NGO Statement on the Middle East and North Africa

Agenda item 3(a)ii

Thank you, Chair.

Six years after the outbreak and despite a recent ceasefire, the Syrian conflict remains the defining trigger for protection concerns in Syria and across the region. There are 6.3 million IDPs and about 4.9 million people displaced regionally.\(^1\) 13.5 million people require humanitarian assistance, including some 4.7 million people in hard-to-reach locations.\(^2\)

The vast majority of those displaced internationally continue to be hosted by neighbouring countries in the region, namely in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt, which is an expression of those countries’ willingness to help, as much as of the failure of the larger international community to contribute to more equitable responsibility-sharing on hosting refugees. The continued securitisation of borders, particularly in Europe, North America, and Australia, has led to reduced access to asylum procedures, the effects of which are now increasingly also being felt within the MENA region, as states emulate approaches being taken in the Global North.

Resettlement, one of the most visible forms of international solidarity, continues to be under threat from domestic political trends in many resettlement countries, including in Europe and the US. Despite three major international conferences focused on responsibility-sharing for refugees during the last year, wealthy countries have failed to offer significantly more resettlements and other forms of admission for Syrian refugees. Currently, less than 3% of them have been resettled.\(^3\)

The recent suspension of the US resettlement programme and indefinite travel ban for Syrian nationals have caused a further intensification of this crisis. We join UNHCR in urging the US government to resume this programme, and we further insist on protection obligations to be honoured in accordance with the 1951 Refugee Convention.\(^4\)

Inside Syria, people continue to live under dire humanitarian conditions, even though the scale of direct military confrontations, including assaults on civilians, has reduced since the ceasefire took effect. Following continued evacuations under life threatening conditions, Eastern Aleppo has been witnessing a considerable return movement of families from Jibreen

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\(^1\) [http://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html](http://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html)

\(^2\) UNOCHA update as of 26 January


\(^4\) The 1951 Refugee Convention particularly calls on states to apply its provisions "without discrimination as to race, religion or country of origin" and enshrines the principle of *non refoulement*. 
shelter -- which is currently hosting approximately 3,500 IDPs -- while more than 11,000 IDPs moved to western Aleppo given the dire living conditions in the shelter. Ongoing conflict continues to impact daily life in other areas, including Damascus, where reconciliation initiatives have been unsuccessful. Attacks by ISIL continue in various parts of the country, contributing to continued insecurity and adverse impacts on daily life.

As Jordan closed its borders to newly arriving refugees in 2016, significant numbers of Syrians are now stranded in “The Berm” area, between Syria and Jordan where access is difficult. About 80% of the Syrian population live in urban host communities, while about 100,000 have to remain in the official Za’atari and Azraq camps. Bureaucratic hurdles have made life difficult for refugees, adding to the high cost of living and the lack of adequate economic resources.

Unfortunately, the issuance of 200,000 work permits supposed to enhance Syrian refugees’ access to work has been slow and complicated. Furthermore, UNHCR should clarify which services refugees may no longer receive once they obtain a work permit.

We commend UNHCR for a major advancement in identifying persons with disabilities (PWD) in Jordan, where the Disability Task Force has incorporated the “Washington Group” set of questions into refugee registration interviews, as well as vulnerability assessments. We recommend replicating this approach to other countries in the region.

Lebanon hosts about 1.5 million refugees from Syria, in addition to an estimated 280,000 Palestinian refugees. One in four people living in Lebanon is a refugee from Syria – the largest concentration of refugees per capita worldwide. In a context of limited livelihoods opportunities, the political climate for hosting refugees in the country has worsened recently. There has been talk of “safe zones” within Syria, in the expectation that refugees in neighbouring countries could be moved back. Legal entry and stay have been tightened since October 2014. Residence permits are expensive and difficult to obtain, and many refugees are pushed to provide evidence of a Lebanese sponsor. As a consequence, at least 70% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon lack legal stay.

Currently about 3.1 million IDPs in Iraq are in need of humanitarian support, in addition to approximately 225,000 Syrian refugees. According to UN-OCHA and IOM reports, a total of 135,500 people are currently displaced as a result of the conflict in Mosul city that began on 17 October 2016, meanwhile some 15,000 returnees are estimated in the newly-accessible regions, who are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. Iraqi forces have been in the process of retaking Mosul, having recently entered the western side of the city, where around 700,000 civilians were previously estimated to be trapped. UN-OCHA estimates that in 2017 as many as 1.2 million additional civilians may be forced from their homes. There is also an expectation that the operation in Mosul has the potential to be the single largest humanitarian operation in the world in 2017.

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1 50,000 such work permits were to be provided by the end of 2016 but c. 38,000 permits have been issued so far.
2 Based on pilot use, UNHCR identified 27% of households with disabilities, well above information currently on-file with UNHCR.
3 Université Saint-Joseph Institut des Sciences Politiques, Survey on Perceptions of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, Full Report (V.1.0), August 2015
As the situation continues to deteriorate within Libya, nearly half a million people have fled within the country and across the region, including large numbers of IDPs, as well as asylum seekers and refugees. In addition, local NGO partners have reported increased numbers of migrants arriving in the southern cities, increased tribal tensions between Awlad Suleiman and Qadada tribes, and ongoing conflict between Tebou and Libyan Arab tribes. Human rights abuses persist, particularly in the context of detention and many marginalized IDPs are forced to live in very poor conditions, sheltering in bombed and abandoned public buildings. Although agencies work to alleviate the conditions of IDPs, INGOs and UN agencies have not been able to implement at scale.

We commend UNHCR’s efforts to assist, including through local registration and cash-based interventions. NGOs can support such initiatives and call on UNHCR to make full use of this capacity, in collaboration with local implementing partners, who are the only ones with sufficient access in many locations across the country.

We are deeply concerned about the continuing systematic violence against refugees and migrants in Libya. Multiple reports describe the harrowing conditions, including rape, torture, executions, and other sufferings. NGOs have documented prolonged arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment prevalent in centres where refugees and migrants are detained after being intercepted at sea by Libyan entities performing coastguard activities. We are deeply troubled by developing EU plans to transfer responsibility for managing migratory movements along the central Mediterranean route to Libya. This will neither reduce human rights abuses, nor end smuggling. Instead, it will significantly increase harm and suffering by promoting arrests and detention in Libya. We therefore support the UNHCR-IOM call to “move away from migration management based on the automatic detention of refugees and migrants in inhumane conditions in Libya”.9

**Egypt** is home to thousands of refugees and asylum seekers arriving mainly from Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Eritrea, Yemen, Ethiopia and Palestine.10 The Egyptian Mediterranean coast has become a key departure point to Europe.11 Over 3,400 people have been reported dead or missing at sea in 2015, and many more are likely to have perished. Factors behind increased movements to Europe include loss of hope, deepening poverty, deteriorating psychological and medical conditions, limited livelihood and education opportunities, and aid shortfalls.

Despite being signatory to the 1951 Convention and 1969 OAU Convention, Egypt maintains several reservations on its obligations, which in practice combine to disadvantage refugees in terms of access to work and structural barriers to services such as health, education, shelter and employment forcing them to live and operate on the fringe of society, and further isolating them from the host community. UN agencies and INGOs lack funding resources to foster policy reforms on the mentioned sectors and expand operational capacity.

In **Yemen**, 18.8 million people12 continue to require some form of humanitarian assistance or protection. 3.2 million people have been displaced since the beginning of the active conflict in

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10 As of end of 2016, a total of 250,671 asylum-seekers and refugees were registered with UNHCR in Egypt.

11 According to UNHCR, departures from Egypt now represent 10% of the overall arrivals in Europe.

12 Out of Yemen’s 27.4 million inhabitants.
March 2015. More than half of the population (14.1 million people) is suffering from food insecurity and malnutrition. Civilians have endured the worst of this conflict with recurrent violations of humanitarian and human rights law. NGOs call on UNHCR to help ensure IDPs and refugees have their basic needs fulfilled, that they have access to basic services, assistance, adequate protection and long term solutions.

Concerns about other displaced groups in the region – including Palestinians, Iraqis, Somalis, Sudanese, Eritreans and Afghans – remain. Their protection needs should be meaningfully addressed by states and UNHCR. Lack of attention to their needs can lead to protests, as seen with Sudanese refugees in Jordan in 2016.

 Forced displacement has been and remains a fundamental cause and consequence of statelessness in the region, a trend which has been amplified by the Syrian crisis.13 Statelessness adds a further level of vulnerability to refugees, and must be taken into consideration in order to find durable solutions. NGOs remain concerned at the low levels of accession to both the 1954 and 1961 conventions on Statelessness and call upon all states to take steps to ratify these treaties. States should also develop national legislation to ensure the reduction and elimination of statelessness and the protection of stateless persons. NGOs support UNHCR’s campaign to eradicate statelessness by 2024.

In conclusion, we remind all actors that emergency response in conflict situations must systematically be based on needs and respect for humanitarian principles.

Thank you, Chair.

13 http://syrianationality.org/