

NGO Statement on International Protection
Agenda item 4(a)

Dear Chairperson,

This statement is delivered on behalf of a wide range of NGOs.

Two years after the adoption of the New York Declaration, we welcome the proposed Global Compact on Refugees. Several large hosting States are already implementing the CRRF and improving their national policies, prioritizing protection, resilience and self-reliance. However, States with greater capacity should also take their share of responsibility through increasing resettlement and humanitarian assistance and considering debt relief and concessional loans. NGOs are keen to engage with States to turn words into action.

Despite progress on the GCR, reality on the ground remains sombre: increasing numbers of displaced people, including from Myanmar and Venezuela; shocking instances of civilians being targeted in conflicts, for example in Yemen and Syria; and new challenges, such as the first ever Ebola outbreak in a conflict zone in DRC, all call to draw attention to five key protection concerns:

First, displaced people continue to face restricted **access to protection and lifesaving assistance**, often being confined to areas contaminated by unexploded ordnances. In Myanmar, where brutal attacks and human rights violations against the Rohingya people have left thousands dead, and forced over 700,000 people to flee, humanitarian organizations continue to face serious restrictions in accessing affected communities. In Yemen, ongoing hostilities prevent essential supplies from entering the country, hindering the provision of lifesaving assistance. And, in the Mediterranean, rescue boats carrying hundreds of refugees remain stranded awaiting a country or port willing to accept them. We urge States to uphold their obligations under international law including humanitarian, refugee and human rights law as well as binding Security Council resolutions. States must also allow humanitarian organisations access to people in need of protection, including those stranded at sea.

Furthermore, while repatriation is an important durable solution when it is voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable, we note with alarm that refugees continue to be pressured to return prematurely to their countries of origin. Thus, over 2 million Afghans have recently returned, often unwillingly, to areas still largely affected by conflict and fragility. Syrian refugees also face pressure to return despite widespread insecurity across their country. In Southeast Asia, Chin refugees face cessation of protection and return to Myanmar, with uncertainty over their future. We therefore recall that *non-refoulement* is a core principle of international refugee protection and a non-derogable norm of customary international law. We demand States to respect this at all times.

Moreover, as resettlement remains an important protection tool, we call on third countries to increase places and process cases swiftly. In particular, NGOs commend the UNHCR-facilitated evacuations from Libyan detention centres to Niger, which saved many women, men and children from

dehumanizing conditions. However, we note that too many have to wait for months in transit shelters in Niger before being resettled, which increases their desperation and can throw them again into the hands of opportunistic smugglers.

Second, with two-thirds of the world's displaced population being **IDPs**, there is an urgent need for strategies to ensure they receive adequate protection and assistance. We therefore welcome the GP20 Action Plan, which provides for a range of stakeholders including the UN, NGOs and States to collectively reflect on needed contributions. UNHCR's efforts to update its policy on internal displacement is also welcomed as an opportunity to meaningfully engage with NGOs, in line with the Principles of Partnership. We emphasise that any proposed changes to coordination mechanisms should complement existing structures. The policy should also clearly outline how IDPs may receive assistance, protection and solutions on a par with refugees and other persons of concern. The policy should also acknowledge the need for stronger data and evidence on internal displacement and recognise the critical role of partnerships in improving data interoperability and promoting innovation.

Third, at least 10 million people remain stateless worldwide, with the largest group, the Rohingyas, continuing to face indiscriminate violence. The **statelessness crisis** in the Dominican Republic also affects tens of thousands of people of Haitian descent, and those defending their rights are frequently harassed and intimidated. Discrimination against women in nationality laws remains a major driver of statelessness. We ask governments to change their laws and procedures to ensure every birth is registered, and all people without access to nationality can acquire it in countries where they were born or have significant ties.

Fourth, women and girls, who make up about half of the world's displaced population, often face a high risk of sexual and gender-based violence with limited access to maternal or sexual and reproductive health. Older women particularly encounter barriers in accessing protection and assistance, partly due to a lifetime of gender-based discrimination and specific age- and disability-related vulnerabilities. NGO research in Somalia recently showed that more needs to be done to ensure aid does not put women and girls in greater danger. In this context, we welcome UNHCR's new Age, Gender and Diversity Policy, which includes updated commitments to refugee women and girls. It emphasises the need to hold all humanitarian actors and donors accountable. We also urge all actors to systematically consult men, women, boys and girls, including persons with disabilities, in displaced and host communities, to ensure that assistance is safe and designed to meet their right to protection.

Fifth, wider efforts are needed for political and practical action to expand access to **quality education** for refugee and host community children and youth. A UNHCR report indicates that almost half of refugee children did not go to school in 2016. Education is undeniably a protective measure for the millions of children who have fled violence, and were forced out of their homes.

To conclude, the New York Declaration and the Global Compact offer a unique opportunity to tackle international protection challenges. However, these texts are only meaningful when they result in concrete changes. NGOs stand ready to support and adapt our ways of working to put agreed commitments into practice.

A detailed version of this statement is available on icvanetwork.org

Thank you