



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency



SUMMARY

# HIGH COMMISSIONER'S DIALOGUE ON PROTECTION CHALLENGES: PROTECTION AND RESILIENCE DURING PANDEMICS

*Opening Session*

21 OCTOBER 2020, 15:00 - 17:00 (CET)

# Opening Session

## SESSION DESCRIPTION

Around the world, many refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless people have been deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and they have joined their host communities to support prevention and response efforts.

From providing help to vulnerable people, to countering misinformation, volunteering in the medical response, or advocating for access to health services, refugees have stepped up and contributed, showing solidarity and leadership.

The opening session set the scene for the High Commissioner's Dialogue by introducing the three key aspects of the dialogue that were explored in the context of responses to pandemics: protection, resilience, and lessons learned for climate action.

The principal of meaningful refugee engagement in global processes, which featured strongly at the Global Refugee Forum and subsequent discussions, guided the format of the session. A group of five refugees and a Sustainable Development Goals advocate, representing regional, gender, and other forms of diversity, who have been engaged in the response to the pandemic, were featured in the session. Three of them also participated as speakers in the subsequent three virtual sessions.

This group of young people had the opportunity to share their experiences, showcase their work/good practices, and discuss in a Davos-style format the protection and resilience challenges posed by the pandemic, solutions that can help us in the future, and lessons learned that could help us confront other global challenges, such as displacement related to climate change and disasters. These exchanges and testimonies set the stage for the discussions in the virtual sessions to follow.

Questions for the refugees were solicited from registered participants in advance, and also drew upon the themes outlined in the concept notes for the subsequent three virtual sessions, to foreshadow these sessions.

## Chair



**Mr. Filippo Grandi**  
*United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*

Mr. Filippo Grandi became the 11th United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on 1 January 2016. He was elected by the UN General Assembly to serve a five-year term, until 31 December 2020. He was born in Milan in 1957 and has been engaged in refugee and humanitarian work for more than 30 years. From 2010 to 2014, he served as Commissioner-General of UNRWA, the UN Agency for Palestine refugees, having previously been its Deputy Commissioner-General since 2005. He also served as Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Afghanistan and worked with NGOs and UNHCR in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and at our Geneva headquarters. He holds a degree in modern history from the State University in Milan, a B.A. in Philosophy from the Gregorian University in Rome, and an honorary doctorate from the University of Coventry.

## Moderator



**Ms. Kelly Clements**  
*United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees*

Ms. Kelly T. Clements joined UNHCR as Deputy High Commissioner on 6 July 2015. She has been closely involved with refugee and displacement issues throughout her three-decade career.

Before joining UNHCR, Clements was a member of the Senior Executive Service, serving as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) where she was responsible for humanitarian issues in Asia and the Middle East and global policy and budget. In 2014, she was Acting Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon.

From 1993 to 1996, Ms. Clements served at the U.S. Permanent Mission to the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, on a Foreign Service appointment. She was Special Assistant to the Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs in 1997-1998. She served as a Senior Emergency Officer for Europe, the Newly Independent States, and the Americas, and later as Balkans Assistance Coordinator; she was deployed to Albania in 1999. She worked for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Bangladesh in 1992. Ms. Clements holds a B.A. in International Studies and an M.A. in Urban Affairs from Virginia Tech. She is a national of the United States of America.

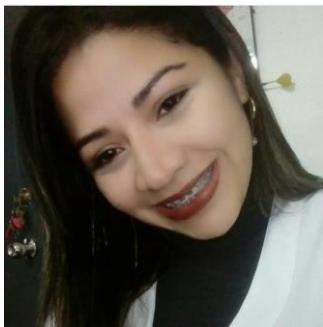
## Speakers



**Mr. Barthelemy Mwanza Ngane**  
*Congolese Refugee Advocate | Tongogara, Zimbabwe*

Mr. Barthelemy Mwanza is a 27-year-old Congolese refugee currently living in Zimbabwe at Tongogara refugee camp. He is the Co-Chair of the UNHCR Global Youth Advisory Council (GYAC), which is serving as UNHCR's consultative group on issues relating to the protection and development of young people who are refugees, internally displaced, and stateless. He has been working with the GYAC as a delegate since December 2017. Through this role, he has taken on a wide range of responsibilities, including engaging in consultations with refugee communities, advocacy, identifying good practices, networking, and identifying and supporting refugee projects and programmes.

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**Dr. Carmen Alejandra Parra**  
*Venezuelan Medical Worker | Lima, Peru*

Dr. Carmen Alejandra Parra is a Venezuelan national who, having lost her support network in Venezuela to various diseases and lack of access to medical care, could no longer feed her children or live peacefully, and left for Peru where she sought asylum. For two and a half years, she worked as a waitress, a saleswoman, and finally back in the health sector, as a receptionist in a radiography clinic. Today, she is working as a doctor. For almost six months now, she has been helping people with COVID-19. A widower at 35, Carmen has three children (13, 6, and 3 years old). Her dear friend Hemmy, who is a nurse and her "guardian angel", helps to care for them.

Facebook: [Alejandra Parra García](#)



**Dr. Fezzeh Hosseini**  
*Afghan Doctor | Eshfahan Province, Iran*

Dr. Fezzeh Hosseini, age 38, is a refugee doctor in Esfahan province, in Iran. As the head of a health centre, she oversees a dozen doctors and nurses and, since the COVID-19 outbreak, has gone beyond her medical duties to ensure Afghans and Iranians have information about and access to health services. She was born in Afghanistan, but her family fled the conflict to Iran when she was one month old.

- [Afghan doctor helps refugees fight COVID-19, one phone call at a time](#)
- [Word Refugee Day Op-Ed by Tehran Times](#)
- [Afghan female doctor in Iran shares her story](#)



**Ms. Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim**  
*SDG advocate for Climate Action and indigenous people's rights | Chad*

Ms. Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim is an environmental activist, member of Chad's pastoralist Mbororo community, a UN Sustainable Development Goals Advocate, President of the Association for Indigenous Women and Peoples of Chad (AFPAT), and member of the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC). She began advocating for Indigenous rights and environmental protection at age 16. She served as co-chair of the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change (IIPFCC) during the historic UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris. Her vision is to promote traditional knowledge and science to improve resilience to climate change, especially for rural communities.

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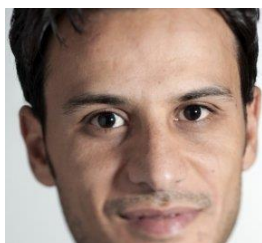


**Mr. Nhial Deng**  
*South Sudanese Refugee Advocate | Kakuma, Ethiopia*

Mr. Nhial Deng has lived in the Kakuma Refugee Camp for ten years. His father, originally from South Sudan, was displaced by the Sudan Civil War in the 1970s and found a new home in Ethiopia.

Mr. Deng found hope in Kakuma after fleeing an armed attack on his village in Ethiopia in 2010, and today he is a community activist helping young people in the camp to improve their lives through education, mentorship, and social entrepreneurship.

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LinkedIn: [Nhial Deng](#)



**Mr. Shadi Shhadeh**  
*Syrian Refugee Advocate | Geneva, Switzerland*

Mr. Shadi Shhadeh, age 35, is an activist from Syria who studied law at Damascus University. He was forced to flee Syria at the end of 2011, and he has lived in Switzerland since 2013. Mr. Shhadeh earned his Diploma in French as a Foreign Language from the University of Lausanne and now works for UOSSM, a medical relief organization.

## SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

The session was attended by more than 750 participants from 88 countries.

### Key issues

In his opening remarks, the High Commissioner, Mr. Filippo Grandi, detailed how the global pandemic has challenged the institution of asylum:

- In some cases, it has triggered restrictive measures, including restrictions on movement. These limitations must not impact negatively and unnecessarily the rights of people for whom freedom movement is lifesaving. There needs to be a careful balance between legitimate measures and the right of people to move freely to access safe areas or safe countries to ask for asylum. Lockdown should not mean that some people are locked out.
- In addition, the most significant and possibly lasting consequences of this pandemic are economic and social. It is exacerbating the pre-pandemic vulnerabilities of individuals with specific protection needs. Children are dropping out of school, sexual and gender-based violence is spiking, and xenophobia has been witnessed in some contexts.
- This is not an isolated crisis, especially when we talk about refugees and forced population movements. It comes on top of a series of other crises that plague our world: unresolved and lengthy wars and conflicts, growing inequality and poverty, and the climate emergency, for example.

Following are some examples of interventions made by the speakers on this subject:

- **Mr. Shadi Shhadeh:** *“Protection for me is offering a safe space to live with dignity, with respect to the human rights (..) The refugee crisis is a global crisis, as is the COVID pandemic. So, it needs a global response, a global solidarity, a global responsibility. Refugees and non-refugees have stepped up, acted and engaged during this pandemic.”*
- **Mr. Barthelemy Mwanza Ngane:** *“Displaced people are battling the same barriers as the rest of the world, but they are still facing greater challenges without access to common solutions.”*
- **Mr. Nhial Deng:** *“Misinformation and rumours have been a challenge in refugee camps and all over the world.”*

#### Good practices

The High Commissioner highlighted that the majority of States understood that in designing and implementing their own responses to the pandemic, it is important to include everybody, including people forced to flee, in testing, prevention, quarantine, and communication efforts.

A total of 113 States have continued to allow individuals to exercise the right to seek asylum. There have been also some extraordinary examples, such as Uganda, a country currently hosting almost 1.5 million refugees, which agreed a few months ago at the peak of its own health crisis to open the border to allow the entry of thousands of Congolese refugees. Together with UNHCR, Uganda worked on taking inclusive quarantine, isolation, and health measures to ensure that no one was left behind.

The pandemic also showed that where people on the move are included, their contributions are making a real difference. The skills that people carry with them can be put to great use at a time when first responders and essential workers are in high demand.

Following are some examples of interventions made by the speakers on this subject:

- **Dr. Carmen Alejandra Parra:** *“It is important to include refugees in the labour market to help the community in their area of expertise.”*
- **Mr. Barthelemy Mwanza Ngane:** *“We usually identify the problems caused by the COVID-19, and then we come up with solutions and good practices that we (young people) share in the community groups on health, WASH, food scarcity to better manage resources, or gender-based violence. Young people are now working in close collaboration with UNHCR and other partners to create alternatives and use technologies to support the COVID-19 response.”*
- **Mr. Nhial Deng:** *“It’s important to make sure that communication channels are available for all and in several languages. How? Through posters, by working with*

*community leaders trusted by their communities, by putting in place a platform in order for people to report on rumours through sending a free text message, and by community engagement through youth and members of the community who deploy the information to their peers.”*

- **Dr. Fezzeh Hosseini:** *“Knowledge is power, and knowledge is what we need to give them.”* Dr. Hosseini used TV as a first point of contact for prevention in Iran and together with other colleagues opened a phone channel for communications in several languages and dialects to inform refugees about the virus and explain preventive measures. She also engaged religious leaders in passing on these messages.

### Recommendations

The High Commissioner emphasized the necessity of supporting and engaging with refugee-led organizations. UNHCR is hoping to have by next year a clearer framework for helping refugee-led organizations and refugees on the ground.

He also added that regarding entry and asylum restrictions, although 113 States is a good number, challenges remain. He appealed to States to ensure that when restrictions are in place for accessing territory, seeking asylum, or resettlement, they be necessary and temporary and limited only to the duration of the emergency.

He advocated strongly that inspiring inclusion measures continue when a vaccine is found and that health workers in refugee communities be included. Also, to mitigate the economic and social impacts of the pandemic on people forced to flee, displaced and stateless people and their host communities need to be included in the safety nets being planned all over the world.

The High Commissioner reiterated the need to prevent misinformation about COVID-19, but also about refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons, and suggested that we use the pandemic to turn the narrative around, providing concrete examples of how their contributions have mattered during this health crisis.

Following are some examples of interventions made by the speakers on this subject:

- **Ms. Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim:** *“We can only learn from what is happening in COVID and as human beings build our own resilience. Build resilience with new actions that tackle people who are left behind, who are the frontlines of climate change.”*
- **Dr. Fezzeh Hosseini:** *“Refugees should not wait for UNHCR or others to provide support; they should develop, use their abilities to help others.”*
- **Mr. Barthelemy Mwanza Ngane:** *“We also need to create alternative forms of education, of promotion of mental health and well-being of refugees and asylum seekers and increase the variety of opportunities for people forced to flee, especially children.”*



The session ended with a call to action shared by panellists:

- **Mr. Shadi Shhadeh** advocated for access to simplified basic information, as he did with SALMA (Swiss Association Linking Migrants with activity).
- **Mr. Barthelemy Mwanza Ngane** encouraged participants to support entrepreneurship, which will help young people and displaced communities increase their self-reliance.
- **Ms. Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim** raised the importance of funding for affected communities in order to fight against climate change in the same way States are mobilizing to overcome the impact of COVID and rebuild economies: people not only need to be beneficiaries but also partners. *"If you want to bring back peace and security, if you want to fight COVID and climate change, you need to enable development in poverty."*
- **Dr. Carmen Alejandra Parra** asked for better support for professionals such as herself as well as others who are part of the solution in their host country.
- **Dr. Fezzeh Hosseini** called for investment in the infrastructure of countries with less economic prosperity. She suggested speaking directly to the host communities to understand their needs, improve the services (health, education, social coverage, etc.), and invest in the power of the communities. With a clear plan on how to eradicate the problems, this could help in lifting the burden.
- **Mr. Nhial Deng** suggested strengthening communication infrastructures in the refugee community: *"Bring us at the table to understand what our journeys are."*

The High Commissioner concluded by reminding participants that it was our collective duty to pursue the Sustainable Development Goals to leave no one behind.

Throughout the series of dialogues, participants contributed the following further recommendations related to participation of refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless persons in supporting the response through the online Q&A as well as in written statements:

- Build resilience by ensuring the input of women and girls in national pandemic response plans for health, education, and economic recovery.
- Work with communities to counter misinformation, gender-based violence, and discrimination that have unfortunately soared during lockdowns.
- Recognize and support the important contributions of refugees and especially women as frontline workers.
- Support and engage refugee-led organizations in the response to the pandemic.