Mr. Chairman,

UNHCR wishes to thank Secretary General Sekimizu and members of this committee for the important step to convene this Special Session. We share your conviction that unsafe mixed migration by sea calls for urgent action nationally, regionally and globally.

It is important to be clear. This is not solely a Mediterranean issue. This is a global phenomenon today. We are seeing the tip of a much larger iceberg. When we observe recent events in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, or the complex yet invisible emergency in the Gulf of Aden or the Red Sea, or the situation in the Mediterranean, each of us is understandably viewing and analysing developments through our institutional or industry lenses.

UNHCR has heard the shipping industry's concerns loud and clear. We applaud the extraordinary courage and compassion of ordinary seafarers who undertake rescues. We share your concern that these rescues are often carried out by vessels that are simply not equipped for the task. When faced with the suffering and desperation of fellow human beings, captains and crews do their best in extremely difficult circumstances to uphold proud maritime traditions and international law. But seamen on these front lines have often told us,"We are doing a job for which we have not been trained or prepared."

Like you, we humanitarians are convinced that State responsibility, translated into action, is the answer. We cannot waver from or dilute the legal and humanitarian duty to assist anyone—seafarer, commercial passenger, refugee, migrant, anyone—who finds him/herself in distress at sea. This means that States, individually and collectively, need urgently to fill the gaps that international shipping is currently being asked to fill.

We need life-saving mandates and operations in locations experiencing the greatest pressure. This requires quite urgently delivering adequate State SAR services, capacity-building support where needed and setting in place a robust web of State search-and-rescue mechanisms and facilities. Of course, border-policing mandates are also needed but let’s remember the victims are not criminals.

UNHCR’s focus is on the men, women, boys and girls on those boats who need international protection and may never be able to go home again. At least half the people on those boats have valid reasons for seeking protection abroad as refugees. Syrians crammed into rubber boats today, for example, are refugees fleeing for their lives and not ‘migrants’.

UNHCR has therefore long shared your deep concern about the lack of stable, pre-agreed and predictable disembarkation arrangements. It cannot be put off any longer.
When Assistant High Commissioner for Protection Volker Türk was here at IMO Headquarters in March, he emphasised a number of basic truths about the desperate and dangerous sea journeys that are occurring around the world. Weeks later, thousands have been rescued from sinister death ships in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea orslave camps ashore, while others remain adrift as I speak. More will join them. In the Gulf of Aden, increasing numbers of people have been compelled to flee conflict in Yemen, while thousands of Ethiopians continue to take boats to reach Yemen.

Our first priority can only continue to be to find ways to limit loss of life and suffering at sea through search and rescue.

We must also recognize that unsafe mixed migration at sea is the visible manifestation of deeper, systemic root causes: conflict, insecurity, persecution, chronic poverty and marginalization of groups and communities, failed development linked to bad governance, and the sentiment that things will really never get any better.

Some describe the situation in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea as an ‘emergency’, and wish to treat it as such, whereas the cure in this and other situations will require an array of measures that also make inroads into root causes.

Sea journeys are most often just one leg of a much longer journey overland. Throughout it, smugglers and traffickers ply their heinous trade. Criminality and violence abound and the trip can end brutally at any point along the way. Women and unaccompanied children and adolescents are especially easy prey. We must do more to protect and advise them along the way.

The starting point for any talk of ‘prevention’ is that most are refugees fleeing conflict and persecution. Any solution that turns on blocking escape routes, on deterring or penalizing desperate people, or on blocking the right to seek asylum, is no solution at all.

This means that while law enforcement is clearly needed, is not a solution on its own. As one speaker said at our High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection at Sea last December, that would be like squeezing a balloon. There is already one clear example. Syrians and others are now transiting through or exiting Turkey to take small, unsafe boats to Greece, alarmed at the prospect of armed sea operations in Libya and the barriers placed at land borders. So far this year we have seen an extraordinary six-fold increase in the number of arrivals by sea to Greece. Others try to enter Europe through the Western Balkans. The balloon is already ballooning from Libya elsewhere.

We must therefore use holistic approaches to find solutions. We need to address this issue through a range of policy and legislative responses – for example on migration, development, and peace-building. If people have peace, stability, and viable economic options at home, it is less likely that they will risk their lives at sea. We need to bring to justice those who put them in danger for profit and protect victims from intimidation and retaliation at the hands of both smugglers and traffickers.

UNHCR is deeply grateful for its excellent cooperation it enjoys with the IMO and we look forward to working closely with you during this deeply challenging period of history.

Please place my regards, Statement in the record of these proceedings.

UNHCR Statement