

80th meeting of the Standing Committee
2020 High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges

Oral Update by the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection

Madam Chair, Excellencies and distinguished delegates,

Thank you for the opportunity to report on the outcomes of the High Commissioner's Dialogue held in December last year on Protection Challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Dialogue considered lessons learned from the health crisis and its impact on those forced to flee and their host communities, to ensure that in future we are better prepared for global emergencies.

Last's year's Dialogue was also intended to give concrete effect to the role of the Global Compact on Refugees, and to inform discussions within this committee as well as at the High Level Official's Meeting in December this year with respect to responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Dialogue was held virtually and was attended by more than 1,500 participants - an unprecedented level of engagement prompted by the health crisis and made possible by technology. In the spirit of the Global Compact on Refugees, participants included the voices of refugees, along with States, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, NGOs, development actors, humanitarian partners and global scholars.

The Dialogue took place over several weeks with sessions on Protection, Resilience and inclusion in health services, climate displacement and preparing in for prevention, protection and durable solutions.

The Dialogue identified many innovative ways to ensure access to asylum and to health, social services and education, which are detailed in the outcome document online, and many of which are also set out in the Report "International protection and durable solutions in the context of a public health emergency" submitted to the Standing Committee.

I will mention some of the key recommendations made by participants in the Dialogue.

An overarching message is recognition that the Global Compact on Refugees has demonstrated its enduring value in the pandemic. International solidarity, equitable responsibility sharing and support for countries hosting refugees, especially those with fragile health systems and facing economic challenges, remain the core principles informing responses to global emergencies in the future.

While the Global Compact on Refugees was severely tested soon after its birth in 2018 and within weeks of the Forum at which so many pledges were made, participants in the Dialogue confirmed that the Compact remains vital to UNHCR's protection mandate. As mentioned by my colleague, the Compact has a focus on durable solutions and adopts a whole-of-society approach so that all stakeholders – from governments to cities, parliaments, faith actors, NGOs, International Organizations, international financial institutions, the private sector,

academics, and refugees – have an essential role in ensuring that responses are people-centred and focus both on emergencies and longer-term prevention and recovery.

Dialogue participants noted that new and innovative partnerships called for by the Compact emerged from the pandemic. Most encouragingly innovative financing practices such as interest-free development loans, pooled funds for health systems, and refocused GRF pledges were adopted during the health crisis. These financial opportunities now need to be replicated and expanded to ensure better preparedness in the future.

In recognizing the centrality of the Compact on refugees, participants in the Dialogue asked that it be applied in a more systematic, rather than ad hoc, way to both emergencies and to longer-term impacts and development needs.

Specific recommendations include:

Participants reaffirmed the importance of the participation of refugees, and those internally displaced or stateless as a crucial in the response both to the pandemic and to future emergencies.

- The Dialogue highlighted, for example, the invaluable contributions that people forced to flee have made to responding to the health crisis. As my colleague Clementine Salami, Director of the Bureau for the Eastern Horn of Africa and Great Lakes Region, observed, many displaced people are also health professionals who, in their host communities, were quick to support overstretched national health services, providing care and saving lives. The positive image of support from health professionals among refugee and displaced groups stands in contrast to the misinformation, stigmatization, and discriminatory attitudes that surfaced during the pandemic.
- The Dialogue observed that engaging frontline workers, particularly women, and strengthening and working with local communities are key to countering misinformation and responding to the spikes in gender-based violence and discrimination that proliferated globally during lockdowns.

Dialogue participants urged States to meet their international obligations by ensuring access to territory to seek asylum and protection, a crucial point raised in the previous presentation.

- While States are responsible for protecting national health, it was recognized that limits on border crossings must also ensure that people seeking international protection have access to territory to claim asylum. States can legitimately restrict freedom of movement during a pandemic, but detention and other restrictions of movement, where they need to be imposed, must be necessary and proportionate to responding to the health crisis.
- The Dialogue stressed the need for flexibility and adaptability in maintaining processes to identify refugees and to provide them with a legal identity and documentation during the pandemic. By stepping up the use of technology, many States showed it was possible to receive and assess asylum claims remotely, not necessarily requiring major financial or technological investments.

- Participants warned that unless asylum systems continue to function during an emergency, backlogs will grow and delay or deny protection for asylum seekers.

The Dialogue participants stressed the importance of non-discriminatory inclusion of refugees and those displaced or stateless to national social safety nets and medical care and vaccination programs, access to education, adequate housing and opportunities for employment... a key recommendation for consideration in the Ex Com Conclusion set out by the Director of DIP.

Vulnerable people, including those in need of international protection, are especially likely to face higher risks during a pandemic. Including them in national responses and services is also vital as nations address the longer-term social and economic impacts of the pandemic, including loss of livelihoods.

In emphasising inclusion, the Dialogue further recognized that many host countries need support to do so.

- While many States have extended COVID-19 health services to refugees and other people in need of protection, some States need assistance to meet the health needs of their own citizens. Financial and technical assistance is crucial to strengthening national health systems, to meet the 2030 Sustainable Development goal of “leaving no-one behind”.
- Many pledges made at the GRF to support health responses already have been or in the future could be accelerated or adapted to support inclusion in health systems.
- UNHCR will continue to work with authorities and share information to ensure specialized screening and quarantine procedures, registration, and documentation to access health services, including mental health and vaccination programmes.

Strong interest was attracted by the session on how responses to the pandemic can ensure protection of those displaced by climate emergencies. Participants stressed the need to learn from the pandemic and to act urgently to invest in and take action to mitigate, and where possible, prevent displacement before it occurs.

Reactive action, it was stressed, is not sufficient. We must be better prepared to provide protection in the future, including women as leaders and adopting a gender transformative approach to decision-making.

Participants also stressed that it is essential to empower refugees and those displaced to be self-reliant through education, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. In fact, many of the pledges made at the GRF in 2019 and implemented during the pandemic include programs for the economic empowerment of youth, capacity-building of refugee-led organizations and support for durable solutions.

In responding to the need for inclusion and self-reliance, Dialogue participants noted the need to refresh existing partnerships and to develop new ones, especially in the private sector and

with refugee-led and community organizations.

In conclusion, the Dialogue recognized that most States have shown solidarity in their responses to the pandemic. The challenge is to learn from our experiences in responding to Covid-19 so that we are better prepared for global emergencies, including the protection of the growing numbers of people displaced by climate change and conflict.

It is hoped that the HC's Dialogue and the recommendations made will be useful in considerations for an ExCom conclusion.

May I end by thanking Member States of this Standing Committee for their compassion expressed for the loss of life and injuries among Rohingya refugees arising from the fires in Cox's Bazar.