

WEB – PRESS CONFERENCE

“Meet refugees, listen to their voice”

on the occasion of the completion of the AWARE Campaign and the WRD 2020

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Introduction by Katja Saha, Representative of the UNHCR in Cyprus

COVID-19 is a situation unlike anything we’ve faced before. We have all been impacted in one way or another, coping to protect our families. Many are also struggling with economic hardships as a result of the pandemic. While in the face of the public health crisis, we are all vulnerable but it is clear that people fleeing war, conflict and persecution have been the hardest hit. As countries battle to protect their populations and economies, fundamental norms of refugee protection and human rights have been put at risk.

As Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees noted:

“The core principles of refugee protection are being put to test – but people who are forced to flee conflict and persecution should not be denied safety and protection on the pretext, or even as a side effect, of responding to the virus”.

In Cyprus, and elsewhere in the world, UNHCR has been closely monitoring the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on refugees and asylum seekers and has been addressing issues of concern to the competent authorities from the very beginning, making recommendations to address the challenges. At the same time, we have prioritized access to accurate information on the virus and the related measures taken by national authorities; we assisted the Government of Cyprus by translating the official health advisory and other information related to the emergency into a number of languages of asylum-seekers and refugees. These flyers were then disseminated to camps as well as to NGOs and the Refugee Volunteers to reach out the refugee community in the cities.

Major issues of concern that have been raised in Cyprus relate to access to territory and asylum procedures, the decision to relocate vulnerable asylum-seekers from hotels or other structures to overcrowded reception centers, the particular hardships faced by asylum-seekers by staying in closed and overcrowded centers for an indefinite period of time without sufficient information about their cases and their future; the increase of homelessness and destitution and obstacles in access to health.

While fully supporting measures aimed at controlling the epidemic, UNHCR has been advocating for solutions that meet both the public health and refugee protection requirements. Securing public health and protecting refugees are not mutually exclusive. We

have to do both. Long-recognized refugee laws can be respected even as governments adopt stringent measures to protect public health, including at borders.

Seeking asylum is a fundamental human right guaranteed by international law, including the 1951 Refugee Convention. No one should be detained or otherwise sanctioned for exercising this right, even if arrived irregularly. UNHCR has consistently reiterated the legitimate right of States to manage their borders. However, States also have an obligation under international law to protect those who seek asylum by permitting them access to territory and safe reception.

Reception capacities for new arrivals in a number of European states have been under pressure for some time – a situation that has been aggravated by the COVID-19 emergency. Virus transmission risks are particularly high in overcrowded reception facilities or confined spaces, such as in immigration detention facilities.

It has been encouraging to note that a number of European States have begun to release detained asylum-seekers into safer reception conditions. States have also taken a variety of proactive measures to improve conditions in reception facilities with a view to reduce transmission risks. Some have quickly created additional temporary reception capacity by populating unused facilities or empty hotels to decongest crowded facilities, prioritising the move of at-risk groups, such as older persons. Also noteworthy has been the fact that nearly two thirds of European countries have found ways to manage their borders effectively while allowing access to their territories for people seeking asylum. Medical screenings at borders, health certification or temporary quarantine upon arrival are some of the measures put in place by European countries. These are important positive precedents for other States in Europe and beyond.

As Europe starts to shift measures in its response to COVID-19, there are risks but also opportunities. Measures taken at a time of adversity, may contribute to building more resilient asylum systems for the future. UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Europe has issued a compilation of good practices and practical recommendations. These offer practical support to States in ensuring access to territory and asylum, addressing movement restrictions or in communicating effectively with asylum-seekers and refugee populations on COVID-19 risks.

While Cyprus and other parts of the world navigate in the new normal, we strongly believe that the Republic of Cyprus has an opportunity to put in place adequate systems for both reception and integration of refugees. And Cyprus is not alone in this task - EU provides important financial support and UNHCR is here to assist with good practices and recommendations for effective integration.

The national integration plan for third-country nationals is expected to materialize in 2020 and should address head on the most pressing issues faced by every refugee – housing, employment/vocational training, language, education.

Integration should also include effective strategies and educational programmes to promote the virtues of tolerance, inclusion, multiculturalism, diversity, and mutual respect. According to an opinion Poll commissioned by UNHCR in 2018, the general feelings of Cypriots towards refugees, migrants and migration in general, were before the pandemic, neutral to negative. However, the negative narrative that has prevailed in Cyprus for more than two years is of major concern to UNHCR. The narrative that Cyprus cannot cope, that “Cyprus is being invaded” and calling refugees a threat makes effective integration very difficult to achieve.

So, let’s emphasize in the public and political discourse, that behind the numbers there are individuals – fathers, mothers and children – who have lost everything but hope.

Refugees have enormous challenges to face when they arrive in a new country. They often arrive alone, separated from their families and with little more than the clothes on their back. Many, also, arrive traumatized by their experience of persecution and violence – carrying with them psychological and physical scars that can haunt them for years. There’s still a long way to go in terms of dispelling myths and enhancing awareness and understanding for refugees; and fostering in general acceptance and inclusion.

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