

**Keynote Address**  
**UNHCR Deputy High Commissioner**  
**22<sup>nd</sup> Conference of the OSCE Alliance against Trafficking in Persons**  
**"Protection: upholding victims' rights and strengthening assistance"**  
**4 April 2022**

Excellencies,

Delegates,

Colleagues,

Conflict, persecution, generalized violence and insecurity continue to force millions of people - over 90 million by our last count - to flee their homes in search of safety. And of those, many face conditions of poverty, discrimination, unemployment and a lack of resources in exile, compelling many to travel further afield in search of opportunities.

With challenges for refugees to reach safety, and with limited legal means for regular and orderly migration, opportunities for the criminal business of traffickers and smugglers are ripe.

Amidst tightening visa regimes and border controls, the many barriers imposed by States to legal entry often have unintended consequences, including fuelling these very criminal businesses. In many regions, criminal networks control informal transit routes and have both the resources and contacts to overcome States' deterrence efforts. They charge increasingly high prices to move desperate refugees, and often prey on vulnerable people in the process.

To illustrate the consequences of this, let me introduce you to Maria, a Nigerian woman who fled deadly fighting in her village. With no surviving family, no support network, and no financial resources, the promise of domestic work in Europe was all Maria needed to embark with a rag-tag group on the dangerous journey north. The group was ambushed by armed men in the desert, and left there to die of hunger and thirst until, for a brief moment, they believed they were saved by strangers. But their respite was short lived and Maria was soon subject to savage violence, and forced into prostitution for over a year. She was only released when, stricken by illness, she no longer served a purpose for her captors. Then, relying on the good will of strangers, she received medical treatment and continued her journey across the sea to Europe with smugglers.

This is but one of thousands of testimonies of refugees who have fallen prey to traffickers and which we have collected through our “Telling The Real Story” project<sup>1</sup>, a flagship initiative to provide communities with trustworthy information on the risks of such dangerous journeys.

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This story is unfortunately not unique to Maria, or to Nigeria. Sadly, millions of people on the move are at risk of trafficking. In the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, the Tigray region in Ethiopia, Pakistan, Turkey, Lebanon, and countless other countries and regions that host refugees and internally displaced people, weak security and socio-economic conditions heighten people’s vulnerabilities to trafficking.

In many conflict- and post-conflict settings, the breakdown of public institutions combined with deteriorating rule of law and extreme violence (often gender-based) provide fertile ground for trafficking in persons.

Many, faced with a lack of resources, family, and community support see no option but to resort to smugglers in search of safety or opportunity, and offer material possessions to traffickers eager to take advantage of people's desperation.

For some, as was the case for Maria, this journey begins along the land routes from Sub-Saharan Africa to and through North Africa – routes along which abuse, violence, rape, extortion, torture, trafficking for sexual exploitation or forced labour are all too common. For many, unspeakable brutality begins well before the spotlighted leg of their journey across the seas to reach Europe.

Along these routes, the UN Refugee Agency - UNHCR - and our partners work tirelessly to identify those who have suffered harm, to map risks, and document abuses. These are the important first steps to prevent trafficking and provide protection to those who have already been victimised.

The heightened risk faced by displaced women and children in humanitarian crises linked to conflict is well documented. Addressing this risk requires robust victim identification mechanisms, along with access to protection and comprehensive aid for survivors. This is why we have redoubled efforts along the routes leading to and across the Mediterranean to provide protection and increase access to third-country solutions for refugees, including through evacuations to Emergency Transit Mechanisms in Niger and Rwanda, resettlement, and family reunification. Critically, survivors must not be penalized or stigmatized for their involvement in unlawful activities they may have been compelled to engage in.

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<sup>1</sup> [Home - Telling the Real Story](#)

The increasing risk of trafficking in recent years has led the UN Refugee Agency to reinforce protection for refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons, and stateless.

Our work with States to address trafficking in persons is adapted to each context. In Ukraine, a senseless war has displaced over 10 million people in recent weeks<sup>2</sup>: 4 million into neighbouring countries and 6.5 million within Ukraine. Governments, local authorities and host communities have provided incredible support and the EU has taken the unprecedented step of activating the Temporary Protection Directive.

In spite of this outpouring of solidarity, the huge displacement caused by war, in what has been the fastest growing refugee crisis since the second world war, increases the risks of trafficking, gender-based violence, and sexual exploitation and abuse for refugees fleeing Ukraine. Risks are great for women and children, representing 90% of those fleeing the conflict. Unaccompanied and separated children, including those who used to live in care institutions in Ukraine, are especially vulnerable.

Anecdotal information about persons approaching refugees at border crossings, in reception facilities and other locations with dubious or too-good-to-believe promises of work, free accommodation or transportation points to clear risks that women, boys and girls may fall prey to unscrupulous individuals, or well-established criminal networks: this occurs especially where there are no systematic vetting and registration systems in place for volunteers and organisations supporting refugees.

Echoing these concerns, Europol recently warned that Ukrainian refugees are at risk of sexual and labour exploitation and forced criminality at different stages of their flight, not only in the immediate aftermath of the conflict. And while news of the first identified cases of trafficking is trickling in, we remain acutely aware of the extreme challenges faced by both law enforcement and humanitarian actors to identify such cases.

To respond to these risks, UNHCR and partners are stepping up and tailoring prevention efforts immediately, including through our “Stay Safe” campaign. Together with UNICEF, we are setting up “Blue Dots” (information and support hubs) at strategic locations such as border crossings, train and bus stations and reception centres. These provide safe spaces for refugees to receive information, counselling and protection services.

We are also advocating for vetting and registration arrangements for those who provide accommodation or transport to ensure refugees seeking help are not exposed to exploitation

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<sup>2</sup> [UNHCR - Ukraine emergency](#)

at the hands of criminal actors, and that any abuse or misuse can be reported to the appropriate authorities and perpetrators held to account.

We are cooperating and coordinating closely with key anti-trafficking partners, including UN agencies, notably IOM, UNODC and UNICEF, and European partners, including the EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator, and of course, the OSCE, as well as civil society organizations. Within UNHCR's Regional Refugee Response, we are working to establish a Task Force on Anti-trafficking to support States' and civil society anti-trafficking efforts.

In receiving countries, we plan to support and scale up national referral mechanisms to identify, assist and protect victims of trafficking; step up targeted prevention among the refugee population, and; respond to cases in a manner that is both gender- and age-sensitive and responds to trauma.

Our work in other crises informs our response, and efforts to mainstream and embed anti-trafficking action from the outset of our humanitarian work. The Global Protection Cluster's Anti-Trafficking Task Team, co-led by UNHCR and IOM, is fostering information exchange, coordination and mainstreaming of anti-trafficking action within the protection response in Ukraine.

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The war in Ukraine is on everyone's mind, but we cannot forget that millions of others also face the dramatic consequences of conflict. People in Ethiopia, Yemen, Burkina Faso, Myanmar, and other countries across the globe continue to suffer. And poverty, inequality, injustice, and discrimination – all root causes of trafficking in persons – are a reality for millions of refugees across the globe, and often for the communities who so generously host them.

To address these long-term challenges, the UN Refugee Agency – UNHCR - complements life-saving protection and aid with efforts to promote the social inclusion of refugees into their host communities. We are building a more comprehensive model of response with a broader coalition of development and other partners at the international, national, and local levels to address the immediate and longer-term needs of refugees and host communities. When people have access to safety and opportunity, and when solutions are real, they become more resilient and self-reliant. Facilitating access to labour markets and other forms of livelihoods for forcibly displaced, and removing barriers to their inclusion, promotes their participation and contribution to host communities. Faced with this, traffickers can no longer capitalize on vulnerabilities to lure refugees into fraudulent and abusive travel and employment arrangements.

But these are longer-term efforts. In the short-term, we must improve our collective capacity to screen populations to identify survivors of trafficking, and to establish referral pathways to aid and protect. It is challenging work, there is no doubt about it, given the clandestine nature of trafficking and the fact that survivors rarely self-identify. Yet, where good cooperation and coordination exists between all relevant actors, including asylum authorities, we do far better in survivor protection and support.

Before closing, allow me to return to the story of Maria. In her case, as in others, we have a responsibility to ensure persons who fear persecution in their country of origin, either because of the circumstances of their departure or because of a fear of being trafficked are afforded international protection. We must consider the consequences Maria and other survivors of trafficking would face if returned to their country and, where relevant, consider non-refoulement obligations under the 1951 Convention and international human rights law.

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To conclude, please allow me to outline three recommendations for your consideration and discussion in the coming days.

First, while States retain the right to regulate entry into their territories, mitigating trafficking risks and providing adequate protection to victims of trafficking requires them to adopt protection-sensitive entry systems and meet the commitment outlined in both the Global Compacts on Refugees and for Migration to strengthen legal pathways for refugees and migrants.

Second, we call on States to end the impunity of traffickers and ensure better aid and protection of survivors, regardless of their willingness or capacity to cooperate with authorities. This includes the identification of international protection needs of survivors and persons at risk of trafficking to ensure their access to asylum procedures and durable solutions, including, where appropriate, in the form of third country resettlement.

And finally, it is critical that all of us - civil society, states, multilateral institutions - make or redouble efforts to address the drivers of conflict and persistent root causes of displacement and trafficking: violence, poverty, inequality and injustice. Because, to quote the UN Secretary General: “for predators and human traffickers, war is not a tragedy. It’s an opportunity – and women and children are the targets”<sup>3</sup>.

Thank you for your kind attention and concerted action.

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<sup>3</sup> [Secretary-General's opening remarks to the press on the war in Ukraine | United Nations Secretary-General](#)