

Conference on Sustaining Support for the Rohingya Refugee Response - 22 Oct 2020

Transcript of the opening remarks by Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees

Thank you very much Assistant Secretary, thank you, Carol and thanks to all my previous co-host speakers for very good comprehensive and generous statements.

I want to start by recalling a visit I paid to Kutupalong where the refugee camps are in Bangladesh three years ago just after hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees had fled from nearby Rakhine State. I remember observing unprecedented despair, trauma because of the violence endured in terrible living conditions, frankly.

And since then, together with some of my UN colleagues as well, including the Secretary-General, I have visited several times the camps. I have seen the evolution. And here I want to join others in really highlighting and appreciating the refuge – literally - which Bangladesh keeps giving to almost a million Rohingyas.

We should not forget and I remember seeing that back then that the first responders in this crisis were members of the local community. And it's that local community, Bangladeshi community that still hosts almost one million people.

This is why I echo others in saying that it is first and foremost Bangladesh and other host countries Malaysia, India, Indonesia and others that host another 150,000 refugees that must be thanked first and foremost.

I want also to appreciate donors. US\$2.2 billion dollars were contributed since that terrible period in 2017. Until last year, until 2019, the average contribution, the average level of contribution compared to needs was between 70 and 75%. This allowed the government, especially the Bangladesh Government, but also the humanitarian agencies, UNHCR with its partners, IOM, UNICEF, WFP, many international and local NGOs, it allowed all of us to work to protect the refugee population from monsoons, or cyclones and to prevent a major spread of COVID-19, among many other humanitarian improvements.

I really want to thank the co-conveners of this conference, the United States in particular, to organize this because it will allow us to focus on gaps and the challenges ahead and on the need to continue to focus on solutions.

I have to tell you, this year's funding has declined compared to previous years. We have not yet reached 50% of the needs and we are already in mid-October. So I was happy and encouraged to hear the substantive pledges already expressed by the co-hosts and I hope to hear more substantive pledges from States later.

We need that not to lose ground on the gains that we have achieved and to make further progress both for refugees and host communities. Physical needs, humanitarian needs are of course urgent. But also, I would also like to make a plea to keep in focus the dignity and the future of refugees. And on this point, I would like to highlight the good cooperation that we humanitarians, and UNHCR in particular, have with the World Bank utilizing funds from the IDA18 refugee window.

I want to make a special plea for the education of refugee children. I appreciate decisions made by the government of Bangladesh recently on curriculum, on learning centers. They now need to be implemented

and more needs to be done to allow refugee children access to formal education and to skills training. This is their right but this is also a good investment for their future as we hope they can one day return home.

And this is why it needs to be matched by a framework that is strong enough to allow access to education for the Rohingya people in Rakhine state, including the eventual recognition of education gained in refugee camps.

Now, despair in the refugee community, despair in the future is a very high risk and it has already been mentioned. We see it reflected in the growing numbers of refugees trying to leave - 2,400 estimated this year, embarking on very dangerous journeys and then unfortunately left wandering at sea, sometimes for months. We estimate that up to 200 lost their lives this year. And I want to join Janez Lenarčič in appealing to States in the region to use regional mechanisms; the Bali process as was mentioned, the ASEAN Trust Fund to address rescue at sea, disembarkation, and other related issues.

Last but not least we must not lose sight of solutions. And the key solution remains return. Return home, of course. Voluntary, dignified and safe return, which is what refugees want as well.

Responsibility for this lies chiefly with Myanmar and UNHCR and UNDP will continue to support the Federal Government and the local authorities through the Memorandum of Understanding that we have recently renewed for a year to help create conducive conditions in Rakhine State through quick impact projects in areas of origin and potential return. More than 40 projects are being completed, work is ongoing on another 30 projects but more needs to be done to address poverty and here I want to appeal also to ASEAN and regional states and development organizations to support this effort.

And this must be seen of course, we have said it many times, in the broader context.

First and foremost, to ensure peace and security because we know that conflict with the Arakan Army is causing an additional obstacle. But also we make another plea to the Government of Myanmar to accelerate measures to create confidence in the process of return, otherwise it will not happen.

We need assurances of the possibility for refugees to return to places of origin.

We need progress to solve the internal displacement of Rohingya.

We need freedom of movement for the Rohingya in Rakhine.

We need clear pathways to citizenship to be established.

And in general clear progress on the implementation of the Rakhine Advisory Commission recommendations.

And all of this needs to be communicated more regularly and clearly to refugees so that they understand, they ask questions, and they eventually can make an informed decision regarding all these issues.

This is indispensable to create that suitable framework which can allow return one day to happen and a solution to be found and hope to be given to hundreds of thousands that are awaiting this very eagerly. Thank you very much.

ENDS