CANADIAN STATEMENT
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Third Committee of the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly

Mr./Madam Chairperson,

This year has been dominated by a number of complex and large-scale displacement crises, including those in Syria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Mali, Sudan and South Sudan. These crises have tested UNHCR’s and the international community’s capacity to deliver both humanitarian assistance and protection, highlighting the need for strengthened cooperation and support to respond to forced displacement challenges.

Mr./Madam Chairperson,

Canada’s international engagement on refugee issues is complemented by our domestic actions. Extensive reforms to make Canada’s asylum system faster and fairer came into effect last year, improving the integrity of the system, including through the prompt removal of individuals determined not to be in need of protection. Canada underscores the importance of national governments combating human smuggling operations. This criminal enterprise endangers the lives of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants alike, while undermining public support for refugee protection. We will continue our efforts to combat human smuggling, including by preventing human smugglers from abusing Canada’s immigration system and seeking to diminish pull factors for human smugglers and their clients.

The right of individuals fearing persecution in their countries of origin to access protection is at the core of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol, and we underscore the responsibility of all states to abide by the central principles of protection which are enshrined therein. Canada is committed to upholding and protecting human rights and safeguarding the dignity of the most vulnerable. Various religious communities represent vulnerable groups of particular importance to Canada, and the promotion of freedom of religion or belief represents a key Canadian foreign policy priority. Canada has consistently condemned the inter-communal violence and human rights abuses which have affected the people of Burma’s Rakhine State, and continues to call on all sides to reach a sustainable, peaceful solution. We are also concerned about reports of forced conversion and persecution of religious communities in Syria, including those who are fleeing violence and seek safety and security outside of Syria.

Over the last year the international community has witnessed the emergence of new humanitarian emergencies in addition to the resurgence of existing crises, highlighting the enormous human cost of forced displacement. We have been extremely disturbed to hear of the widespread practice of child, early and forced marriage among Syrian refugees. In Burma, ongoing outbreaks of inter-communal violence, particularly in Rakhine State, have forced thousands to flee their homes. In Sudan, violent conflict continues between rebel groups and government forces in border states where humanitarian access is denied, leading thousands to flee to camps in South Sudan and Ethiopia. We have also seen continued reports of high levels of rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria and the Sahel.

The situation in Syria has steadily deteriorated over the past year, with devastating consequences for its people and communities. Canada is profoundly disturbed by the continued deliberate targeting of civilians and the denial of humanitarian aid on political and sectarian grounds in blatant violation of international law. We are also concerned about reports of forced conversions and persecution of
religious communities. In this regard, Canada demands all parties cease attacking civilians and other protected persons and facilities and comply fully with international law.

Canada also calls upon the Assad regime to take immediate steps to facilitate the expansion of humanitarian relief operations. Canada recognizes and welcomes, however, the exceptional generosity of neighbouring states and countries – including Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt – which have kept their borders open and continue to provide life-saving refuge and protection to those fleeing the conflict in Syria.

Identifying and implementing durable solutions to these crises must also remain a high priority.

Sustainable solutions to conflicts must include respect for the human rights of all individuals.

Mr./Madam Chairperson,

The global crises of the past year have once again demonstrated the challenges and perils facing those who have been forcibly displaced and the critical importance of ensuring humanitarian assistance reaches those in need, often in dangerous operations. It is therefore paramount that humanitarian actors are not targeted in the delivery of relief assistance, and that medical and humanitarian personnel, facilities and transport be respected and protected.

Canada will continue to work with relevant partners to strengthen protection capacity in the world, particularly for those most vulnerable.

Thank you.