



## UNHCR's second meeting with NGO partners on preparedness and response to COVID-19 in refugee situations

25 March 2020  
Online

### Participants:

#### UNHCR:

- Gillian Triggs, Assistant High-Commissioner for Protection
- Grainne O'Hara, Director, Division of International Protection
- Robin Ellis, Deputy Director, Division of Emergency, Security and Supply
- Sajjad Malik, Director, Division of Resilience and Solutions
- Arafat Jamal, Head, Partnership and Coordination Service

#### NGOs:

- About 80+ NGOs.

### Arafat Jamal

- This is our regular outreach with partners on COVID-19.
- We have decided to make this weekly, so that we remain in close contact during the crisis.
- We will feature one topic per week with one UNHCR particular speaker. There will also be regular items for discussion.
- Welcome your inputs on what is required.
- Quick update where we stand:
  - UNHCR is not closed, we are open for business but adapting how we do business. All our services are operating but in a different manner. We want to hear from you how to best adjust.
  - UNHCR is part of the UN Global Humanitarian Appeal, which will be launched today at 3:00 pm GVA time. As part of this appeal, UNHCR is putting forward a request for USD 255 million related to additional activities we consider necessary to respond properly to COVID-19. We are focusing on immediate interventions. This appeal supersedes UNHCR's previous appeal of USD 33 million (now incorporated into the Global Appeal).
  - UNHCR has received about USD 42 million already, mainly from Canada and Japan.
  - The Global Humanitarian Appeal builds on three strategic priorities:
    1. Contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and decrease morbidity and mortality.
    2. Decrease the deterioration of human assets and rights, social cohesion and livelihoods.
    3. Protect, assist and advocate for refugees, IDPs, migrants and host communities particularly vulnerable to the pandemic.
  - You may be wondering where you come into this and where your programs are: 1) In the appeal itself there is a mechanism and a fund for NGOs to also seek funding. 2) with UNHCR specifically, this figure does not yet include NGOs' and IPs' needs. The appeal is a rolling figure, a moving document and over the next month we will be consulting with all of you on building up a more complete picture of needs. As the appeal say, to the extent possible, we will be going through existing mechanisms, e.g. in non-refugee contexts it will be through Humanitarian Coordinators and HRPs and in refugee contexts through the Refugee Response Plans and the Refugee and Migrant Response Plans.

### Gillian Triggs

- Communicating effectively with NGO partners is vital.



- Want to hear NGOs' questions and comments.
- Extraordinary crisis time, reaching unprecedented level of needs.
- Principles upon which Refugee Law and practice have been based over the past 70 years are under considerable strain, If not under threat.
- Stress how important our partnership with NGOs is to our work being effective and how we will very much be relying on you in the future to help protect the fundamental principles underpinning our work.
- On communication:
  - We must communicate with PoCs. Refugees are at front and foremost in everything we do. Critical to engage with them, especially those in dire circumstance, often with minimal means of communication.
  - We have to maintain communication between ourselves and in tracking and monitoring protection trends and risks.
  - We also need to communicate with the public; the public is anxious, fearful, constrained and with risks to their livelihoods, education, health. We need to explain to the public what the continuing work in humanitarian is and particularly what the work of UNHCR is.
- This calls for balanced responses and balanced messaging. Key position we are clear about at UNHCR is: States can and should take all necessary and proportionate measures to protect public health, but we want to advocate – and we need your support on this – for States to also meet international legal standards related to refugees and asylum-seekers rights. Saying clearly you can protect borders and health while respecting international law.
- Also need to be very careful of not fostering messages that risk stigmatizing refugees and other PoCs. Refugees, IDPs, asylum-seekers are particularly vulnerable to diseases and of course COVID-19 but in messaging that, we do not want to link them to the virus and foster stigmatization.
- Refugees communities have had few cases confirmed so far despite our worries.
- Messaging must be about encouraging states to take necessary and appropriate containment measures, that are not discriminatory and should be temporary, not permanent.
- Particular risks to protection mandate:
  - Closure of borders and denial of entries has become almost the default position over the past weeks. States have the right to protect their borders and introduce appropriate measures of quarantine, but if someone claims asylum, they have the right of entry even if they are submitted to health measures. It is one of the most fundamental risks we see.
  - Much greater risk of *Refoulement* as well.
  - Many asylum procedures are suspended, and restrictions do not allow people to submit their asylum applications.
  - Significant restrictions on movement and growing use of immigration detention in a way that is becoming dangerously close to arbitrary detention being camouflaged as quarantine measure. This is a risk we are concerned about.
  - Social isolation, which need to be in place to contain the virus may also lead to loss of rights and to critical protection services.
- So, we need to find balances between health measures and respect for fundamental rights.
- Increasing concern: the underlying principles of Human Rights Law and Refugee Law are now under threat. We have a drift to externalization of asylum processes, observed over the last few years and particularly last few months where states send off to third countries the obligations to meet asylum procedures, where people are pushed back away from borders, growing risks of refoulement, a lack of access to basic services and discriminatory restrictions on access to livelihoods, jobs, education, etc. These have been concerns for some time, but we are now seeing the unthinkable: people being denied core refugee rights.



- Even greater concern: Fear that there will be a long-term impact of COVID-19 measures on refugees and asylum-seekers' rights. When this is over, or at least declining, there will be a risk that emergency measures will remain in place long-term: rise in arbitrary detention, exclusion policies and continued denial of access. We do not know this is actually going to be the case, we think the risk is very real.
- So we would ask NGO advocacy to remain alert, to protect fundamental democratic principles and rule of law, and part of this is the commitment to international protection.
- There may be other long-term impacts, e.g. greater need for localization of UNHCR work, greater capacity building where we may need to depend more heavily on local level actors. Support of NGOs in achieving that and guiding us will be very important.
- These are times calling for ingenuity, flexibility, rethinking how to react, encourage to meet fundamental rights, not only in the short-term but also in the long-term. We need to work with States in quiet diplomacy and actually some States are keen to do so but not always the case so need to be vigilant.

### **Grainne O'Hara**

- We are in this together and have collectively identified many protection challenges. We are working cross-divisionally within UNHCR, since there is not always a clear distinction between protection and operations: Each protection measure has to be operationalized and each operational measure has protection impact. For ex. the economic downturn will affect refugee communities but also their access to services, education, livelihoods, and led to protection risks such as rise in GBV, child labour, etc. Increase cash assistance can be an approach.
- Call NGOs to think alike with UNHCR and consolidate information on this.
- Beyond the question of access, we are arguing for flexibility to ensure mitigation measures so that refugees can be admitted.
- We are getting feedback from our field offices about how all this is playing out, some negative, some positive. In some instances, direct manifestation of refoulement inform of non-admission at borders, and in other countries we see positive examples of States issuing instructions on how refugees can be admitted with flexibility (e.g. Switzerland and Colombia).

### **Q&A**

#### **ICVA**

- We had sent a list of questions prior to the meeting; some have been addressed.
- Share fear and analysis about longer-term impacts. Maybe something that would call for joint/complementary UNHCR/NGO advocacy, which could be a theme discussed at another weekly meeting.
- UNHCR protection programming: questions around the appeal, UNHCR appeal is now past and we are looking at the consolidated one, could we have more details about protection programming as developed through the appeal?
- Could you detail UNHCR's COVID-19 specific protection programming in camps but also in urban and rural settings and maybe target specific vulnerable populations (e.g. elderly)? How does this relate to partners and community-based approaches?
- How UNHCR and other organizations are tailoring community engagement interventions for gender, language, and local culture in relation to increased risks of gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation?
- Questions about refoulement, two guidance issued by UNHCR, if you could explain more, is there more guidelines in the pipeline and if so, could NGO provide inputs. Then how have those guidances been used? Having guidance is interesting but it would also be useful to know



how you disseminate and raise attention from States in particular so that guidances are applied.

- We also had questions around the objectives and format of those consultations. During the first meeting last week, it was mentioned that those are weekly meetings at global level and that similar discussions would take place at regional and national levels. Can you articulate on the role you foresee for those global meetings *vis-à-vis* more regional/national ones? How are Bureaus involved? Could you also provide updates on those regional/national meetings and how to join these when relevant for us?
- Is there any specific UNHCR COVID-19 web page, where NGOs could find updates and information, especially as regard COVID-19 protection related issues and interventions?
- Finally, the last set of questions related to a subject not mentioned so far on this call: the GCR/GRF. Last December, one major theme that was not prominently addressed during the GRF was Health. What is UNHCR analysis on this in light of the COVID-19 crisis? Missed opportunity? Is this not telling us that this should be a major theme for the second GRF?
- Can we think of making use of or activating some GCR arrangements either for responsibility-sharing purposes (e.g. Support Platforms or ongoing pledges though the Dashboard) or protection purposes (e.g. could the Asylum Capacity Support Group play a role?)?

#### **Arafat Jamal**

- On the Appeal, there will be a lot of questions, I would suggest having one dedicated session on that, COVID programming and Appeal.

#### **Lutheran Worldwide Federation**

- More than a UN appeal, it is an effort made by IASC.
- Could you clarify your statement on the funds for the global appeal? Given that USD 245 millions do not include funds for NGOs, what does it include then? No funding for partners that will implement most of the activities under the Global HRP?

#### **Global Refugee Led-Network**

- Important that, when referring to refugee population, international actors talk in a way that does not exclude this population. There is a momentum.
- Looking at Asia for instance, there are undocumented Afghan people in Iran, people have died. We are documenting it.
- Lack of access to primary health is not covered also by UNHCR or nationals in Iran because several Afghans are not registered.
- With any crisis we deal with, refugees are the first and last responders to the crisis.
- Not wait for humanitarian and development actors. How we make sure, while creating this global response, we build on this community to advocate?
- We tried to have webinars with medical experts in urban areas and camps. There is not enough support, a lack of information in different languages; how to empower refugee-led organizations to do what some organizations cannot due to travel restrictions?

#### **Oxfam**

- Regarding the gender protection concerns, women will be affected differently as many are part of staff in health care systems, bear the burden of unpaid activities, there are increases in SGBV risks, etc. How is UNHCR dealing with this? How UNHCR adapts? There are Guidances in different sectors but have not seen anything on SGBV yet. Are you planning a guidance?

#### **Arafat Jamal**



- On the USD 255 million appeal, this covers UNHCR's needs. We have not yet included the total figure from RRP and RMRPs. We will have specific consultations on those two plans.

#### **Gillian Triggs**

- To ICVA: joint and complementary advocacy is important and can be useful. We could foresee a remote meeting leading to major key points we can agree on.
- Thanks also for mentioning the GCR/GRF. The Forum produced 1000+ pledges and we expect a report in the coming days.
- The answer is yes, indeed, everything has its moment in time but notion of burden- and responsibility-sharing is an idea, which moment has come. We do hope to be able to speak more about the GCR as a way to respond to COVID-19 with solidarity.
- And yes, the Asylum Capacity Support Group should be brought in and I hope to see how we can use this mechanism to encourage support at country and local level.
- To GRLD, need to work with capacity building at local level.
- Broadly speaking, the IASC has issued a number of guidance documents, some on elderly persons. on scaling-up humanitarian response, in camp and out-of-camp settings, etc. and others will come. UNHCR works with IASC to ensure principles are out.
- Very aware that producing guidance is one thing and getting it out to the field, where needed, is something else. So we work to have those translated, produced in clear forms and used to educate and train people.

#### **Grainne O'Hara**

- Want to clarify that in our COVID-19 response, we are dealing with the needs of persons without status discrimination. Work is ongoing for refugees, IDPs and persons in need of international protection, even those not registered.
- The HC message is clear: Inclusion, inclusion, and inclusion in national health systems and of refugees and IDPs in active responses within their communities.
- Of course there are constraints, e.g. health systems being close to breaking point. So we need to move from guidance to what is practical nationally. How we operationalize.
- On protection programming, more information will follow when the appeal is out but on generally, UNHCR protection or operations/protection interface are constantly being adjusted. The fact that a level-2 declaration has been announced by IASC gives us more flexibility to ensure simplification of programs, also in terms of partnership agreements.
- On community-based engagement, one of the first guidance we put out is communication with communities. This is important so that they don't feel isolated. We also work to foster and encourage community engagement drawing on refugees and IDPs skills set.
- Some negative and positive examples from the field: In Iran, UNHCR and other UN Agencies spearheaded an airlift of supplies for many Afghans (registered and non-registered). Hearing reports from other locations like Venezuela and Colombia, where community health workers are volunteering to assist refugees and IDPs.
- On guidance, the IASC is the principal platform where collective and individual guidance is posted, including some from UNHCR.
- Some guidance will be on Refworld website, not only accessible to NGOs but also Member States.
- We have 7 well-staffed Bureaus working under constraints, some working from home, etc. We need to adjust quickly to other ways of working but in some contexts, we are used to working remotely, for ex. because of security issues. In many UNHCR operations RSD is done remotely, with videos. Some have put RSD on hold but should not result to people being unregistered.



- A GBV guidance is in the pipeline. UNHCR is working closing with IASC, which will allow for consultation.
- UNHCR co-chair IASC result-group 2 where a lot of focus of issues in place including, SGBV, LGBTQI, elder, PSEA.
- Important to avoid risk of working in silos and producing too many guidances that would overwhelm people in the field.

#### **International Rescue Committee**

- On protection services: how we can ensure it is considered, not only on the health part? How to ensure protection and child protection is included?
- What are the plans on engagement made in SGBV?

#### **Care International**

- We welcome the dedicated efforts to focus more on localization, but it is not new and it is usually challenging to have resources on that. Training local organizations, protection of field visits, new guidelines... Are you planning sufficient resources for localization implementation/accompaniment of local partners?

#### **APRRN**

- Importance of communication is compelling at the moment. You mentioned things that go quite well, demonstration solidarity with refugees, maintaining of asylum by some States, etc.
- Idea of a UNHCR repository or data bank of good practices would be great, so people can upload and share information.
- Inclusion of AGD responsiveness, specific needs and sustainability, ensuring there is no duplication, is important.
- UNHCR level of engagement where we can have regional consultations would be great.
- Engaging GCR and GRF infrastructures is important. The Asylum Capacity Support Group, the Support Platforms and the pledges themselves. The response to COVID-19 is obviously cross-cutting, if we can have pledges around that, it will be great.
- There is also possibly the need to work with/through the UN Migration Network, linked to the approach detailed by Grainne (needs-based, not status-based).

#### **InterAction**

- What kind of training and capacity building will be put in place at local level for protection workers?
- How can UNHCR support non-relocatable staff?

#### **Global Refugee Led-Network**

- To what extent UNHCR response plan is prioritizing testing for the refugee population?
- Challenges: build on resources that will be required. What about the delivery, the messages, training packages? It has to be delivered on time.
- suggest working with GRLN and speed out the delivery.

#### **Islamic Relief**

- Giving the success during the GRF of engaging with other actors, particularly with private sector, how are you building on this and are you talking with private sector to support effort?

#### **Help Age International**





- Linked to Oxfam's question and comment on protection risks facing and not specified at groups at risk.

#### **Terre des Hommes**

- There are already protection gaps in some contexts. How to scale up protection capacity to respond?

#### **Gillian Triggs**

- We will need flexibility on part of donors but expect it will not be difficult to convince them. Looking forward to developing those commitments.
- We are including protection issues, children, aged, women perspectives etc. as priority issues in all we are doing. Assure you that we keep those in mind.
- The Forum was a success in persuading and encouraging aid specifically to COVID-19. Looking forward to developing that, it is a very good point.
- The private sector was an exciting part of the Forum. Expect to continue to work in that area.
- Appreciate the ideas of APPRN to have a dashboard on relevant information, we are working on one that will include good practices.

#### **Grainne O'Hara**

- UNHCR has been working for the past 72 hours to develop a dashboard with key issues. Populating it first with info from our colleagues and Bureaus. We would welcome NGOs' inputs to that, we need to find ways to add that. Will come back to you on this.
- Suggest to Arafat, giving the existing function of grouping mailing lists, to use these mailing lists, instead of doing a triage.
- To Help Age: reassure you that the elderly is a group with special needs, reflected in UNHCR case management system, rapid assessment in camp, other location and at borders. The elderly are a specific group and they are including in our assessments.
- See examples of GRF to redirect on COVID-19, with the Asylum Capacity Support Group, and maintain asylum through technology for instance.
- Working with UN migration network and IOM. This will have an impact on people on the move, so the link-up with the UN migration network will be important. Discrimination will not discriminate.
- For instance, OHCHR lead on IASC interim guidance on persons deprived of their liberty, and UNHCR is also working with it.
- To Care and GRLN concerns on sufficient capacity to support local NGOs: it is not forgotten. We will build on existing networks of IDPs and refugees that are doing amazing jobs and who are also impacted. We will be focusing on them and on their capacities.
- A question reflected by InterAction, on protection training, we will not be focusing only on health. Lot of guidance is being translated in languages to reach broader audiences and into ongoing capacities through webinars, etc.
- To the second part of InterAction's question on non-relocatable workers that could be re-tasked: already re-tasked people that cannot physically go out, filling backlog on RSD or RST for ex. (even if RST is in temporary suspensions). People are also being assigned virtually.
- The Division of Resilience is our twin sister, focusing particularly on emergencies, such as education, health, cash-based interventions, and other issues.
- On the guidance on how to adapt field delivery in the context of food delivery, how we ensure it takes place without risks for staff and recipients? The IASC guidance is out and many tips that we can apply to protection activities as well. Many of the guidance add up.



- IASC network is important. More data and guidance in pipeline, for ex. OHCHR is leading on detention, which is a specific protection interest for all of us. Working with them especially on rising resort on administrative detention.

#### **HIAS**

- Can you clarify UNHCR's sum in the appeal?

#### **Arafat Jamal**

- To HIAS : under the RRP's and RMRP's, partners will build their own budgets and plans. Then under the USD 255 million UNHCR is requesting through the Global HRP, we will work with NGOs but this doesn't include your exact needs. In the coming month we will work on RRP's and RRMRP's.
- We will continue this kind of meetings every Wednesday from 1:30 to 3:00 pm Geneva time.
- Next week, we will have Robert Hurt (IPMS).
- NGOs can suggest other speakers/themes and we can have another meeting on protection.
- Can subscribe to our UNHCR Partnership twitter account where guidances are being flagged.