did persecution on the basis of sexual orientation or religious beliefs. Those issues should be taken into account in the operational responses of UNHCR and other United Nations agencies. Canada welcomed the innovative ways in which UNHCR was assisting non-camp populations and the follow-up given to the internal review on United Nations action in Sri Lanka. Any ensuing action plan should provide meaningful protection for the populations of concern.

13. **Mr. Okada** (Japan) said that Japan was taking measures to expand and improve its resettlement programme. His Government supported increased efforts to refugee women's participation in decision-making and had donated US\$ 3 million to UNHCR programmes in the context of the G8 Ministerial Declaration on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict. Japan considered self-reliance for refugees and IDPs and their integration into host communities as essential elements of durable solutions. It therefore supported the implementation of the Transitional Solutions Initiative. Collaboration was key to humanitarian work, and Japan looked forward to pursuing more joint projects with UNHCR through the Japan International Cooperation Agency.

14. **Mr. Beck** (Germany) said that Germany had increased its funding for UNHCR by 50 per cent and had welcomed 5,000 resettled Syrian refugees, mostly arriving from Lebanon. To help reduce statelessness, all States should implement the measures agreed on in relation to civil registration. They should also ensure that all refugees were issued with machine-readable Convention travel documents. Germany applauded the Nansen Initiative, which had been launched to protect people displaced by natural disasters, and urged all relief agencies and actors to increase their preparedness for the humanitarian consequences of climate change.

15. **Mr. Choi** Seokyeong (Republic of Korea) said that the mandate to protect must not be diluted and that measures to ensure universal compliance with the principle of non-refoulement and to increase the capacities of host countries must be implemented. His Government was looking forward to working with UNHCR on the implementation of its Refugee Act and to learning from the experiences of other countries in the resettlement of refugees.

16. **Ms. Rosenvinge** (Norway) said that Norway had pledged 1,000 additional resettlement places for Syrian refugees, as well as funding for UNHCR resettlement work. It welcomed the establishment of a contact group for the host and resettlement countries that were receiving Syrian refugees. It had seconded a person to assist UNHCR with training in modern interview techniques, which were essential for effective refugee status assessments and for addressing security concerns associated with asylum cases.

17. **Mr. Prummer** (Austria) said that the 2013 High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges should address the issue of legal and institutional protection for IDPs and out-of-camp IDPs. At the twenty-third session of the Human Rights Council, Austria had presented its traditional resolution on the human rights of IDPs. The focus had been on the protection of women and girls, durable solutions and the development of national and regional frameworks to protect IDPs. Protection activities must include measures to prevent sexual and gender-based violence and deliver support and justice to the victims. UNHCR should continue to implement its updated strategy on that issue.

18. **Mr. Van Schreven** (Netherlands) said that his Government would continue to cooperate with UNHCR on the issue of statelessness.

19. **Mr. Habchi** (Algeria) said that emergency planning must lay the foundations for durable solutions to prevent protracted refugee situations. Promoting self-reliance was important to help refugees meet their immediate needs but should not distract attention from the pursuit of durable solutions. Action had been taken on mixed migration flows, however, the socioeconomic factors driving irregular migration needed to be tackled and the smuggling networks involved must be dismantled. Algeria was committed to applying humanitarian principles in handling irregular migration.

20. **Mr. Türk** (Director of International Protection, UNHCR), summing up the debate, said that there had been a clear recognition of the fundamental principles of protection and a call for measures to facilitate the admission of refugees. He was encouraged by the changes made to the asylum laws in Morocco and by the work of admissions boards in Thailand. On mixed migration flows, UNHCR was examining cross-continental movements and trends. Good suggestions had been made on tackling sexual and gender-based violence and on protecting children, and he agreed that protection services needed to be better integrated.

21. It was a myth that UNHCR focused on refugees in camp settings; UNHCR had in fact established a working group for urban refugees, and good practices had been identified. He thanked Canada for its work on resettlement and agreed that contact groups played a positive role in the process. He also thanked Norway for seconding a person to work on interviewing training.

22. Delegations had raised the issue of statelessness. In the light of a proposal by Thailand for a new category of person to be established, UNHCR should possibly carry out an assessment of the different types of situations that people faced. It was time to take a fresh look at the issue of IDPs and the possibility of holding another briefing on Convention travel documents.

23. UNHCR would continue to support the Nansen Initiative and looked forward to working with the European Union on responsibility-sharing within its asylum system and with the Republic of Korea on its Refugee Act.

24. **Mr. Getahun** (Ethiopia) said that Ethiopia had established a task force to address the problem of trafficking in persons and would like to work with UNHCR on that issue, as well as on the issue of unaccompanied minors, for which both immediate and long-term solutions were required. Ethiopia was also interested in working with UNHCR to address the problem of statelessness.

25. **Mr. Al-Amin Digna** (Sudan) said that the Sudan faced many challenges in relation to human trafficking and was thankful to UNHCR for its support in tackling the issue. His country had adopted a new law on refugee protection and would welcome UNHCR support with implementation and with addressing the specific needs of refugees in the Sudan.

26. **Mr. Türk** (Director of International Protection, UNHCR) said that the establishment of an anti-trafficking task force in Ethiopia was a welcome development. UNHCR would be discussing possible follow-up to the 2013 High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development with the International Organization for Migration with a view to framing an effective response for asylum seekers who were trafficked. UNHCR was developing dialogue with other agencies on regional responses to the issue of unaccompanied minors. UNHCR looked forward to working with the Sudan on its new refugee protection law.

Programme budgets, management, financial control and administrative oversight
(A/AC.96/1124 and A/68/5/Add.5)

27. **Mr. Aleinikoff** (Deputy High Commissioner), referring to the High Commissioner's report on the financial statements of UNHCR for the year ended 31 December 2012 (A/AC.96/1124) and the report of the Board of Auditors (A/68/5/Add.5), said that total assets in 2012 had amounted to US\$ 1.6 billion. UNHCR now reported the value of both tangible and intangible assets on the face of financial statements. Inventories, as well as property, plant and equipment (PPE) were now recognized as assets, in keeping with international public sector accounting standards (IPSAS). The overall level of inventories had reached US\$ 122.1 million and PPE almost US\$ 100 million, as at 31 December 2012. Total liabilities amounted to US\$ 0.6 billion, the largest component being employee benefits (US\$ 570.2 million).

28. The Board of Auditors had issued an unqualified audit opinion, confirming that the financial statements fairly presented the financial position of the voluntary funds administered by UNHCR and of the financial performance and cash flows for 2012. The Board had issued 27 recommendations, mainly related to financial reporting, the implementation of IPSAS, and inventory and vehicle fleet management. UNHCR had accepted all the recommendations and had already taken steps to address them.

29. The Board had concluded that UNHCR had fully implemented 12 of the previous year's recommendations and was addressing 40 others, many of which should be implemented during 2013.

30. The Board had noted that the production of the first set of IPSAS-compliant financial statements in 2012 was a significant achievement and had recognized UNHCR efforts to enhance internal financial reporting. It had encouraged UNHCR to focus on key information needs and ensure that reports were readily available as management tools. The Board had called on UNHCR to improve inventory data accounting; UNHCR had already started to review its standard operating procedures in order to make reliable accounting records available throughout the year. Training would be arranged for inventory focal points and physical counts of inventories would be made on a quarterly basis.

31. In response to the Board's comments on vehicle fleet management, UNHCR had initiated a global fleet management project, which would address many of the deficiencies that had been identified. The adoption of IPSAS has resulted in multiple benefits for UNHCR operations, financial management and reporting.

32. **Ms. Pollack** (United States of America) said that the current level of contributions to UNHCR called for enhanced oversight. The response to the Syrian crisis should not stretch UNHCR beyond its limits, and needs must be properly identified and met. In that context, Executive Committee members should support UNHCR by providing flexible, robust, and predictable contributions and limiting earmarking.

33. The United States had appreciated the opportunity to discuss the content of the 2014–2015 biennial budget in informal meetings prior to decisions being taken. It encouraged UNHCR to hold such meetings more often. There was a need for increased transparency about how prioritization decisions were taken and how resources were allocated between pillars and geographical regions. The adoption of the Global Needs Assessment (GNA) methodology was an important advance, while the continuing use of expected income budgets for global programmes and at headquarters had a number of disadvantages, particularly in the areas of child protection, gender-based violence, health, education, finance, oversight and programme management and monitoring. UNHCR should provide stakeholders with timely information on budget decisions and their impact on programmes. Such communication built respect and trust and enabled donors to plan.

34. **Ms. Conijn** (Netherlands) said that she hoped the implementation of the Enterprise Risk Management project would lead to an effective organization-wide risk management and anti-fraud policy and more effective financial control over implementing partners. The adoption of IPSAS was a positive step but she was concerned that some staff, especially those in field offices, lacked knowledge of how it functioned.

35. **Ms. Schamell** (Germany) commended UNHCR on the implementation of IPSAS, the establishment of the Independent Audit and Oversight Committee, and the ongoing effort to improve the management of implementing partners. She said that various internal oversight functions should be better integrated across the organization and called for dialogue to explore how their effectiveness and efficiency might be enhanced.

36. **Ms. Norton** (Canada) said that her Government was committed to making its assistance more efficient, focused and accountable. It called on UNCHR to: demonstrate greater value for money and focus on efficiency gains to close the funding gap; improve financial, risk and performance measurement systems; strengthen results-based management and continue to build a results-based culture; and foster more effective partnerships. Her Government would particularly like to see greater transparency in decision-making in the field, standardized procedures and clarified expectations for implementing partners.

37. **Mr. Okada** (Japan) called for careful examination of the recommendations of the Independent Audit and Oversight Committee and further operational and procedural improvements.

38. **Mr. Swalens** (Belgium) said that Belgium would like to see further improvements to the quality and precision of the IPSAS output. It welcomed the detailed picture that the new GNA framework provided, which had enhanced its understanding of the budget prioritization and reprioritization process. Belgium saw a need to prioritize quality and cohesion in the work of UNHCR with implementing partners.

39. **Ms. Stone** (Australia) noted that full implementation of the recommendations of the Board of Auditors was taking time and that action had yet to be taken on some of the 83 recommendations issued by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) over two years previously. Further information about how those recommendations were being addressed in an environment of limited resources would be appreciated, as well as more details as to how guidance formulated at headquarters was implemented in the field.

40. **Mr. Meyer** (Norway), speaking also on behalf of Denmark, Finland and Sweden, said that the Nordic countries appreciated the important insight that the GNA budget mechanism provided. He would welcome information on the feasibility and usefulness of formulating a resource plan to accompany the GNA, as had been suggested by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions. Noting that results-based management and IPSAS should be used to strengthen overall efficiency, he asked whether any particular functions and resources had been overstretched or depleted by the sharp increase in emergency operations and what was considered an appropriate balance between headquarters and field functions.

41. The Nordic countries called on UNHCR to: enhance internal oversight; pursue more strategic and structured dialogue with implementing partners; and focus more on solution-oriented strategies to end protracted situations. They supported the proposed 2014–2015 biennial budget but remained concerned about the increasing gap between needs and resources. They called for more transparent planning and prioritization processes and ongoing communication with States to address reprioritization needs. UNHCR should continue to broaden the donor base, and donors should make flexible, unearmarked contributions.

42. **Mr. Aleinikoff** (Deputy High Commissioner), responding to the points raised, said that various initiatives to enhance oversight and increase investment in internal audit functions were in place and were already bearing fruit. UNHCR recognized that the audit function must keep up with the huge growth in external programmes but was also cognizant of the need to retain flexibility. Enhanced oversight should not be allowed to impede the organization's performance of work in the field or reduce the funds available for external programmes. UNHCR would shortly be conducting an appraisal of the evaluation function to see what improvements might be made. Value for money should be a consideration in evaluations as well as in planning.

43. A review of the overdue recommendations by the Board of Auditors and the Office of Internal Oversight Services would shortly be conducted to ascertain which of them remained relevant. The widespread support for the GNA budget was very encouraging. The shortfall between the needs-based budget and available resources should serve as a resource mobilization goal.

44. UNHCR was committed to keeping the number of Geneva-based staff to the absolute minimum necessary for management, monitoring, oversight and planning functions. Moreover, the child protection, finance, oversight and programme management and monitoring functions had all been strengthened in recent years. Most of the additional funds for monitoring gender-based violence had gone to positions at the regional level. The results-based management system should help to ensure that UNHCR continued to spend its money wisely.

45. UNHCR valued partnerships and welcomed suggestions for improvement in that area. It recognized the importance of solutions and would be looking to identify additional resources for solution strategies in the current budget cycle.

46. **Ms. Matsuura-Meuller** (Controller) said that the implementation of IPSAS had involved extensive staff training. All staff had completed a basic e-learning module and finance staff had completed no less than 13 different e-learning courses. In addition, the change management unit her division had given training workshops in various regions. The benefits of IPSAS extended beyond the financial sphere: IPSAS provided stakeholders with a full picture of the organization's asset and liabilities and allowed them to see donated funds being converted into immediate resources. It brought significant operational benefits, including in inventory management. For example, thanks to IPSAS, the availability of precise information on stocks in the 190 UNCHR warehouses worldwide allowed for more efficient and rapid deployment in emergency situations. The new system allowed for better control and oversight of all property, plant and equipment and for goods and services to be expensed only once they had been delivered to the persons of concern.

Consideration of reports relating to the programme and administrative oversight and evaluation (A/AC.96/1127)

47. **Mr. Kebede** (Inspector General), introducing the report on activities of the Inspector General's Office (A/AC.96/1127) for the period from July 2012 to June 2013, said that the report gave a general overview of developments in the internal audit function in that period. The High Commissioner had decided to bring the internal audit function in-house and merge it with the inspection function following an independent evaluation which had been undertaken on the recommendation of the Board of Auditors. The evaluators had concluded that the preferred option for UNHCR would be to have an internal audit service. In June 2013, a task force had been established to guide planning and decision-making.

48. High-level discussions on transitional measures were under way and a solution that met the pressing needs of UNCHR and was in conformity with the Financial Regulations and Rules of the United Nations should soon be found. In the months ahead, UNHCR and

the Office of Internal Oversight Services would be concluding a modified memorandum of understanding to ensure that existing oversight services and expertise were retained until internal audit capacities were established and institutional safeguards were in place. The audit and inspection functions would be merged in a phased manner, with the new integrated team being based in either Nairobi or Amman.

49. An independent peer review of the Inspector General's investigation function was also due to be undertaken. Resources for investigations remained grossly inadequate and at any one time each of the four investigators might be working on between 15 and 20 cases. Detailed figures on complaints handled were provided in the report.

50. Turning, lastly, to cooperation between UNHCR and NGOs in third-party investigations, he reported that an advanced investigation workshop attended by nine key principal NGO partners had garnered positive feedback and that further regional workshops were being organized. The first was scheduled to take place in Islamabad in October 2013. UNHCR and the Danish Refugee Council had established a joint roster of experienced consultants to conduct investigations for UNHCR and its NGO partners.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.