

April 17, 2020

His Excellency António Guterres
Secretary-General of the United Nations
405 East 42nd Street, New York, NY, 10017

Dear Secretary-General,

As members of the World Refugee Council we urge you to intensify your crucial efforts to address the perilous state of the world's refugees and displaced persons during the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Secretary-General and former High Commissioner for Refugees you are uniquely endowed with the moral authority and political experience to lead.

We support your call for an immediate ceasefire in all corners of the world to bring a halt to the conflicts that have displaced so many people, including women, children and persecuted minorities.

We also strongly endorse your \$2 billion appeal for the UN's COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan.

While we understand that support for refugees is included in this plan and while we acknowledge the efforts of the WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNHCR and IOM to prevent the spread of the disease, we fear nonetheless that this will not be nearly enough. We are particularly concerned that the WHO continue to receive full funding at this critical moment and that a coalition of participants including governments, philanthropists and foundations unite to fill the impending shortfall.

We worry that borders, which are closing in response to the pandemic, will prevent people fleeing violence and persecution from finding safety. We worry that refugees' living conditions render them near defenceless against the virus and that their mental health is further threatened by this crisis. And we worry that governments that are turning inwards to deal with COVID-19 at home will ignore the needs and rights of the world's refugees who cannot count on local authorities to protect them at a time like this.

For the sake of humanity and the well-being of the displaced we urge you to embrace and promote six basic principles:

First, refugees and displaced persons must not be mere afterthoughts. They are at vast risk and their protection is both a moral imperative and an enlightened self-interest of those in a position to help.

Second, refugees and IDPs must participate in global efforts to respond to the pandemic. They must be invited to the tables that determine their fate. Women in particular who suffer terribly as they seek to protect their families at great peril to themselves, must be empowered if success is to be had.

Third, if local peace and stability are to be preserved, host communities must be treated equitably and engaged as partners in the development of solutions.

Fourth, all UN hands must be on deck, including the Security Council. The Council's political impetus is urgently needed, particularly regarding conflicts that can trigger virus outbreaks. Political and bureaucratic silos cannot be allowed to impede action in times of such great need.

In the past the UNSC has properly responded to global health threats such as AIDS and the Ebola crises. Presently the Security Council is missing in action.

Fifth, success takes money and engagement. A global mobilization of financial and human resources is urgently needed.

Sixth, fears about the spread of COVID-19 should not infringe on the right of refugees to seek asylum. Governments have a panoply of options at their disposal to screen, test and quarantine asylum-seekers and refugees while upholding international protection standards designed to save lives. Governments should follow the example of Portugal and provide refugees, asylum seekers, and other forcibly displaced persons with accessible healthcare and guarantee their protection and rights.

We encourage you to use your convening power to engage like-minded states, private corporations and associations, philanthropists, international agencies like the Red Cross, civil society networks, health-based NGOs, regional multilateral organizations and representatives of refugees and IDPs themselves to join in the common effort.

Inter alia, specific measures should include the following:

- Support for planning in those member states which host large concentrations of refugees and displaced persons, i.e., Turkey, Bangladesh, Jordan, Lebanon, Greece, Kenya, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Tanzania, Yemen, Uganda and for refugee-led organizations who have the capacity to contribute to the COVID-19 response;
- A global mobilization of "health brigades" from member states to work with domestic authorities who can eventually spare medical teams to support countries with serious needs, especially as it relates to testing, contact tracing, and the protection of people on the frontline. Health care professionals, including doctors and nurses in the displaced population can and should be enlisted;
- Emergency medical facilities in anticipation of increased patient demand forwardly deployed stockpiles of equipment, medical supplies and basic necessities, and the requisite assets to distribute these essential supplies;
- A special call should be issued to begin working on a collaborative, international resettlement program aimed particularly at girls and women, and those who face increased risk of abuse and sexual exploitation. The World Refugee Council is presently working with a network of refugee women (GIRWL), which is seeking to address this deadly issue; and
- Direct appeals to the global financial institutions for new, targeted contributions and a call to the philanthropic foundations for support (leadership by the Gates foundation, for example, was a game-changer for the AIDS epidemic).

To make all of this happen, we strongly urge you to appoint an individual with the credibility, authority, and power to overcome political and bureaucratic differences and build a consensus for concerted, collaborative action.

We call on you to take action now to protect refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. It is in their and our self-interest to constrain the virus and moderate further waves of refugees and further surges of disease. As noted Iranian-American writer Dina Nayeri reminds us, “It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks.”

Thank you for your consideration,

Members of the World Refugee Council (WRC):

Lloyd Axworthy, WRC Chair, former Foreign Minister of Canada

Pamela Aall, American University and Senior Adviser, United States Institute of Peace

Alexander Betts, Professor and Director of the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford

Aya Chebbi, African Union Youth Envoy, Co-founder of the Voice of Women Initiative and Founding chair of Afrika Youth Movement

Sarah Cliffe, Director of New York University’s Center on International Cooperation

Jérôme Elie, Independent

Jonathan Fanton, Former President American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and Former President MacArthur Foundation

Elizabeth Ferris, WRC Vice President of Research and Professor, Georgetown University

Leymah Gbowee, 2001 Nobel Peace Laureate, Founder and President Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa

Fen Osler Hampson, WRC Executive Director, Chancellor’s Professor, Carleton University

Per Heggernes, Chief Executive Officer, IKEA Foundation

Paul Heinbecker, WRC Deputy Chair, former ambassador of Canada to the United Nations

Hina Jilani, WRC Co-chair, human rights and democracy activist, and lawyer and advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan

Jonathan Kent, WRC researcher

Jakaya Kikwete, WRC Co-chair and former President of Tanzania

Susan Martin, Donald G. Herzberg Professor Emerita of International Migration at Georgetown University

James Milner, Associate Professor, Carleton University, and Project Director, Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN)

Rosemary McCarney, former Ambassador of Canada to the United Nations

Marwan Muasher, Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, former foreign minister and deputy prime minister of Jordan

Devota Nuwe, Refugee Law Project, School of Law, Makerere University

Ratna Omidvar, Independent Senator, Senate of Canada

George A. Papandreou, Former Prime Minister of Greece

Nirupama Menon Rao, retired Indian diplomat, foreign secretary and ambassador

Allan Rock, former Minister of Justice, Attorney General and Ambassador of Canada to the United Nations

Güven Sak, Executive of the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV), and a professor of public economics at the TOBB University of Economics and Technology

Eduardo Stein, former vice president and foreign minister of Guatemala, special representative for Venezuelan refugees and Migrants of UNHCR and IOM

Rita Süßmuth, WRC Co-chair, German politician and scholar

Andrew S. Thompson, CIGI senior fellow and adjunct assistant professor of political science at the University of Waterloo

Jessie Thomson, Vice President, International Programs, CARE Canada

Shaima Al Zarooni, Founder and President of Camp01

CC: Mr. Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

Mr. António Vitorino, Director General of the UN International Organization for Migration