NGO statement on the Middle East and North Africa

Agenda item 3 (a) ii

Thank you Chair.

This statement has been drafted through a wide consultation with NGOs and attempts to reflect the diversity of views within the NGO community.

Syria

1. The Syria conflict is the world’s single largest driver of displacement. ¹

2. Inside the country, International Humanitarian Law is routinely violated by multiple actors, as civilians and civilian infrastructure remain the targets. Meanwhile humanitarian access to the most vulnerable in Syria is regularly subject to obstruction and delay.

3. Most refugees from Syria continue to be denied access to enter neighbouring countries. NGOs have grave concerns for the 40,000 asylum-seekers stranded at the border with Jordan ² and the 58,000 Syrians reportedly at the border with Turkey. This undermines their fundamental right to seek and enjoy asylum.

4. More than 60 per cent of the Palestine Refugees from Syria were forcibly displaced as a result of the conflict. Although discrimination against and refoulement of refugees are forbidden by international law, they are a daily reality for Palestine refugees when fleeing Syria. These breaches are practiced by neighboring countries and other states including European states signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, with no action taken by the international community.

Regional response to Syrian refugees

5. The recent London conference brought funding pledges to the response in the region as well as commitments by neighbouring countries. Valid legal stay and access to

¹ http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php
² According to Jordanian Border Guard Force and UNHCR, 29 February 2016
documentation are key preconditions to be able to access services. Without them, refugees are forced to consider negative coping strategies such as embarking on unsafe boat journeys to reach Europe.

6. The EU must reinforce Turkey’s efforts to accommodate the continuing influx of refugees, although we caution against efforts to externalize migration management. UNHCR, among other actors, must be ready to support the EU and Turkey in realizing their Joint Action Plan, specifically in the areas of resettlement; implementation of legislation granting access to education and health services; and assistance to refugees and host communities. The NGO statement on Europe discusses the other arrangement.

7. In Lebanon an estimated 70% of Syrian refugees and almost all Palestine Refugees from Syria have no valid residency permits due to burdensome regulations. This not only impedes access to humanitarian assistance and livelihoods opportunities, but also leads to extreme coping mechanisms. NGOs stand ready to assist the Government of Lebanon and UNHCR to promote improved protection such as the right to access territory, ability to access and maintain valid residence, obtain civil and identity documents, and the right to legal and dignified livelihood opportunities.

8. In Jordan, refugees in the community are forcefully relocated to formal refugee camps, or even deported back to Syria, while others are not able to leave the camps. Since August 2012, Palestine Refugees from Syria have been prohibited from entering the country. Refugees from Syria face problems receiving aid outside of the camps, registering their children in schools, accessing public health services at subsidized rates, and registering births, deaths and marriages. We applaud UNHCR’s commitment to its Alternatives to Camps policy, and encourage to pursue strategies in line with the policy in all other contexts.

Other issues of concern

9. NGOs commend the increased pledges by countries such as Canada, the United States of America and Australia to support Syrians in displacement. NGOs urge that UNHCR and resettlement countries, including European governments, make every effort to ensure that 10 per cent of the current registered refugee population in the region is resettled by the end of this year.

10. In the region, 10% of refugee children are working as informal labor. The NGO community encourages UNHCR and governments to enhance registration and identification for unaccompanied and separated children, and to increase efforts to determine the best interests for at-risk children.
11. We remind UNHCR that other populations of concern, including Palestinians, Iraqis, Somalis, Sudanese, Eritreans and Afghans, are also present throughout the region. The assistance and protection that they receive must be commensurate with that of Syrian populations. Deportations of specific groups have been met with condemnation by human rights groups and are a marker of the precarious situation faced by asylum seekers.

12. In the last year, more than one million Iraqis were displaced by violence. Support for informed, dignified, safe and voluntary return is essential; however, NGOs are concerned with the lack of freedom of movement for the 440,000 people who recently returned, restricted on ethnic and religious grounds.

13. In Iraq, increased efforts are needed for negotiation of humanitarian access into the hardest-to-reach and most critical areas. Amidst the violence, decreases in funding and assistance coupled with a lack of access to documents and registration threaten the delivery of even the most basic services and further endanger social safety nets.

Yemen

14. NGOs recognize the important work that UNHCR and Yemeni authorities are carrying out to assist the 250,000 primarily Somali refugees along the southern and western coastal regions and in Sana’a’s urban areas, and would encourage increased responses for refugees in the other areas of the country.

15. NGOs encourage stronger leadership from UNHCR in ensuring that the necessary steps be undertaken to more adequately and systematically respond to the 2.8 million IDPs in Yemen in need of shelter and protection. Furthermore, we would encourage UNHCR to more proactively engage with the full range of potential partners in Yemen in order to meet these needs.

North Africa

16. The security and political environment in Egypt has resulted in a deteriorating protection environment for refugees and asylum seekers, including Syrians, Palestinians and other populations, which has led to instances of people attempting unsafe journeys to the EU and beyond. NGOs ask that UNHCR continue to work with the Egyptian government to ensure not only registration and access to livelihoods and social services, but also effective protection from arbitrary arrests, detention and deportation.

17. Libya continues to be characterized by instability with Libyans facing worsening conditions of internal displacement and 2.44 million people estimated to be in need of
protection in the country. 2,892 of the 153,842 people taking the dangerous sea crossing from Libya to Europe have died. More must be done to strengthen response systems, especially for rescue at sea, improved procedures for identifying those who die at sea, and efforts to pursue alternative arrangements for migrants and refugees who are subject to detention in Libya.

A longer version of this statement can be found at www.icvanetwork.org.

Thank you Chair.