Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for being here today as we discuss the dire conditions facing Rohingya refugees who have fled their homes in Myanmar for Bangladesh. Today’s event is an opportunity to brief you on my recent mission to Cox’s Bazar with UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake; to update you on some of the latest developments; and to share some thoughts on the way ahead.

As you know, more than half a million refugees have sought refuge in Bangladesh since 25 August, fleeing violence and persecution in Myanmar. This brings the total number of Rohingya refugees in Cox’s Bazar to well over 800,000 people.

During my visit to Cox’s Bazar, I heard heart-rending accounts of people who experienced appalling human rights violations and abuses in Rakhine. Many have suffered terrible atrocities. In a safe space run by UNFPA, a group of 24 women told me stories of fathers, husbands and young sons killed in front of them, and of brutal rapes and other atrocious sexual violence. They fled as their homes were burnt behind them. Similar stories of pain, loss, grief and despair permeate the camps and settlements in Cox’s Bazar. A report released last week by OHCHR suggests that “the destruction of Rohingya villages in northern Rakhine State, and other serious human rights violations…were executed in a well-organized, coordinated and systematic manner.” These findings are very disturbing, and are consistent with the many accounts that we heard from the refugees themselves.

The massive influx has created what is now the world’s fastest-growing refugee crisis, putting enormous strain on already limited basic services. New refugees continue to arrive – including over the last few days. They are arriving traumatized and destitute, often with nothing at all. I met an 11-year-old boy cradling his severely malnourished two-year-old sister in a UNICEF therapeutic feeding centre – he had walked for nine days to reach the camp. His mother had died on the journey, leaving him – an 11-year-old boy – in sole charge of his four younger brothers and sisters. More than 11,000 people arrived in Cox’s Bazar in just one single day last week. New arrivals, as well as prior refugees, urgently need assistance.
to meet their immediate needs and to promote the longer-term, just solutions that they deserve.

Concerted efforts to scale up the response are under way. In this regard, I want to reiterate my tribute to the generosity and humanity of the people and the Government of Bangladesh, who have welcomed the refugees and offered them safety and assistance when they had nowhere else to go. The Government should be commended for keeping its borders open throughout the crisis. In our meetings, Government officials showed themselves to be truly committed to working with humanitarian partners to ensure the best possible response. Local communities have likewise shown tremendous generosity in welcoming new arrivals. Host communities and the Government of Bangladesh, though, must not be left to shoulder the responsibility alone. The international community must now come together to support them to meet the enormous needs on the ground.

Response efforts are already having an impact. UN and NGO partners – both local and international – have delivered impressive results. As of 12 October, these combined efforts had provided emergency food assistance to 536,000 people; water, sanitation and hygiene support to 370,000 people; health care to 272,000 people; and shelter kits to 110,000 families. Recognizing the serious risk of disease outbreaks in overcrowded settings with poor sanitation, partners have vaccinated more than 135,000 children against measles and rubella, and more than 72,000 children against polio. A cholera vaccination programme targeting 650,000 people – led by the Ministry of Health with support from WHO and UNICEF – is also under way and scheduled to conclude this week. This is the second largest cholera vaccination campaign ever.

But much more is needed. The results to date cannot be sustained or expanded without a considerable increase in resources, keeping pace with new arrivals and growing needs. For example, about one third of food assistance beneficiaries have not yet received full rations. While partners have built more than 14,000 latrines, surveys show that about half of them are already nearly full in some areas. We urgently need more resources to fill these and other gaps.

Earlier this month, we revised the initial response plan to account for the needs of new arrivals as well as refugees already in Bangladesh, and host communities, who are themselves vulnerable. The revised plan aims to assist 1.2 million people. It is seeking US$434 million to cover humanitarian operations for six months – from September to February. Donors have already provided start-up funding, and I have allocated $19 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund. As of today, nearly $106 million – or 24 per cent of requirements – has been committed or disbursed in support of the appeal. On 23 October, I will co-chair a high-level donor pledging conference in Geneva with my colleagues from UNHCR and IOM, together with support from our co-hosts, ECHO and Kuwait. We are counting on your participation and your generosity at this event.

Looking to the future, it is essential to recall that the current crisis is only the latest wave in a long-standing history of persecution, neglect and marginalization of the Rohingya. During my visit, I met refugees from earlier rounds of violence who spent more than twenty years in
the camps with very few opportunities to better themselves or to provide a brighter future for their children. This cannot continue, and we must support efforts to find a sustainable, comprehensive solution for all refugees. That will require stronger support to host communities too, and engagement with development actors to work with the Government and humanitarian partners in order to improve access to basic services and livelihoods.

Towards that end, I must stress that the origins of this crisis lie in Myanmar, and ultimately the solutions must be found there as well.

We must also keep our focus on the critical situation of the remaining Rohingya population in Rakhine – which the best available estimates currently amount to up to another half million people. This is a population that has been facing a vicious cycle of persecution, discrimination and violent repression. In recent weeks, their situation has deteriorated further. Communities that were already marginalized and insecure are now feeling more vulnerable and unprotected than ever before. Unless urgent measures are taken to reduce the cycle of violence and intimidation, there is a very real risk that we will yet see hundreds of thousands more fleeing across the border into Bangladesh. Humanitarian needs in Rakhine, therefore, have never been greater.

We remain extremely concerned about gaining humanitarian access to Rakhine, as it remains essentially impossible for humanitarian actors to properly assess or meet the humanitarian and protection needs of IDPs and affected communities. UN agencies and international NGOs continue to be denied access to people in the affected areas in northern Rakhine, and it has not been possible to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the scale of the needs across Rakhine. The few organizations permitted to operate in northern Rakhine struggle to meet the immense needs, and they themselves have called for the UN and INGOs to resume the provision of assistance. In central Rakhine, where over 120,000 people remain confined in camps without freedom of movement, UN and INGO humanitarian staff are also facing serious restrictions.

The UN stands ready to support Myanmar in peacefully and sustainably addressing the root causes of this crisis and promoting peace and prosperity for all communities, including through the implementation of the recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission. The Rohingya in Myanmar must be afforded the most basic of human rights: to non-discrimination and humane treatment; to a nationality and to a safe home; to freedom of movement; and to be able to work and access basic services. I also take this opportunity to reiterate the Secretary-General’s calls for the Government of Myanmar to end all violence; to ensure unfettered humanitarian access; and to ensure refugees’ right to safe, voluntary returns to their places of origin in a secure environment. Preliminary discussions between the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar on returns are encouraging, and we hope to see concrete steps to address this catastrophe very soon. Governments across the international community must also use all their leverage and influence to support a lasting solution to this tragic and mounting crisis. We seek your support in maintaining this focus as we move into the pledging conference later this month, and beyond that, to ensure an effective, immediate response, and just, comprehensive solutions in the longer term.
I would like now to invite my distinguished colleague, the Honourable Speaker of the Bangladesh Parliament Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury to address the meeting. The Honourable Speaker has been in her position since 2014, following more than fifteen years as an advocate practising in the Supreme Court of Bangladesh. Her legal career has focused on human rights, constitutional law, gender issues and sustainable development, among other topics. I want to thank her personally for joining us today, and on behalf of the international community, again thank the generosity that her Government and people have shown to the Rohingya in Bangladesh. You have the floor.

[Remarks by Speaker of Bangladesh Parliament]

Before we open the floor to Member States, I would like to invite representatives of UNHCR, IOM and UNICEF to make brief remarks. I think it’s important for us to hear from UNHCR and IOM in light of their important roles – particularly on coordination and protection – in this refugee crisis. I’d also like to give an opportunity to UNICEF to add to my remarks, as their Executive Director joined me in Bangladesh.

[Remarks by UNHCR, IOM and UNICEF]