Mr. Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This statement has been drafted in consultation with, and is delivered on behalf of, a wide range of NGOs and aims to reflect the diversity of views within the NGO community.

Mr. Chair, since last year’s Standing Committee Meeting on Protection, we have seen highs and lows. The highest high was unquestionably the 19 and 20 September summits. In turn, there were several lows: divisive politics scapegoating refugees and migrants, shocking cases of asylum seekers and refugees being turned away (refoulement), increased detention of asylum seekers, the bombing of the Rann IDP settlement in Northern Nigeria, abduction of UNHCR staff in Sudan, shrinking protection space, serious gaps in asylum and reception systems, sexual assault and physical violence suffered, tragic deaths, and a forecasted reduction of the total number of resettlement slots on offer.

Given the scope of forced displacement today, we would like to draw the Standing Committee members’ attention to five key aspects we believe are central to international protection.

First and foremost, we reaffirm the central importance of international protection and the principle of non-refoulement.

Based on the 1951 Refugee Convention, UNHCR’s core mandate is to ensure the international protection of uprooted people worldwide. Yet, in many parts of the world refugee protection is not enshrined in legislation, is woefully under-resourced or wilfully ignored, and in particular instances actively undermined by policies and actions which fail to meet minimum standards in humanitarian response.

NGOs are concerned that in South Sudan ruthless military tactics have driven a massive exodus of asylum seekers into Uganda. Uganda has demonstrated
tremendous willingness to receive refugees, but NGO and governmental capacities are being pushed to the breaking point, risking effective protection.

NGOs remain concerned about the exodus from Pakistan of Pakistani Ahmadis and Christians due to national blasphemy laws, ongoing persecution, and the targeted killing of minorities. These refugees, like many others around the globe, suffer further mistreatment, indefinitely held in administrative detention centers in third countries, deprived of fundamental rights essential to protection.

UNHCR states in its note that it observed pushbacks in Central Europe and the Western Balkans, but also in other parts of the world. At the June 2017 UNHCR-NGO Annual Consultations, the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection mentioned non-refoulement as the “core of the core” of protection. Non-refoulement is binding on all States at all times, even if they are not party to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol. The NGO community calls on all governments to respect, in all circumstances, the principle of non-refoulement.

Second, we wish to raise the importance of statelessness in our discussions on international protection.

The existence of about 10 million stateless people today represents a serious failure to provide protection at the national, regional and international levels.

To achieve UNHCR’s stated goal to end statelessness by 2024, NGOs call upon States to put in place robust safeguards for preventing and addressing statelessness and protecting stateless persons through legal frameworks. NGOs urge States to strengthen support of UNHCR’s #IBelong Campaign, the Coalition on Every Child’s Right to a Nationality, and the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights. Finally, and most importantly, NGOs call upon all States to accede to the Statelessness Conventions, and enact reforms of nationality laws that discriminate on the basis of gender, religion, ethnicity, and ability. UN agencies, including UNHCR, and civil society organisations must make available their expertise and capacities in other to support States in the application of their international protection obligations.

NGOs welcome the ongoing work on an ExCom Conclusion on Machine Readable Travel Documents. Provided proper data protection measures are in place, issuance of such travel documents can improve access to rights, durable solutions and complementary pathways. NGOs continue to be ready for constructive engagement with ExCom members and UNHCR on this topic.
Third, we want to highlight the issue of access to education, especially for refugee children and youth.

Education is essential for the enjoyment of other refugee rights, and must remain an integral part of UNHCR’s Framework for the Protection of Children. We urge States to keep child protection a priority and to ensure the basic human rights of children, consistent with the principle of best interest of the child.

NGOs call on UNHCR and host countries to rapidly enlist the aid of development partners to provide funding for adequate classrooms and other facilities for refugees, recognising the value of engaging and providing access for host communities.

Let’s recall that youth access to education was identified as one of the ten challenges for refugee youth following the 2016 UNHCR-NGO Consultations.

NGOs commend UNHCR for its support of the Initiative for Child Rights in the Global Compacts, and call upon States to fully support this initiative, including specific support for Goal 5: ensuring access to basic services for all refugee and migrant children, including access to health, education, and psychosocial services.

Fourth, resettlement and complementary pathways are central protection mechanisms that must be enhanced.

In 2015, less than one per cent of the 16 million refugees and asylum seekers worldwide were resettled. While the focus should be on sharing responsibility, States tend to evade that responsibility through border control, ‘securitization’, and low acceptance quotas.

Canada’s very robust, privately sponsored refugee program should be replicated, and States should ensure private and community sponsorship programmes come not within but in addition to resettlement quotas.

The CRRF puts significant emphasis on returns as part of durable solutions for refugees. In this perspective, NGOs wish to stress the importance of the principle of voluntariness. It is also important to ensure the sustainability of reintegration. Reports about, for example, Afghanistan and Somalia indicate that returns occurred over the past year in unfavorable conditions, thus questioning the voluntariness and sustainability.
Fifth, and finally, partnership is crucial.

Mr. Chair, UNHCR fittingly concludes its note on international protection by emphasizing the importance of partnership. NGOs can play a complementary role in advancing protection. We have taken forward commitments made during last year’s UNHCR-NGO Annual Consultations focused on youth, High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Children on the Move, and Structured Dialogue partnership workshops in Tanzania, San Salvador and Greece. We have followed the process of UNHCR’s internal review of how it operationalizes protection responses to IDPs. We have mobilized in the run-up to the 19 September Summit, and are now working to advance towards the eventual Global Compact on Refugees. This is the tenth anniversary of the Principles of Partnership, and we look forward to discussing them further during this Standing Committee.

A longer version of this statement will be made available on icvanetwork.org

Thank you, Mr. Chair.