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 demonstrating global solidarity in response to large movements of refugees and migrants. 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, growing asylum backlogs, sexual assault and physical violence suffered by people on the move, tragic deaths at sea and by land, and a forecasted reduction (rather than expansion) 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, as the South Sudanese army acts with impunity against the civilian population. 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. Where needed, this would ensure special protection for vulnerable displaced women and children and that international legal obligations are upheld, in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. 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. States should call upon the assistance of partners in situations of crisis and/or when States are unable, due to circumstances or otherwise, until States authorities’ recovery.

NGOs welcome the ongoing work on an ExCom Conclusion on Machine Readable Travel Documents, which is meant to focus on stateless people as well as refugees. Such travel documents can indeed bring concrete benefits for both categories through providing legal identity. Provided proper data protection measures are in place, issuance of such travel documents can improve access to rights, durable solutions and complementary pathways. NGOs welcome the fact that civil society perspectives were included in the informal briefing on technical and administrative aspects of travel documents organized on 29 May. NGOs continue to be ready for constructive engagement with ExCom members and UNHCR on this topic. NGOs also reiterate the position that a Conclusion on resilience and self-reliance, although postponed, should be covered by ExCom’s future workplan.

**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 are upheld at all levels, consistent with the principle of best interest of the child.

This must include, among other things, early childhood development, providing quality basic and secondary education for refugee and displaced children to enable them to realize their full potential and equip them for the future. It is also important to provide an adequate curriculum and formal provision of legally recognised educational certificates and basic freedom of movement rights in order to pursue higher education where available. UNHCR and governments must provide greater attention to and resources for secondary education for refugee children, especially in protracted displacement situations. 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. The young refugees consistently identified the difficulty of obtaining recognition for their existing qualifications and accessing quality learning, formal education, and skills-building opportunities as a serious challenge, which should be addressed.

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 enables Canadian people and communities to directly sponsor refugees. This initiative should be replicated, and States should ensure private and community sponsorship programmes come not within but in addition to resettlement quotas. Community-based resettlement and pathways have proven to be most effective and comforting for refugees.

We urge States and UNHCR to make the refugee status determination and resettlement process more comprehensive and efficient so that the refugee experience is minimized, and resettlement can take place sooner and for greater numbers. NGOs look forward to working with UNHCR and international and national organisational partners to establish ways to strengthen our joint capacities.

UNHCR must support NGOs working towards the CRRF objectives and urge States to adequately support host communities and the self-reliance of refugees. This should be prioritized along with possibilities of viable third country resettlement and effective local integration, ensuring refugee rights and pathways to naturalisation.

The CRRF also 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. For many refugees the decision to return is often combined with a range of factors leading to concerns that repatriations might have been neither entirely voluntary, nor dignified. 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 in advancing protection – partnership with States, partnership with other organizations, and partnership with civil society. NGOs can play a complementary role in advancing protection. We have taken forward commitments made during the June 2016 UNHCR-NGO Annual Consultations focused on youth, the December 2016 High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Children on the Move, and Structured Dialogue partnership workshops in Tanzania (October 2016), San Salvador (November 2016) and Greece (December 2016). 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 the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework and eventual Global Compact on Refugees. This is the tenth anniversary of the Principles of Partnership, and these Principles could serve as the basis for moving forward with the CRRF’s “whole of society” approach, which we look forward to discussing further during agenda item 5.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.