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**STATEMENT BY
MR. ALEKSANDR VOLGAREV, DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF
THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE 1429th MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

22 June 2023

On World Refugee Day

Mr. Chairperson,

In accordance with its international legal obligations, Russia has consistently taken measures to assist persons seeking protection. An important element of these efforts is co-operation with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as the main international framework for addressing the challenges of forced migration.

The factors conditioning population exodus are well known. At the centre of these is the irresponsible policy of the Western alliance countries in the Middle East and North Africa and their interference in the internal affairs of sovereign States. The results of the activities of the so-called progressive democracies there are well known: destroyed States and statehoods, poverty, economic inequality and much more.

It is important to continue working to facilitate the voluntary return of Syrian refugees. In that connection, we draw attention to the joint statement adopted on 21 June in Astana by the representatives of Iran, Russia and Türkiye following the 20th International Meeting on Syria in the Astana Format. Paragraph 15 of this document focuses specifically on the need to facilitate the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their places of residence in Syria. It also points to the relevance of continued engagement with all stakeholders, including the UNHCR.

People who were forced to leave their countries and head to the European Union and its Member States in search of security have faced multiple challenges. These include the risks of becoming victims of trafficking, “black market transplantologists” or sexual exploitation, and of being the target of intolerant, discriminatory and racist language. Unaccompanied children are at particular risk.

The tendency to legitimize pushbacks is a cause for concern. As we know, asylum seekers are often subjected to violence, intimidation and prolonged detention during such operations. Cases have been reported in Spain, Croatia, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture has concluded that the actions of these countries constitute “clear patterns of physical ill-treatment”.

According to a report published in June this year by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, numerous serious violations of the rights of refugees and asylum seekers have been documented along the European Union's external border. The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) has been repeatedly criticized for its lack of attention to violations of the rights of arrivals in temporary accommodation facilities and on the ground. Together with the impunity for these unlawful acts and the lack of attention to such incidents, this poses a serious challenge to the rule of law.

Tighter migration policies and the failure over a period of many years to address issues related to search and rescue operations, rapid disembarkation and ensuring the safety of regular routes often lead to disappearances or deaths. In 2022, the International Organization for Migration recorded 2,967 deaths and disappearances at EU maritime borders. Most of them happened in the "graveyard" of migrants and refugees, in other words the Mediterranean Sea.

The recent tragedy when a boat carrying between 400 and 750 people capsized off the coast of Greece is illustrative in that regard. As a result of the absence of a swift rescue response by the authorities in Athens, dozens of people died and hundreds are missing. The duty to rescue persons in distress at sea without delay is a fundamental rule of the international law of the sea. Commenting on this tragic case, UNHCR representatives made it clear that "States have an obligation to render assistance to those in distress at sea regardless of their nationality, status or the circumstances in which they are found, including on unseaworthy vessels, and irrespective of the intentions of those on board." Assistant High Commissioner for Protection Gillian Triggs called upon the European Union to "put safety and solidarity at the heart of its action in the Mediterranean".

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated occurrence. In February this year, the UNHCR conducted a survey among thousands of refugees in European countries. According to their testimonies, they were often subjected to pushbacks, threats, intimidation, violence and humiliation. The same is happening at land borders, where refugees are brutally pushed back in harsh weather conditions.

Mr. Chairperson,

These cases clearly demonstrate the urgency of the problem of protecting the rights of refugees and migrants in the OSCE area. This is particularly important in view of the increasing number of statements in several participating States about refugee fatigue, such as the case in late May in Krasnystaw, Poland, whose residents declared themselves "tired of the arriving Ukrainians". We call upon the countries of the Western alliance to stop violating their international obligations to protect the rights of migrants and refugees, to cease lecturing others and to finally start taking responsibility for their actions, also in the neighbouring regions.

Thank you for your attention.