

# **UNHCR Executive Committee**

*71st Session*

5-9 October 2020

Agenda item 3: General Debate

## **Statement by Portugal**

Thank you Chair

Portugal is fully aligned with yesterday's statement on behalf of the European Union and its Member States.

We gather here in an unprecedented context, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic which increased the humanitarian needs of populations in vulnerable situations, especially refugees and those forcibly displaced. Protection challenges became wider and even more urgent.

This pandemic has triggered a truly global human, economic and social crisis. And it made clear that a global response based on international solidarity is essential.

We commend UNHCR for quickly adapting to the new situation and express our gratitude to its staff and its partners, for their commitment to deliver under very challenging conditions and remaining in their duty stations.

Portugal remains willing to share the burden and responsibility and has joined the international community's efforts to respond to calls for financial contributions from UN Agencies, including UNHCR.

Under the "Team Europe" approach, Portugal facilitated the humanitarian flights to São Tomé e Príncipe and Guinea Bissau; was co-facilitator of the humanitarian flight to Venezuela; and contributed to the recent flight to Lebanon.

Mr. Chair. This crisis can also be an opportunity to implement transformative agendas to achieve social progress by making universal social protection a reality; revisit the social impacts of globalization; ensure green growth strategies; and build more inclusive societies.

We commend UNHCR for consistently advocating for the inclusion of persons of concern in national health responses as well as other necessary services.

These are also concerns of the Portuguese Government, which, on 28 March, decided to grant temporary residency rights to all immigrants and asylum seekers who had applied for residency up to 18 March, therefore granting them access to social and health benefits, including access to the national health service, bank accounts and work and rental contracts. This measure became valid when a state of national emergency came into force. And it was later further extended until the end of October.

The Portuguese Government also decided on a temporary extension of documents and visas to stay in Portugal under the same terms.

This decision was part of a comprehensive and crosscutting response to the pandemic based on the protection of human rights, in particular of those in vulnerable situations.

Mr. Chair, Portugal remains strongly committed to the protection, assistance, reception and integration of refugees and migrants.

We recognise the importance to safeguard the right to seek asylum and the principle of non-refoulement, as enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

We welcome the proposal by the European Commission of a New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which is a good basis for a compromise. We remain committed to engage in discussions.

Portugal has repeatedly advocated for the need to focus on strengthening cooperation with countries of origin and transit. No migration strategy will be effective and lasting without this.

The principles of humanitarian responsibility and solidarity have guided our action. We have consistently participated in the ad hoc relocation of people rescued in the Central Mediterranean and disembarked in Italy and Malta; an agreement was concluded with Greece for the relocation of up to 1.000 asylum seekers and refugees and we are available to host 500 unaccompanied minors from the refugee camps on the Greek islands. Following the fire that destroyed the Moria camp, we reaffirmed our commitment to support Greece.

The first group of 25 unaccompanied minors arrived in Lisbon in early July. They are learning Portuguese and are followed by a multidisciplinary team so that they can better integrate in school and society. A second group of 28 minors is soon expected.

Mr. Chair. Economic, Social and Cultural Rights have always been dear to us, namely the right to Education.

The complexities of many conflicts; the increased duration of wars and the profound long-lasting effects they have; all make education key. Higher education in countries facing conflict is crucial for both early recovery and long-lasting rebuilding of affected societies. It is a fundamental step towards consolidating peace, breaking cycles of violence and avoiding the relapse into conflict. If humanitarian efforts fail to integrate higher education programs, there will be a generational loss with poorly educated and unskilled young people less prepared to contribute to their country's recovery.

Among the initiatives supported by the Portuguese Government, is the Global Platform for Syrian Students. The platform is designed and developed as an emergency scholarship program to enable students from countries in conflict to continue their training and thus prepare for the future, by participating in the reconstruction of their

countries, or contributing to their host communities. The Platform has already awarded over 550 annual scholarships for young Syrians to continue their studies.

Portugal is committed to the Global Education Pathways Task Force, launched recently, and co-organized a virtual briefing on higher education opportunities as complementary pathways for admission to third countries. We also contributed financially to the Sustainable Resettlement and Complementary Pathways Initiative (CRISP), at the Global Refugee Forum last December.

Portugal remains committed to the Global Compact on Refugees. The GRF is a steppingstone as it brings together a wide range of stakeholders, including refugees and the private sector, generating important commitments. We encourage UNHCR to maintain the momentum generated by the Forum. From our side, the implementation of the various *pledges* made last December is ongoing.

Mr. Chair, in order to respond to the growing challenges and needs, we all have to be more efficient, resilient and results oriented. We fully support the High Commissioner's internal reform initiative, including the decentralisation process and strengthening the humanitarian-development nexus.

I Thank You