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Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the UN
Geneva

Statement

78th Session of the Standing Committee of UNHCR

**Statement by Ambassador Khalil Hashmi,
Permanent Representative of Pakistan**

Agenda Item 2: International Protection
(07 July, 2020)

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for your able stewardship of the Standing Committee.

We commend the UNHCR leadership and the field staff for their hard work, often under difficult conditions, and not least amidst the on-going COVID pandemic.

We appreciate the assistance that international partners have provided to refugee hosting countries.

This meeting is a timely opportunity to assess the efficacy and effectiveness of the international protection regime.

Mr. Chairman,

The surge in number of refugees in the past six years had already added an additional layer of complexity in the UNHCR response portfolio.

The Global Compact on Refugees and the first Global Refugee Forum provided the necessary normative and political impetus to the international protection regime.

COVID-19 outbreak has however presented new challenges.

Even as COVID-19 remains primarily a global public health emergency, it has disrupted economies and societies in unprecedented ways.

Several reports from IFIs and international organizations have forecast debilitating economic impact particularly on developing countries, wiping off decades of development gains and heightened risks of high unemployment, poverty and hunger.

It is clear that developing countries would be obliged to shoulder the primary burden of economic distress as they are host to 85 % of refugees around the world.

As a result of lockdown measures and the downturn in world economic growth, developing countries are bracing for the COVID-induced repercussions in terms of substantial fall in domestic revenues, 20-30 % decline in foreign remittances, 40-45 % decrease in FDI and 20-25 % reduction in export earnings.

Conversely, apart from significant financial outflows, the existing high levels of debts of the developing countries would only accentuate, squeezing their fiscal space. Cumulatively, these negative developments would seriously hamper the protection capacity of refugee host countries, particularly those with huge populations of their own.

Initiatives such as GHRP, WHO's Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (SPRP), UN's Response and Recovery Fund (RRF) and G-20 led debt suspension are welcome steps.

We commend the UNHCR for mobilization of international support for COVID-19 related assistance to refugees across the world.

However, the scale of economic fall-out on developing countries especially those with large populations of their own and substantial number of refugees, is such that they will not be able to meaningfully accord protection to refugee populations.

The developing countries hosting large refugee populations would therefore require greater international support and solidarity through enhanced liquidity and debt relief, among other steps.

We encourage the UNHCR to factor these aspects in its advocacy efforts with international partners including development partners and IFIs to meaningfully ease this growing burden on the refugee host countries of the South, commensurate with the enormity of their unique challenges.

This situation also demands that financing instruments such as IDA-19 be designed and implemented in ways that do not exacerbate existing high debt burdens of refugee host countries and erode the true essence of the principle of equitable burden and responsibility sharing.

On our part, the Prime Minister of Pakistan has launched a global initiative for debt relief for developing countries. We look forward to working with international partners including IFIs to evolve consensus on this important issue.

Mr. Chairman,

Pakistan is the fifth most populated developing country, hosting the second largest concentration of protracted refugee population for the last 40 years.

Despite our existing and projected economic constraints, we have pursued an inclusive, generous and compassionate approach towards all refugees in Pakistan before and during the on-going pandemic.

We have provided equal and unhindered access to public health facilities to refugees.

We have worked closely with UNHCR in providing cash assistance of Rs.12000 per family to 36500 extremely vulnerable Afghan refugees. This social protection arrangement is similar to the emergency cash transfers through our national “Ehsas Programme” to over 10 million Pakistani families in most need.

Given the uncertainties associated with the duration of the pandemic and the anticipated increase in protection needs, additional ways of support would be necessary to save lives and livelihoods.

Mr. Chairman,

We value UNHCR efforts to broaden the support base for refugees and to reach out to new partner states and institutions. It is essential that

these efforts are firmly anchored in the fundamental principles of humanitarian funding.

Durable solutions and voluntary repatriation remains the most preferred choice. We welcome the launch of the SSAR Support Platform of the virtual High Level Meeting (HLM) yesterday. Support and solidarity on both the political and financing tracks would be vital to the success of this Platform. We look forward to working closely with UNHCR, Afghanistan, Iran and international partners in the shared pursuit of durable solutions.

We welcome the progress made in the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan. The peace agreement signed in February this year represents a historic opportunity. The intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations would create space and conditions conducive to the return and reintegration of Afghan refugees.

Timely and targeted investments inside Afghanistan, especially in priority areas of high return would be critical to reinforce the shared vision of peace and development.

Mr. Chairman,

It is a matter of great concern that repatriation trends in 2019 decreased considerably i.e. 46 % compared to 2018. Only 317,200 refugees opted for voluntary repatriation, while their numbers ballooned to 26 million with overall 79.5 million forcibly displaced worldwide.

In Pakistan, during last year only 6,220 Afghan refugees returned voluntarily, a 50 % drop compared to 2018. The numbers are predicted to be even lower this year.

Hopefully, with progress on intra-Afghanistan dialogue, reinforced by international support politically and financially, the rate of repatriation and reintegration would improve.

The pace of development interventions, scaling up livelihood opportunities, providing shelter, establishing education and health facilities, and putting in place allied infrastructure would be the entry points for sustainable peace and development in Afghanistan.

Mr. Chairman,

The Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) and the first Global Refugee Forum (GRF) have laid the foundation for a number of useful initiatives. The launch of Three Years Strategy (2019-21) on resettlement and complimentary pathways has generated significant pledges that would expand opportunities for third country solutions for three million refugees (one million for settlement, two million for complimentary pathways by 2028).

Due to many competitive claims, the refugees in protracted situations appear to be getting lesser attention in terms of resettlement opportunities.

We call for increased opportunities for resettlement and complimentary pathways for refugees in large and protracted situations.

Mr. Chairman,

The global refugee landscape continues to present a range of challenges especially in the area of international protection.

It is vital to align the implementation of pledges with the four objectives of Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) and operationalizing the principle of burden and responsibility sharing in a fair, equitable and timely manner.

Even as UNHCR and its partners invest time, efforts and resources in managing these challenges as best as they can, there is no substitute to greater investments in prevention, durable solutions and peacefully settling the conflicts.

Thank you.
