



**Remarks by António Guterres,
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

OSCE Permanent Council

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. UNHCR and the OSCE share a long-standing partnership around our common interest in forced displacement and the importance which protection and durable solutions hold for security and regional stability. My Office greatly appreciates the political support which both the OSCE Institutions and participating States continue to give to issues such as the resolution of protracted displacement situations; the strengthening of national capacities; the protection of refugees within mixed migration movements; statelessness; the prevention of violence against women and children and the fight against discrimination and xenophobia.

I will focus my intervention today on some of the most challenging refugee and displacement situations the world presently faces, which have clear implications for the OSCE region.

First, of course, the conflict in Syria, which has not only caused one of the worst humanitarian crises in decades, but which is also the biggest threat to global peace and security the world has seen in a long time. Within a few years, Syria has gone from being the world's second largest refugee-hosting to becoming its fastest refugee-producing country. UNHCR has registered nearly 2.5 million Syrians as refugees in the region, although the real number is much higher. We fear that over 4 million Syrians may become refugees by the end of 2014. In addition, there are already over 6 million internally displaced Syrians, and more than half of the country's population now depends on humanitarian assistance for survival.

Syria's neighbours – Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt – have received an unrelenting stream of refugees and have provided them protection, at enormous cost to themselves. Few refugee influxes have ever generated this profound an impact on their host countries, with such dramatic demographic, economic and social consequences.

For example, measured against the total population of Lebanon, the number of Syrian refugees currently hosted there would be equivalent to 71 million in the United States, 18 million in Germany or nearly 15 million in France. Lebanon's population today is at the level it was expected to reach in 2050 – which is only a hint at the crushing economic and social burden the Syria crisis has placed on its small and fragile neighbour. By the end of this year,

the World Bank estimates that unemployment in Lebanon may double, an additional 170,000 Lebanese risk being pushed into poverty and the total cost of the Syria crisis to the country could reach US\$ 7.5 billion.

Turkey, the second-biggest refugee-hosting country in the region and a participating State of the OSCE, has already spent over 2.5 billion dollars on assisting Syrian refugees since the beginning of the crisis, mostly from its own budget. Although the country's capacity is of a different order, one must not forget that Turkey alone has received ten times as many Syrian refugees as the entire European Union – in recent weeks, some 500 new arrivals every day.

Jordan is also feeling the heavy impact of the refugee presence, estimating the cost of hosting them at some 1.7 billion USD so far. In this resource-poor country, hundreds of millions of additional subsidies are being paid by the government to ensure refugees have access to water, bread, gas and electricity at the same prices as Jordanians. In northern Iraq, the population of Dohuk governorate has increased by over 10 per cent as a result of the refugee influx.

But the crisis not only has dramatic consequences for the governments and institutions of the host countries. It also puts heavy pressure on ordinary people, in all areas of daily life. As budget deficits are increasing, growth suffers and jobs, salaries and price levels are affected across the region, leaving local families struggling to make ends meet.

The Syria crisis also has profound implications for regional stability, and indeed for global peace and security. One needs only to look at the spill-over effects in Iraq, where the events in Anbar province are clearly linked to what is happening in Syria, or at the multiplication of violent incidents in Lebanon. The proximity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and of the economically sensitive Gulf region further contributes to the complexity of this part of the world, with the Syria crisis increasingly jeopardizing regional security.

As regards the global impact of the conflict, a possible destabilization in the Middle East could have disastrous consequences for the rest of the world. But one also should not forget the high number of foreign fighters currently present in Syria, and the risk that they will continue to spread insecurity elsewhere once they move on from the current conflict.

As the Syria crisis impacts directly on the OSCE region and its immediate neighbours, I would like to make three appeals to participating States.

First, the generosity of Syria's neighbours needs to be matched by massive international support, in a true spirit of effective burden-sharing. This is essential to preserving the asylum space for people fleeing this brutal conflict, and also a crucial contribution to maintaining regional stability. The region needs much more financial assistance than it is currently receiving, to allow it to cope with an influx that would severely strain the capacities of even the world's most developed countries. This is true not only for immediate humanitarian priorities, but also for the structural, longer-term development needs which this crisis has

created in the host countries. Governments in the region have already put in place their own mechanisms for this purpose, such as Lebanon's Roadmap for Stabilization developed with the World Bank, or Jordan's National Resilience Plan, which must receive robust international support. To ensure that humanitarian and longer-term development interventions are closely interlinked, UNHCR and its partners work closely with UNDP, the World Bank and other development actors in the region.

Second, all countries – including, and perhaps especially, those beyond the region – must keep their borders open for Syrians who are forced to flee and seek protection elsewhere. There is something fundamentally wrong in a world where asylum-seekers drown at sea or are pushed back from land borders – a world where people requiring protection are forced to risk their lives, or to submit themselves to appalling human rights violations at the hands of smugglers and traffickers, because they have no other way of accessing territories where they hope to find asylum. Especially in the European context, this also requires more solidarity and more consistency among EU members, to ensure countries like Bulgaria and Greece have the capacity to adequately respond to the protection needs of Syrian and other asylum seekers arriving at their borders.

And third, as it is clear from the recent negotiations that the Syria conflict will drag on for the foreseeable future, I hope more countries farther afield will provide Syrian refugees with additional forms of protection. UNHCR aims to find third-country resettlement or humanitarian admissions places for 30,000 Syrian refugees by the end of this year. Some 20 States have already pledged their support to this scheme, and most of them are represented here today. I would like to highlight Germany's humanitarian admissions programme in particular, which provides one third of these places. But the need for significantly larger programmes beyond 2014 is becoming more evident. Alternative measures, such as establishing more flexible visa arrangements and family reunification mechanisms, can also help to allow Syrians find safety without having to resort to high-risk entry channels like the ones I have mentioned.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The other major displacement situation I would like to discuss today is that of Afghans, still the world's largest and one of its most protracted refugee populations. 2014 will be a watershed year for Afghanistan, with elections in April, the withdrawal of ISAF forces and a complex economic transition ahead. All of these processes can be expected to have a substantial impact on the prospects for peace, security, good governance and development in Afghanistan, at least until the end of this decade. There will also be likely consequences on the displacement of people within the country, into the sub-region, and beyond.

Even though some 5.8 million people have returned to Afghanistan since 2002 – which means a quarter of today's population are former refugees – there are still some 2.5 million spread across more than 80 countries, making this a truly global refugee population. Some 2.4 million of them remain in the Islamic Republic of Iran and in Pakistan – the world's largest refugee-hosting countries – along with a similar number of undocumented Afghans.

Both Pakistan and Iran have displayed extraordinary generosity in hosting huge numbers of Afghan refugees over the past three decades, and both need increased international support to continue to do so, in particular during the challenging period ahead.

Like in the Syria crisis, refugee-hosting countries are making a fundamentally important contribution to regional peace and stability by providing shelter and safety to millions of people uprooted by conflict. It is essential that the international community does not abandon Afghanistan, nor its neighbours, at such a crucial time.

In 2012, the three governments and UNHCR together launched a Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees, which centers on sustainable reintegration in Afghanistan but also foresees support to host communities, such as through a very successful programme for Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas in Pakistan. Both host countries are to be commended for their forward-looking policies, including Pakistan's Management Strategy for Afghan refugees, which also foresees the extension of registration cards until end 2015. I have just come from a mission to Iran, where I was able to see some of the very progressive arrangements the country has put in place for refugee education, access to work permits and health insurance.

The Solutions Strategy has also been a useful forum to strengthen partnerships with development and government agencies in the three countries for joint advocacy and resource mobilization. But meaningful durable solutions for this large refugee population remain elusive. Sustainable reintegration of returnees in Afghanistan has been a challenge for several years, with on-going insecurity and a persistent lack of access to basic services and livelihoods. Refugee returns have dwindled over the past five years, to an all-time low of less than 39,000 in 2013. This has been accompanied by a steady rise in the number of internally displaced Afghans over the past few years, with over 630,000 people now uprooted inside the country, more than half of them in urban areas. The recently adopted national policy on the rights of internally displaced persons is a positive step, but humanitarian needs remain staggering.

In this already extremely challenging displacement context, it is difficult to predict what will happen as a result of the various complex transitions facing Afghanistan in 2014. UNHCR is working with governments and partners in the region and beyond to update contingency plans in light of possible population movements, although we expect that most of these movements will occur within Afghanistan.

For those who do leave the country, it must be recognized that the majority of Afghan refugees today are already part of mixed migration movements, which is likely to be reflected in any future displacement patterns. In this context, regional initiatives such as the Almaty Process in Central Asia play a crucial role in developing protection-sensitive migration management strategies. In particular, border control measures must be effective and fair so as to facilitate the identification of persons who are in need of international protection, and mechanisms to deal with those who are not. I count on the OSCE institutions and participating States to support these efforts.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We also must not forget that a number of unresolved displacement situations still remain in Europe after the conflicts in the Western Balkans and the Caucasus.

Just like the other displacement crises I have mentioned here today, these remaining situations in Europe will have no humanitarian solution. Only political will – and the required resources – will bring a durable solution to the many thousands who remain displaced in these countries after several years.

A positive illustration of this fact is the Sarajevo Process in the Western Balkans, in which the Governments of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia have joined hands to close the displacement chapter of the mid-1990s. A cornerstone of that initiative is the Regional Housing Programme, which aims to provide over 70,000 of the most vulnerable refugees and internally displaced persons with sustainable accommodation. The Programme is now ready to move into implementation in 2014. It is crucial that the funds that have already been made available are used to benefit as many people as possible and without unnecessary bureaucratic delays, so as to make a real forward step in achieving durable solutions. I also hope that a comprehensive solutions strategy will be designed at the regional level to address the humanitarian needs of the populations still displaced by the conflict in Kosovo (UNSCR 1244).

Both the Sarajevo Process and the Housing Programme also set a good example of cooperation between UNHCR and the OSCE, inspiring other international partnerships and showing how joint international advocacy can yield concrete results for durable solutions and regional collaboration. There are many other such examples, such as the Protection Checklist that our two organizations have developed jointly, and which we will launch together later today. I am looking forward to further building our collaboration in the months and years to come, since the challenges linked to forced displacement, and the humanitarian needs it creates, are only likely to grow in the future, and will require stronger and more collaborative approaches.

Thank you very much.