

U.S. Government Opening Statement
UNHCR High Commissioner Protection Dialogue:
Protection and Resilience During Pandemics
October 21, 2020

Never before have we faced such a comprehensive threat to the protection, health, and socio-economic welfare of forcibly displaced and stateless populations and their host communities. The COVID-19 pandemic, layered on top of unprecedented levels of forced displacement, lends urgency to understanding and addressing not only the acute, but also the medium-and long-term, needs of those forced from their homes. In this context, strengthening protection foundations and building resilience must be a focus for us all. We must simultaneously manage both the short- and long-term implications of COVID-19.

Most immediately, the pandemic has magnified pre-existing protection risks. For example, we are seeing increased incidences of gender-based violence and discrimination, and access to education and return to education, especially for girls, continues to be a challenge. We applaud those States that are working to address public health needs while respecting the principle of *non-refoulement*. Across the world, we see innovative measures to ensure asylum systems remain effective while protecting populations against the spread of this deadly disease. Creative and adaptive solutions will be required to ensure that the progress made on protection is safeguarded.

Particularly critical to promoting the health, safety, and socioeconomic well-being of all – and promoting protection for all -- is the inclusion of refugees, internally displaced persons, and other persons of concern in national COVID-19 prevention, response, and recovery efforts. In countries like Thailand and Jordan, we have seen governments proactively incorporate refugees into COVID-19 planning and response with the support of UNHCR, NGOs, and international donors. These partnerships demonstrate how the international community can work with hosting States to find sustainable responses for refugees that benefit and protect them as well as host communities. It is imperative to ensure that the input of refugees and host communities is also integrated in any pandemic response. We are pleased to see that the Opening of this Dialogue features a discussion between the High Commissioner, refugees, and advocates directly pursuing inclusion of the most vulnerable groups as the world responds to this current pandemic.

At the same time, we must not lose sight of the long-term challenges posed by the pandemic. The economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are particularly dire for refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons. For example, refugees are 60 percent more likely than host populations to be working in sectors highly impacted by the pandemic, and remittance flows, a source of refugee household income, have declined sharply. COVID-19 is already resulting in a widespread loss of livelihoods and an increase in poverty among refugee and other vulnerable populations.

As such, strengthening coordination between humanitarian and development actors will be critical to meeting the diverse needs of forcibly displaced populations and their host communities while supporting economic recovery. We encourage early and frequent coordination across humanitarian and development actors to chart a path forward to safeguard and restore livelihoods and support economic recovery.

Confronting today's crisis and preparing for future ones requires international solidarity and creativity. Last December, we did not know how timely the Global Refugee Forum would be. Today, we must be even more decisive in our efforts to implement the Global Compact on Refugees, honor the pledges we made to provide more predictable and sustainable support, and share the responsibility for assisting both refugees and host countries to effectively confront this pandemic.