

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME
NGO Collective Statement – General Debate
75th Session
14-18 October 2024
Delivered by: Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT)

Dear Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

This marks the first time a refugee-led organization (RLO) delivers an ExCom statement on behalf of the NGO community, a moment we are proud of. It reflects the significance to engage refugees not just as individuals, but as institutions, and this is an example of that progress.

We meet today in a world where over 122 million displaced people are caught in limbo, torn from their homes, lives lost, and their dreams shattered by conflict, war, persecution, and disaster. As we sit here today, safe within these walls, their cries for help resonate beyond our borders—pleas that are becoming harder to hear amidst the rising clamor of fear, division, and indifference. The concept of humanity under siege.

But it is not just the displacement numbers that are alarming. It is the deepening chasm between those whose suffering is acknowledged, and those who are forgotten. Let us be honest: some civilians seem to be more worthy of protection than others. Some refugees, more deserving of our compassion than others.

We, as humanitarian workers, once believed in a world where every human life was equal. We endured long hours, heavy burdens, and personal sacrifice because we trusted in the ideals that this very institution was built upon. But today, we stand on the precipice of doubt. Are we still fighting for those same principles? Or have we begun to selectively apply our compassion?

The recent violence in Gaza and beyond illustrates the stark double standard at play. We mourn every innocent life lost, whether in Israel, Palestine, Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, or elsewhere. Yet, when refugee camps become battlefields and children become collateral, the silence of the international community is deafening. How did we get here, where some deaths are more tragic than others, where some attacks on civilian life merit global outrage, while others are met with quiet acquiescence?

For decades, NGOs have shouldered this burden, believing in the power of change, in the power of leadership. But today, we ask ourselves—and we ask you—how do we continue this work? Do we still believe that together, we can create a world where every human being is afforded the same dignity, the same protection, the same chance to live in peace? Or are we watching that dream die before our eyes?

We stand at a crossroads. The decisions made in this room will shape not only policies but the very future of what it means to be human.

Today, we are in a critical phase that needs efficient and sober change and actions to prioritize saving lives, ending conflicts and providing an enabling ecosystem for forcibly displaced people to not only to survive but to thrive as well. For that we put forward the following recommendations to work towards a shared humanity, one in which every human being is indeed afforded dignity, protection, a chance to live in peace.

- **First: we cannot forget the basics: We must prioritize saving lives and ensure access to protection and essential services, such as education and healthcare.**

Refugees and migrants experience unimaginable horrors along the routes extending from the East and Horn of Africa and West Africa towards the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and onward to Europe.¹ Between 2021 and 2023, an estimated 7,600 people [died or went missing](#) in the Mediterranean, while around 950 [perished crossing the Sahara](#), though the actual numbers are likely much higher. In the Americas, people on the move [including thousands of children](#), face perilous journeys through routes like the Darien Gap, where they are exposed to robbery, rape, and human trafficking. Rohingya people continue to flee persecution, mass atrocities, and violent attacks, with [UNHCR estimating](#) that in 2023, for every eight Rohingya person attempting boat journeys across the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal, one was reported dead or missing. These patterns of loss of life are not confined to a single corridor or region but are tragically widespread, reflecting the global nature of this humanitarian crisis.

Refugees and asylum seekers are often met with deterrence, pushbacks, and detention policies. These practices not only deny them the protection they are entitled to but are frequently carried out with violence that amounts to inhumane or degrading treatment, and in some cases, torture. This approach not only exacerbates their existing vulnerabilities but creates new ones.

States must ensure that border governance measures fully respect the prohibition of collective expulsions, the principle of non-refoulement, the right to seek asylum, the right to life, and the prohibition of torture. States must promote gender equality and uphold the rights of the child. States are obligated to fulfill their search and rescue duties under international maritime law.² The global refugee protection regime must collectively increase resettlement and complementary pathway opportunities while removing legal barriers that force asylum-seekers into legal limbo. This legal uncertainty and deficiencies in implementing laws and regulations severely restrict their rights, access to services, ability to work, and freedom of movement. Women in legal uncertainty are more prone to heightened risks of labor exploitation, domestic abuse, and sexual violence. To address these challenges and ensure that these rights are upheld, states must guarantee access to protection and justice for victims of human rights violations, including through gender-based violence prevention and responses.

In 2019, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, used the phrase “lethal disregard” to describe the use of policies and practices that repeatedly put forcibly displaced

¹ International Organization for Migration (IOM), Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2024). *On this Journey, No One Cares If You Live or Die: Abuse, Protection and Justice Along Routes Between East and West Africa And Africa's Mediterranean Coast. volume 2.*

² Recommendations based on A/HRC/47/30: Report on means to address the human rights impact of pushbacks of migrants on land and at sea - report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants | OHCHR. (2021, May 12). <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc4730-report-means-address-human-rights-impact-pushbacks-migrants>

people's lives and wellbeing at risk. She reminded states that whilst they “have a right to determine whether nationals may enter and remain on their territory...all migration governance measures should be implemented with full respect for the human rights of the people concerned. They are no different – and in no way less valuable or less deserving of dignity – than you or I”.³

- **Second: All stakeholders must proactively address the public backlash against forcibly displaced and stateless persons, both in public discourse and political rhetoric.**

The political discourse surrounding refugees and stateless people, has devolved into an increasingly negative, inflammatory, and divisive narratives. These narratives are not confined to the fringes of the internet; they are echoed and legitimized by politicians, leading to the normalization of xenophobia, racism, hate speech, and violence. This political rhetoric dehumanizes those we seek to protect. Beyond the stigma that refugees and stateless people experience due to their migration status, they also endure compounded discrimination based on factors such as age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, where these intersecting layers amplify their hardships.⁴

This public backlash and political rhetoric also put the lives of humanitarian workers at risk and undermines the principles upon which our efforts are built. [A recent report by Humanitarian Outcomes](#) found that in 2023, more aid workers died by violence than in any previous year on record, with 280 fatalities reported in 33 countries. This narrative of fear and division undermines the principles upon which our efforts are built.

States must place emphasis on implementing integration strategies, fostering social cohesion and upholding human and labor rights, including access to essential services. States must adopt and implement anti-discrimination legislation, prevent violence, and develop public policies to tackle xenophobia. Aid and humanitarian workers must be protected, ensuring that humanitarian aid and search & rescue operations are never criminalized nor sanctioned.

- **Third: we must continue to recognize the importance of meaningful refugee participation as a tool to enhance refugee responses at all levels.**

Meaningful refugee participation means that forcibly displaced and stateless people, including children and youth, are present and allowed to influence discussions, policy, and decision-making processes pertaining to refugee issues. Meaningful participation can be operationalized through refugee advisory boards in which members are selected not only based on their lived experience of forced displacement but also on their technical expertise.

Refugees and stateless people have firsthand knowledge of the challenges, gaps, and effective practices. Many refugee and stateless leaders go on to establish RLOs, becoming essential local actors in humanitarian and development solutions. Meaningful refugee participation means that

³Quote available at: Lethal disregard: Search and rescue and the protection of migrants in the Central Mediterranean Sea | OHCHR. (2021, May 30). <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/reports/lethal-disregard-search-and-rescue-and-protection-migrants-central-mediterranean>

⁴ Information gathered from: A/HRC/56/54: Report on revisiting migrants' contributions from a human rights-based approach: A discussion on facilitating and hindering factors| OHCHR. (2024, May 1). <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2024/call-input-report-revisiting-migrants-contributions-human-rights-based>

we shift our view of forcibly displaced people as only passive aid beneficiaries to active contributors who can help to enhance global displacement responses and foster more effective and sustainable outcomes.

One such opportunity for meaningful partnership is the Global Alliance to End Statelessness - a collaborative multistakeholder platform led by UNHCR with a vision to create ‘a world free from statelessness where everyone enjoys the right to a nationality without discrimination. This initiative centers stateless-led organizations and persons with lived experience of statelessness. We encourage all States, regional institutions, UN agencies and other actors to positively engage with this, as well as UNHCR to in parallel allocate sufficient resourcing within its own programming.

Despite their essential contributions, RLOs face significant challenges in securing funding. A recent report, shows how [RLOs are chronically underfunded](#), receiving only small proportion of the 1.2 % of funding directed to local and national actors. We also see funding cuts at a time when support is needed the most. Halfway through 2024, [only 18 percent of the funding](#) needed for humanitarian assistance globally had been received. We're not just cutting funds; we're cutting lifelines. We compel all stakeholders to consider how their support can contribute to more sustainable and equitable outcomes through meaningfully engaging a diverse range of local humanitarian actors, including organizations led by refugees with disabilities as a critical step towards achieving inclusive humanitarian responses.

Furthermore, at the global refugee policy level, it is becoming increasingly difficult for humanitarian NGOs, civil society and RLOs to contribute our expertise when protection and policy frameworks are being discussed. In recent global and regional processes, NGOs and RLOs have been consulted but have not meaningfully participated in shaping final outcome documents. We urge states to fully embrace NGOs and RLOs as indispensable partners in crafting refugee policies and priorities, as outlined in the multistakeholder approach that is integral to the Global Compact on Refugees. We ask for more than consultation; we ask for true partnership.

Conclusion

We must remember our shared duty to save lives and ensure access to protection and essential services. This is not merely policy—it is a moral imperative that has guided us through history's darkest chapters.

Let us remember that our response today will shape the world of tomorrow. We must rise above the noise of racism and xenophobia and act with the compassion and courage that defined the post-World War II generation. If we fail to do so, we risk becoming the generation that repeats the mistakes of the past—a generation whose inaction led to unimaginable human suffering and failed future generations.

The NGO community, including organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless persons, stand ready to support UNHCR and states' attention to these issues. Thank you.