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Statement

by

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Executive Committee,
Honorable Ministers and Heads of delegation,
My close friend High Commissioner for Refugees,
Colleagues from the UN system,
Ladies and gentleman,

Through you, members of the Executive Committee I want to pay tribute to all UNHCR colleagues for their tireless efforts and steadfast commitment to the cause of the unprotected and most vulnerable Africans. Indeed I address this august Assembly with Africa in mind, given the special focus of this session.

In 2013 the number of people of concern to UNHCR has capped 51 million, of which about a third are Africans. Despite progress in many indicators, including on governance, as it will be confirmed in today's release of the annual installment of the Mo Ibrahim Index, forced displacements is an area where the continent is disappointing. The number of refugees, internal displaced persons, and asylum seekers are all increasing. Images of the horrors in the CAR and South Sudan, Mediterranean boat people or dying migrants in the desert, are real and graphic. There is no way they should be placed under the blanket of the Africa rising narrative. Over 7 million Somalis remind us protracted conflict and complex emergencies can last and they do affect entire neighborhoods. That is why we need to understand the complexity of these social and political developments. Forced displacements blur African gains and confuse perceptions. The toxic combination of discrimination, demonizing, sexual violence, stereotyping and xenophobia, is all too familiar. Managing diversity has been identified as the number one common governance challenge in the continent by the Africans themselves, through their Peer Review Mechanism. African countries of course should know about it as they live with its consequences. The bulk of refugees are actually hosted by neighbors.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Unfortunately the story I just narrated is not Africa specific. Since the agreement reached in 1991 for a humanitarian coordination, preparedness and response capacity, by the UN General Assembly, this field has never been so vast. In many parts of the world the toxic combination I just alluded to is as real and graphic as in Africa. From Ukraine to Gaza, Colombia to Afghanistan, Syria to Myanmar, the list is long and stretches far and wide. UNHCR never had so many people of concern, despite data demonstrating a diminishing number of conflicts. They are part of new trends that include what is designated as extremism. Is it new? Is there something we should be aware as we try to bring the dots together?

You will have little patience for broad philosophical readings but let me indulge your patience for a couple of insights.

The international architecture resulting from the post 2nd World War, with the establishment of the United Nations at its centre, is based on the principles of the sovereign State, the so-called Westphalian State. The Westphalian system that was previously regional in scope and civilizational in identity, slowly evolved into a universal framework. Today's erosion of sovereignty in many domains, as a result amongst others of economic globalization and technological developments, certainly, has flatly reduced the power of the State. The western influenced secularism, or separation of State and religion, has also been accelerating and contributing to a particular reaffirmation of legitimacy. The international system, on the other hand, has, little by little, transformed individual rights into a universal value system. The principles of neo-liberal democracy, and its forms of public accountability, became the embodiment of a new internationally legitimized State authority.

When the new legitimized and accepted forms of State authority are challenged we invoke, as my brother Adama Dieng just did, the R2P and other recent additions to international law. The idea of a global responsibility to protect those exposed to mass

atrocities is rather special. Some say it is both redundant and utopian. Redundant from a legal perspective when it prescribes States do prevent genocide and mass atrocities within their borders. And utopian when it believes others should spend scarce resources to deal what others failed to prevent. R2P from idea to norm epitomizes the evolution of our notions of State sovereignty.

What we have been missing -since the end of the Cold War- is a true strategic reflection about new forms of hegemonic power, not necessarily State-led, the ones protagonized by non-State actors, those who do not conform to the rather well structured distribution of power... the Westphalian way. Why is this important? Notably because the State legitimate use of power and authority is being challenged. With it secularism is being challenged. And of course democratic values are also being challenged. This is not an African or islamic issue. It is a worldwide phenomena. Just pay attention to the growth of intolerant populist movements everywhere.

The more the other views, the views of the alienated ones, are repressed, the more they turn into conflict as a way of asserting themselves. For the contestants of the accepted or established order what they proclaim is legitimate power and authority. Not the power and authority we are ready to accept, but the power and authority they construct as an alternative. With the new communication technologies networking is experiencing a multi-fold increase, making the contestations I just described, transnational. We are, therefore, in a world where local conflicts can get either connected to transnational ones or be perceived at the global, or better said international level, in isolation from the local context.

Pastoralists missing the economic transitions in marginalized sahelian countries become easily associated to extremism alone. Deep rooted illicit flows to exploit Great Lakes coltan we all use in our cell phones, just perceived as resulting from ethnic conflict. Evaporating fish stocks and toxic dumping in the coast of Somalia, obliging fisherman to reconvert their ways of life just reduced to piracy. The examples abound.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Extremism, and in particular religious extremism, such as practiced by Boko Haram, Seleka, Anti-Balaka, Al Shabbab, some of the Libya militia or other AQMI and Mujao, are manifestations of a larger trend. The fragile institutions in the countries where they operate offer them a fertile ground. Corruption, inequality, lack of political representation and cultural alienation, and sometimes repression, all contribute to make it attractive to the unemployed youth to try other, hopefully, more rewarding prospects: be it on earth or in heaven.

If we are to offer solutions to counter these strong ideological movements we need to embrace complexity and comprehensiveness. We shall need more than passing references to socio-economic dimensions of conflict. We need to avoid terminology simplifications such as the use, shall I say abuse, of the expression "post-conflict". Human society always had and will have conflict. In Africa and everywhere. Our common aim is rather to reduce violent conflict.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Globalization has contributed for a few to amass wealth equivalent to hundreds of million people. The financial crisis of 2008-2009 is still externalizing its impact to the most marginalized and vulnerable. The interconnectedness of these developments with conflict and the displaced may seem remote, but it is, nevertheless, real. We live in an unequal world, which makes us responsible for common but differentiated responsibilities, in more ways than just trade or climate sustainability.

We live at a time of interregnum. The old is fading and the new is not yet born. Our protection imperative will have to navigate this complexity.

I thank you.