Ministerial-Level Pledging Conference on
Syrian Refugee Resettlement and Other Forms of Humanitarian Admission
9 December 2014

NGO Statement – Extended Version

This statement is delivered on behalf of a wide range of non-governmental organizations, which have thousands of staff providing vital services to Syrian refugees as well as supporting resettlement programmes across the globe.

High Commissioner, Ministers, State Secretaries, Ambassadors, honoured guests, Mister Chair,

For the fourth year in a row we commend the tremendous efforts of Syria’s neighbours in hosting millions of refugees and recognise them for opening their borders, hearts and communities in solidarity with the Syrian people. We thank those members of the international community who have supported these efforts through generous funding. Yet, given the duration and magnitude of the present crisis, these efforts are unfortunately no longer enough.

Syria has generated one of the largest refugee crises since the Second World War. The international community’s response needs to match both the scale and urgency of the crisis. All of us in this room today have done a lot, but we must do more. There simply is no alternative, especially for the Syrian people.

Today we renew our call with even greater urgency for a global Comprehensive Plan of Action that will build on UNHCR’s recommendation for increased international responsibility-sharing for Syria’s refugees. Whilst recognising the significant challenges, we appeal to Syria’s neighbours to keep your borders open in line with international obligations. Otherwise, we fear that people fleeing the conflict in Syria will have nowhere else to go. International support for host states must also dramatically increase, as must resettlement commitments. And more work should be done to ensure that all violations of international law cease in Syria and those responsible are held to account.

As a matter of urgency, we call for a significant expansion of safe and legal routes and more generous and timely procedures to assist refugees from Syria seeking protection in countries beyond Syria’s immediate borders. Furthermore, we call for the expansion of durable solutions for the most vulnerable.

In particular:
UNHCR estimates that over 10% of Syrian refugees are in need of resettlement. We urge traditional and non-traditional resettlement countries to come together and resettle at least 180,000 Syrians – or 5 per cent of the projected refugee population – by the end of 2015. We urge member States’ selection criteria to be based on need, consistent with UNHCR’s Resettlement Handbook. Priority should be given to women and girls at risk, unaccompanied children, medical cases, survivors of trauma or torture, elderly refugees and those with disabilities, refugees facing immediate security risks, LGBTI refugees, refugees at heightened risk of sexual violence, and refugees who require family unity. Palestine refugees from Syria should also not be excluded. Further, although humanitarian admissions programs can constitute a very important complement to vulnerability-based resettlement programmes, they should not be a substitute for resettlement.

Resettlement processing requires signification staff and resources. We therefore urge States here today to follow the example of the US, Canada and Norway by investing in capacity, expertise and deployments in the different locations to facilitate processing.

We call on States to creatively explore other alternatives that would allow an even greater number of Syrians to arrive in third countries, such as humanitarian visa programs, expedited family-based immigration processes, community sponsorship arrangements, academic scholarship opportunities, and labour-based immigration opportunities – affording protections in line with the 1951 Refugee Convention.

These efforts should be guided by refugees’ individual needs and wishes. Resettlement and other forms of admission do not preclude a resettled refugee from one day voluntarily repatriating to Syria once conditions exist for a safe and dignified return.

As NGOs, we would like to highlight that even with the generous efforts made by Sweden and Germany, the European Economic Area hosts less than 2% of Syria’s 3.2 million registered refugees.

Further, tomorrow many of us will participate in the High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection at Sea. We are extremely concerned that actions like fencing and increased surveillance of external land borders will continue to push more refugees to take dangerous sea journeys. We already see the sharp increase in refugees from Syria and
other conflicts throughout the region packing into the “coffin boats.” Furthermore, discontinuing support for life-saving interventions like Mare Nostrum will only result in more deaths. Other regions are grappling with this challenge, including the Asia Pacific, and we hope to see protection-sensitive solutions proposed in the coming days which recognise that we are talking about people who have hopes and dreams of a good life, not just statistics.

To conclude, High Commissioner, Mister Chair, while the enhanced resettlement, asylum and protected status initiatives will not solve the refugee crisis, it will provide an immediate lifeline to individuals who need it most. It will also tangibly demonstrate solidarity with Syria’s neighbours who are generously hosting millions of Syrians, and will help preserve protection space. Of greatest importance, it will offer 180,000 or more people the prospect of life in safety and dignity by the end of 2015.

High Commissioner, Mister Chair, we thank you.