

Statement by Mr. Mohamed Ali Alhakim
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ESCWA
Regional Consultation on International Migration in the Arab Region
In Preparation for the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration
United Nations House, Beirut, 26-27 September 2017

Ministers, heads and members of delegations of Arab States,

Representatives of civil society organizations,

Experts,

Colleagues and representatives of United Nations organizations,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you all to the United Nations House in Beirut, and to thank you for participating in this regional consultation in preparation for the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration. Special thanks go to the Secretariat of the League of Arab States, the International Organization for Migration and all ESCWA partners in the working group on international migration in the Arab region. I would also like to thank Ms. Louise Arbour, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for International Migration, for her efforts in promoting regional dialogue and ensuring that the global compact covers trends and issues specific to the Arab region.

It is my pleasure to address this meeting in my capacity as Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, an organization with a mandate in a region with unique geographic, political, social, economic and environmental characteristics, which all impact migration patterns and population movements to and from the region.

This meeting is being held at a time of unprecedented global political change, indicating a need to deal with the migration phenomenon in an unprecedented manner. The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants highlights that the time has come to change the discourse to reflect the scale of international migration, and what it holds in development opportunities if carried out in a safe and orderly fashion, thus guaranteeing the protection of human rights and a brighter future for migrants.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The world is witnessing unparalleled international migration. Our region in particular has seen a large increase in international migrants for myriad complex reasons, and in multiple patterns. In 2015, Arab countries hosted 35 million migrants while over 26 million Arabs emigrated, half of whom remained within the region. Some chose to migrate voluntarily in search of education and work opportunities or a better life; others were forcefully displaced, fleeing from conflict and war in their countries or from occupation threatening the security and future of the region as a whole. In all cases, however, migration is forced even when it begins voluntarily.

Migration, especially forced migration, is frequently seen as a phenomenon with negative consequences, and migrants are treated as an economic burden for host countries, exhausting infrastructure, depleting natural resources, and increasing competition for employment opportunities. However, the positive effects of migratory movements are often overlooked. Is migration not the oldest plan to reduce poverty?

Migration helps build the economies of destination countries by bringing new skills and ideas, and elements that enrich cultural and social diversity. Migrants also contribute to the economies of countries of origin. For example, Arab countries receive over \$50 billion in remittances annually - an amount four times larger than official development assistance to the region. Migrants regularly return home with new skills, ideas and valuable opportunities for growth and investment.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Migration is a reality that crosses walls and barbed wire, which countries must deal with and plan for in order to protect human beings and drive development. To manage this transnational reality, regional and international cross-border cooperation is vital. The international community has recognized this reality, and world leaders have participated in a series of dialogues since the dawn of the millennium on migration issues and their effects. Our region has promoted dialogue and regional cooperation, and developed a vision of common principles and approaches to guide our countries in dealing with migratory movements. Those dialogues have resulted in numerous commitments, which we aim to present at international events and processes, in collaboration with our partners at the League of Arab States and the International Organization for Migration.

Pursuant to commitments resulting from various regional consultations, Arab countries have updated their policies and adopted promising practices that reflect peoples' aspirations to live with dignity. Some have adopted integrated policies to manage migration through a rights-based approach, others have included migration as a pillar in their national development plans, and others still have worked to integrate expatriates through initiatives enabling them to participate in decision-making and encouraging them to invest in their countries. The region has developed several initiatives to limit restrictions on migrant labour, and has enacted legislation to combat human trafficking and protect illegal migrants and reduce their suffering.

However, such accomplishments fall short of achieving the target of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development on facilitating orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies. Many countries still need to update their laws and systems to contribute to improving migrants' quality of life, ensure access to public services such as health and education, assist in family reunification, and enable migrants to efficiently participate in the labour market. The region requires mechanisms to benefit from migrants' efforts, knowledge and expertise, and processes to limit irregular migration and the resulting hardship and loss of life.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This meeting's agenda contains important and thorny items. Today, there is a dire need for concerted national, regional and global efforts to formulate the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration, and to identify the standards and principles governing international migration in all its dimensions. The greatest challenge, however, is to translate the compact into national policies and practices and bilateral and regional agreements, which consider migration from an objective and modern perspective that encompasses both its opportunities and challenges.

Over the coming years, we hope to work together with regional and international organizations, Arab Governments and non-governmental actors through an integrated approach to identify common practical solutions for our shared issues. It pleases me to see among the participants today representatives of all stakeholders.

In support of your tireless efforts, ESCWA commits itself to broadening platforms for constructive discussion and fruitful meetings, which pave the way for the adoption of integrated policies by drawing upon our commonalities and regional data, knowledge and expertise.

In conclusion, I would like to repeat my words of welcome, and wish you every success in your discussions towards a regional approach that reflects the region's realities and priorities in the global compact to which we aspire.

Thank you.