STATEMENT

BY
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PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

NEW YORK, 6 November 2013
Mr. Chairman,

Before I proceed to make my Statement, I would like to welcome Mr. Antonio Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and thank him for his commitment to the solution of the problem of displacement in the world, including the Balkans, over a great number of years. I would also like to thank for the reports on the work of the UNHCR presented today.

Mr. Chairman,

My delegation aligned itself with the statement made by the delegation of the European Union. However, I shall take this opportunity to address some issues of particular concern for my country.

Speaking about displacement, I cannot but begin by highlighting that my country is home to the greatest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Europe and in 2008 was identified by the UNHCR as one of the five countries with the problem of protracted displacement in the world.

Therefore, Mr. Chairman, my country is strongly committed to the quest for lasting solutions to refugees in the region and the implementation of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Out of 291 400 IPDs that lived in Serbia, according to the UNHCR data in 2003, their number has been reduced to 70 000. The reduction was, primarily, the result of the process of local integration. For long-term, sustainable solutions, though, including the question of return and the enjoyment of individual refugee rights in the countries of origin, we need the political will of all actors, especially of the countries of origin. One of the preconditions for sustainable return is full respect for the rights of national minorities in the countries of origin, including their right to use their language and script, as well as an efficient implementation of laws at local levels.

We consider that a regional approach is best suited to address the problem of refugees in the territory of the former Yugoslavia and in this context the 2005 Sarajevo Declaration was revitalized in 2010 at the Belgrade Regional Ministerial Conference convened to discuss the refugee problem in South Eastern Europe.

At the Review Ministerial Conference, held in Belgrade in 2011, the Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia, signed a Joint Declaration on ending displacement and providing lasting solutions for the most vulnerable refugees and IDPs from the period 1991-1995. The Declaration, inter alia, re-confirmed the readiness of the four countries to fully respect the rights of refugees, including their individual rights, without discrimination. In view of the fact that protracted displacement was very much accountable for a difficult economic and social position of refugees, a Regional Housing Programme has been devised for refugees and IDPs in the territory of the former Yugoslavia from that period. €584 million are needed to implement this programme. Half of this amount was raised at the Donors’ Conference in Sarajevo in 2012. On 25 October, Serbia signed the Framework Agreement with the Development Bank of the Council of Europe, as the first among the four partner countries, on the
implementation of the Regional Housing Programme. I take this opportunity to thank the donor countries and international organizations and call on the international community to provide the remaining necessary resources in order to begin the Regional Housing Programme and complete its implementation within the next 5-year period as planned.

The solution of the long-lasting problem of refugees in the region is a process; it calls for a full respect of the rights and needs of refugees, both in the countries of origin and the receiving countries and cannot be achieved through administrative measures, such as setting up deadlines arbitrarily. In this context, we welcome the Statement made by HCR Guterres at the 2013 UNHCR Executive Committee Meeting in which he said that, with full respect for the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the refugee problem in the region has to be solved with the consensus of all relevant actors.

Let me re-iterate once again, Mr. Chairman: my country is ready to continue to work on finding solutions to the problem of the realization of the rights and needs of the refugee population within a regional process and in bilateral cooperation with partner countries with the aim of achieving a sustainable solution and closing the refugee chapter in the Balkans.

Mr. Chairman,

As I indicated at the beginning of my Statement, with 230,000 IDPs from Kosovo and Metohija and 20,000 IDPs in Kosovo and Metohija, Serbia is the country with the largest number of IDPs in Europe.

Notwithstanding the 14-year international presence in Kosovo and Metohija, not even elementary conditions exist in the Province for IDP return. This is particularly true of security and the basic conditions for a normal life. The returnees, very few in number, are faced with numerous problems, such as unlawful occupation of land, burning of houses and physical attacks, the practices that would hardly encourage anybody to return.

According to UNHCR data, only 12,145 IDPs have returned to Kosovo and Metohija since 1999. It is estimated that only four thousand persons managed to achieve a sustainable return. According to the same data, 47 returns were registered in the first quarter of 2013, twice as few as in the same period in 2012.

The lack of the elementary conditions for the return of over 200,000 Kosovo and Metohija IDPs and the difficult conditions in which the Serbian community and returnees live in Kosovo and Metohija affected their turnout at the recent local elections in the Province.

Serbia has made great efforts to ameliorate the predicament of protracted internal displacement, particularly the difficult economic and social position, of its citizens. However, my country has no possibility to influence the conditions for IDP returns as the international presences of UNMIK, EULEX and KFOR, as well as the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government (PISG) in Kosovo and Metohija, have been made responsible for creating those conditions since 1999. Because of the serious impediments to IDP returns to Kosovo and
Metohija, we continue to bear witness to the lack of proper conditions for a free decision by IDPs to return or to integrate, which is the precondition for a lasting solution of this problem.

As Serbian citizens, the IDPs enjoy all rights and fulfil all obligations under the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Serbia and the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. The Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the second National Strategy for the Solution of the Question of Refugees and IDPs for the Period 2011-2014 which, *inter alia*, provides for solutions to improve the housing conditions of the most vulnerable IDPs in accordance with the afore-mentioned United Nations Guiding Principles.

In the survey entitled *Needs Assessment of the IDPs in Serbia* and conducted by the UNHCR, Commissariat for Refugees and the Statistical Institute of the Republic of Serbia in March 2011, it is estimated that 22,886 households or 97,286 persons in need live in Serbia. To meet the need, Serbia has been considering the possibility of initiating an assistance programme in cooperation with the UNHCR for the most vulnerable IDP categories according to the model of the Regional Housing Programme, for the realization of which appropriate international assistance will be needed.

Serbia’s commitment to the resolution of the problem of IDPs is reflected also in its cooperation with the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons.

Mr. Chairman,

The problem of internal displacement is an ever more pressing problem in the world today. Therefore, I commend the initiative of High Commissioner Guterres to host a dialogue on this topic in December. Serbia will be happy to take an active participation in it.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that my country has had very good cooperation with the UNHCR in addressing the problem of refugees and IDPs over a number of years and that, in constructive cooperation with the UNHCR and other relevant international stakeholders, it will continue to invest selfless efforts in finding lasting solutions for the refugee populations of the Balkans and the IDP from Kosovo and Metohija.

Thank you.