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Note on international protection

Summary

This note examines trends in international protection from July 2020-June 2021. It highlights the disproportionate effect of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and related measures on displaced and stateless persons, demonstrating how policies and practices which restrict access to rights undermine the international protection regime. This serves as a sobering reminder, 70 years after the adoption of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, of the need for strengthened international cooperation and solidarity. Yet, the note reveals efforts by States to ensure protection, even in times of crisis, and to promote inclusion in national systems. It also examines progress towards solutions.



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I. Introduction

1. International protection is based on the right to seek and enjoy asylum and the principle of non-refoulement. These fundamental principles have been honoured by most States since the adoption of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees in July 1951, 70 years ago, and its 1967 Protocol. Non-refoulement is now well recognized as customary international law, and the right to asylum is widely reflected in national and regional law and practice. Today, 149 States are party to either the 1951 Convention, its 1967 Protocol, or both. These instruments have withstood the test of time and continue to provide a solid foundation for international protection and durable solutions. In the current environment, where restrictive measures in some countries have denied access to international protection for those who need it, a renewed commitment to the principles enshrined in the 1951 Convention is crucial.

2. At the end of 2020 the number of displaced persons worldwide reached a record 82.4 million, including 26.4 million refugees and 48 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), in addition to an estimated 4.2 million stateless persons. With conflict, persecution and human rights violations continuing unabated in many parts of the world, multilateral and multi-stakeholder action is more essential than ever to ensure protection for the displaced and to realize sustainable solutions. The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) provides a vision and strategy for more equitable and predictable burden- and responsibility-sharing among States. It calls for contributions from an array of actors to support displaced populations and host communities, emphasizing the importance of including displaced and stateless persons in educational systems, the labour market and social services. This necessitates sustained commitment from the international community to support developing States hosting 85 per cent of the world's displaced.

3. The standards set forth in the 1951 Convention, the advancements made in implementing the GCR and the pledges made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum (GRF) were profoundly tested by COVID-19, a health crisis that also threatened international protection and solidarity. The pandemic exposed the fragility of the asylum system and access to essential services, including health care in many countries.

4. The note on international protection highlights concerns over restrictive policies and practices, including serious violations of non-refoulement. At the same time, it demonstrates the benefits of inclusive measures that promote the rights and well-being of the displaced and foster durable solutions.

II. International protection of refugees and asylum-seekers

A. Limitations on basic rights

5. Over the past year, UNHCR observed numerous violations of the principle of non-refoulement. Increased and often violent pushbacks at borders and interceptions at sea were reported, leading to return to persecution and other serious human rights violations. COVID-19 exacerbated the situation, as border closures, reduced search-and-rescue, and refusals to disembark rescued persons (sometimes having left those onboard stranded for months) were justified by the necessity of containing the pandemic. Yet numerous countries showed that arrivals could be safely managed through quarantine and treatment programmes.

6. While search-and-rescue capacity in the Mediterranean proved insufficient to prevent the tragic loss of many lives, some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which attempted to rescue persons from vessels in distress, were threatened with criminal prosecution. Boats carrying rescued persons were refused disembarkation by several countries in Asia and the Pacific, and Europe. In the Caribbean, Venezuelans arriving by boat in countries in the region were reportedly denied access to asylum procedures, and detained and deported for irregular entry, leading to family separation and triggering refoulement.

7. Between March and June 2021, 195 countries implemented emergency measures in response to COVID-19 which included full or partial border closures; 64 of these countries made no exception for asylum-seekers. Such measures denied asylum to persons in need of international protection and increased the risks associated with refoulement. In one instance, asylum-seekers, with limited exceptions, were required to express their intent to seek asylum at embassies in neighbouring countries. As the pandemic fueled increased discrimination, xenophobia and hate speech against foreigners in some countries, attacks were reported on refugee camps, host communities and humanitarian workers. This particularly impacted refugees in parts of the Africa and Asia-Pacific regions. While States must protect the lives and well-being of their own populations, this is not incompatible with their international protection obligations.

8. UNHCR expressed concern about proposals made by some States to externalize international protection. In June 2021, one country in Europe adopted a legislative proposal aimed at transferring asylum-seekers to third countries for assessment of their claims for international protection, undermining international solidarity and raising concern regarding potential non-compliance with the 1951 Convention. Another country proposed far-reaching measures to limit access to territory and to asylum, and to establish a lesser protection status for refugees on the basis of the means by which they arrived in the country. These proposals were closely observed by other States, including some which host far greater numbers of refugees, with far fewer resources to do so. They are inconsistent with the responsibility-sharing objectives of the GCR and the principle of cooperation underlying international refugee law.

B. Root causes and human mobility

9. Conflict and violence continued to be major drivers forcing persons to flee their homes in search of safety. Heavy fighting in Ethiopia's Tigray region fueled internal and cross-border displacement into neighbouring countries, with many of the displaced confronted by armed groups and facing extreme violence en route. UNHCR worked with the Sudanese Government to relocate refugees to camps away from dangerous border areas and reduce overcrowding. The situation of Eritrean refugees in Tigray was of serious concern, with humanitarian access blocked for months amidst reports of ongoing human rights violations affecting refugees and host communities.

10. March 2021 marked a decade of civil war in the Syrian Arab Republic. Coinciding with this date, UNHCR issued its sixth update on "[International protection considerations with regard to persons fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic](#)", confirming that most Syrians seeking asylum continue to need international protection. However, some countries hosting Syrian refugees questioned the continued need for international protection. UNHCR advocated a comprehensive protection and solutions-oriented approach to the crisis: one that ensures support to host countries, prioritizes protection and self-reliance for refugees, utilizes resettlement as a protection tool and vigorously pursues conditions that will enable voluntary return.

11. Some 1 million Rohingya refugees remained displaced in Bangladesh and other countries of the region. In March 2021, a fire in one of Bangladesh's largest refugee camps left at least 11 dead and destroyed the shelters of 45,000 persons. A military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, followed by violent crackdowns against protesters, further undermined prospects for solutions for Rohingya refugees and prompted more to flee and seek protection abroad.

12. Venezuelans continued to leave their country in increasing numbers due to economic and political instability, and insecurity, frequently via dangerous land and sea crossings. Many Venezuelans lost their livelihoods and faced eviction and other hardships in COVID-19-affected host countries. Indigenous Venezuelan refugees faced severe challenges while attempting to make a living and access education and health care, their plight being further exacerbated by the pandemic. Extreme hardship facing Venezuelans in Latin American countries pushed some to decide to return home. In late 2020, this trend reversed, with renewed outflows and onward movements. Colombia's decree providing a ten-year

temporary protection status for an estimated 1.7 million Venezuelans will improve protection and access to essential services, as well as opportunities for socio-economic inclusion. This exemplary measure constitutes a good practice for other States to replicate.

13. In many regions, refugees travelled alongside persons moving for other reasons, often irregularly along dangerous routes. UNHCR worked with partners to reinforce the rights of all persons on the move, including through awareness campaigns and activities to counter exploitation by smugglers and traffickers. UNHCR and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime assumed joint leadership of the Inter-Agency Coordination Group Against Trafficking in Persons in 2021, bringing together partners to exchange information and good practices, including in support of field operations working to combat trafficking in displacement settings. UNHCR participated in the Executive Committee of the United Nations Migration Network to support States in implementing the Global Compact for Migration, including with respect to alternatives to detention, access to public health services and the safe return of those not needing international protection. UNHCR considers safe, dignified and prompt returns to be vital to the credibility of an effective asylum system. At regional and country levels, UNHCR supported collaboration on asylum and migration, including partnerships with issue-based coalitions and regional migration networks.

14. Displaced populations were affected by events linked to disasters and climate change, which exacerbated their situation and hampered humanitarian access. These include sudden-onset extreme weather events, such as flooding, and the longer-term impact of drought and desertification. Other natural hazards, including volcanic eruptions, also took their toll. Growing numbers of persons in Central America were forced to leave their homes due to converging factors that escalated insecurity, including endemic gang violence and organized crime. Meanwhile, disasters, flooding and droughts devastated the region, disproportionately affecting the poor and insecure. The devastation left behind by Hurricanes Eta and Iota widened inequalities and increased instability in violence-affected communities throughout the region.

15. In Somalia, locust swarms destroyed crops and livelihoods, affecting 2.6 million IDPs who were already displaced by flooding and conflict. During the same period, an estimated 700,000 flood-affected persons in the Sahel sought refuge in overcrowded camps, with limited sanitation facilities and access to medical services, exacerbating the risks posed by COVID-19.

16. Global political momentum towards climate action advanced, with a mounting sense of urgency and calls for concerted engagement by States, the United Nations and partners. UNHCR's role in protecting displaced populations in highly climate-vulnerable situations was increasingly recognized. The High Commissioner's Special Advisor on Climate Action led extensive consultations with States and partners, including through the 2020 Dialogue on Protection Challenges, to inform the development of a "[Strategic framework for climate action](#)". Released in February 2021, the framework seeks to provide legal and normative guidance; promote the resilience of displaced populations facing climate and environmental risks; enhance preparedness and response measures to tackle displacement in disaster situations; improve environmental protection in displacement settings; and increase the environmental sustainability of UNHCR's actions. In the coming year, regional action plans based on the framework will be pursued, addressing context-specific needs and opportunities.

17. UNHCR supported sustainable energy and environmental initiatives across different operations and implemented the [Clean Energy Challenge](#). Partnerships were reinforced with States through the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) and the Warsaw International Mechanism Task Force on Displacement. With the support of France and in cooperation with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the PDD, UNHCR helped address challenges around climate change, disaster displacement and migration driven by environmental degradation in West Africa and the Sahel region.

18. Under its supervisory responsibility, UNHCR issued legal considerations on the application of the 1951 Convention and regional refugee instruments to asylum claims made in the context of the adverse effects of climate change and disasters. Its analysis highlighted

linkages between climate change, conflict and threats to human rights, concluding that those seeking international protection in such contexts will in some cases be entitled to refugee status.

C. Asylum systems

19. COVID-19 presented significant challenges to national asylum systems and to UNHCR where it conducts refugee status determination (RSD) under its mandate. These included the suspension of asylum procedures and registration; border closures restricting access to asylum; the arbitrary detention of asylum-seekers; attempts to terminate international protection, despite objective country of origin information and country guidance demonstrating international protection needs; and limits on legal representation in asylum procedures.

20. While the suspension or partial functioning of asylum systems due to COVID-19 undermined access to international protection, the pandemic also presented opportunities. Crucially, it led to the adaptation of asylum systems to manage crises and the provision of registration and RSD services through remote arrangements. The use of technology enabled the continuation of registration activities, issuance or extension of identification documents, and the conduct of asylum interviews and hearings by remote means, including in Austria, Azerbaijan, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Estonia, Jordan, Kenya, Mexico and South Sudan.

21. Other measures taken to adapt to the situation were made possible through positive political will. This included the automatic extension by law of identity documents for asylum-seekers in a number of European Union Member States, as well as in Brazil, Ghana and the Russian Federation, and the conferral of residency rights on asylum-seekers in Portugal. Other States took group-based approaches to ensure protection in large-scale movements. Examples include Brazil's application of the broader refugee criteria under the Cartagena Declaration to Venezuelans, among other nationalities; Sudan's declaration of prima facie recognition for Ethiopian refugees; and the granting or extension of temporary protection status to persons of various nationalities in the United States of America in 2021.

22. The Asylum Capacity Support Group (ACSG) is a key international cooperation mechanism under the GCR. In late 2020, UNHCR issued an operational [guide to its working modalities](#), and the Secretariat of the ACSG facilitated the launch of State-to-State support mechanisms between Niger and France, Chad and France, and Mexico and Canada, covering implementation of diversified processing modalities. Additional pledges of support are crucial to ensure States receive help to improve their asylum systems. By end-2020, despite substantial drops in new claims, the global backlog of pending asylum applications was close to 4.2 million, a slight increase from the 4.1 million claims pending at end-2019. Adaptive measures, ensuring equitable access and continuous processing of claims, will be key in easing the backlogs. In 2020, the Office issued revised and detailed "[Procedural standards for refugee status determination under UNHCR's mandate](#)". Its principles and standards support enhanced due process and may assist in the development of national asylum procedures and case processing.

23. Consistent with its mandate, UNHCR worked with States to guide their interpretation and application of the 1951 Convention and other relevant instruments, including through national and regional legislative and judicial fora as well as human rights mechanisms and institutions. UNHCR's "[Human rights engagement strategy 2020-2023](#)", launched in 2020, provides guidance on utilizing human rights mechanisms and leveraging the engagement of human rights entities in support of refugee protection. Under GRF pledges to provide pro bono legal support, over 140,000 hours of free legal aid, legal representation and research were offered on a variety of issues including child protection, livelihoods, RSD and statelessness.

D. Individuals and communities

24. COVID-19 demonstrated how age, gender and diversity factors can increase exposure to discrimination and abuse. UNHCR witnessed increasing acute mental health and

psychosocial support needs as well as forced marriages, child labour and adolescent pregnancies during the pandemic, reflecting rising poverty and school closures. Twenty-seven countries reported an increase in gender-based violence (GBV) since the beginning of the pandemic, while the GBV situation in over 80 per cent of IDP operations was described as severe or extreme.

25. UNHCR issued [guidance on age, gender and diversity considerations in the context of COVID-19](#). It also adapted its GBV prevention and response programming by strengthening collaboration with community and women-led organizations and local partners, expanding remote case management and updating GBV referral pathways to respond to survivors' needs. Many operations created or expanded communication channels for survivors, including emergency hotlines in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Nepal, Pakistan, Peru, South Sudan and Zambia. UNHCR and partners assisted 2 million women and girls through 24/7 GBV hotlines. In the Central African Republic, a radio communication strategy led by returnee women and community leaders sensitized communities on COVID-19 and gender equality. Lifesaving GBV case management services were provided remotely in many operations, while emergency cash assistance supported survivors and women at risk. In Ecuador, UNHCR supported the opening of a community centre for refugees and Ecuadorian women engaged in the sale and exchange of sex as a coping mechanism. This initiative aimed to promote women's rights, strengthen peer support networks, prevent and respond to human immunodeficiency virus and other sexually transmitted infections, and protect against GBV. In Brazil, the fourth round of the "Empowering Refugee Women" initiative was launched by UNHCR, the United Nations Global Compact and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women to expand livelihood opportunities for refugee women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons.

26. In many countries, displaced women led the response to GBV. In Chad, India, Nigeria and Uganda, UNHCR and partners focused on the rights of refugee women and girls to ensure equal and meaningful participation in decision-making. Improved participation by women and girls in leadership and management were reported in IDP operations in Burkina Faso, Myanmar and South Sudan. In Cameroon, UNHCR and partners strengthened women's capacity to reinforce community mobilization and peaceful coexistence focusing on education, health services and child protection. In the Syrian Arab Republic, 91 women's committees across 12 governorates cooperated with GBV community prevention focal points to share information on COVID-19 prevention, legal services, and medical, mental health and psychosocial support for GBV survivors. In Malawi, 14 refugee-led community-based organizations supported referrals to services for GBV survivors. Other operations, such as Brazil, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Ecuador, Mexico, Niger, Nigeria, Peru and Senegal, used technology and innovative modalities, such as social media, to increase awareness and access to remote services.

27. UNHCR's ["Policy on the prevention, risk mitigation and response to gender-based violence"](#), issued in 2020, highlights the Office's work in this area and recognizes that programming to prevent and respond to GBV is a lifesaving institutional priority. It also emphasizes the importance of embedding gender equality in all aspects of UNHCR's work. During the reporting period, experts in GBV prevention and response were deployed through the "Safe from the Start" initiative, funded by the United States of America, to support the following operations: Brazil, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Djibouti, Mali, Mozambique, Sudan and Yemen, and regional activities in the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes, and West and Central Africa. UNHCR promoted gender equality in humanitarian action by building on initiatives such as the gender audits of global processes around the Global Refugee Forum and implementation of the GCR, and by becoming a board member of the [Compact on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action](#).

28. Displaced children faced numerous protection challenges, exacerbated by the pandemic, insufficient funding and limited capacity. UNHCR and partners introduced remote case management and advocated the continuation of child protection services during lockdowns. They worked with community outreach workers, volunteers and health professionals through 97 community-based child protection initiatives, including virtual child protection committees and adolescent and children's support groups.

29. Information and communication remain vital to prevent incidents and respond to protection concerns for all groups. In Ecuador, UNHCR piloted a WhatsApp chat box as a communication channel for displaced communities, providing access to information on COVID-19 and essential services. Similar chat box initiatives were piloted in Bolivia (Plurinational State of) and Brazil through the U-Report on the Move platform, targeting adolescents and youth. The Regional Support Spaces Network, with 186 structures in Argentina, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay, furnished information on access to rights and services, supported the identification and referral of persons at heightened risk, and provided connectivity, psychological support, safe showers and toilets, and safe spaces for women and children. A regional digital service mapping tool helped ensure access to updated information. In Kenya, a call centre was adapted to provide a trusted source of information about COVID-19 for displaced and stateless persons, while in the Syrian Arab Republic, UNHCR used WhatsApp groups, satellite centres and mobile teams to supplement physical outreach. In Yemen, over 40,000 targeted visits were conducted to provide information and support vulnerable families, persons with disabilities and older persons.

30. In many host countries, violence took place against displaced and stateless populations because of their sexual orientation or gender identity – often the reason why they sought asylum in the first place. These individuals frequently received insufficient counseling, health care and support. COVID-19 increased stigmatization and protection risks, while the psychological impact of isolation and socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 exacerbated the difficulties of their displacement. UNHCR collaborated with LGBTQI+-led organizations to address the situation, including in Bangladesh, Kenya, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey. In June 2021, a roundtable was convened by UNHCR and the United Nations Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity exploring the forces driving displacement, the challenges facing those seeking asylum, the push for inclusion in national services and the effects of the pandemic on LGBTQI+ persons.

III. Inclusion

A. Self-reliance and social protection

31. The pandemic devastated local economies, with a disproportionately negative effect on refugees working in local service industry jobs and lacking the protection of social benefits. For instance, the number of Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica reporting steady work-related income declined from 93 to 59 per cent since March 2020, forcing many to eat only once or twice a day. In 2021, UNHCR and the World Bank published an [update to a joint study](#), highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on poverty among Syrian refugee and host communities in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. UNHCR reported an increase in requests for cash payments among refugees and displaced persons, though underfunding limited its response capacity.

32. While refugee inclusion in impact assessments by the UNHCR-World Bank Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement provided some socio-economic evidence on refugees to inform tailored responses, the data available remains insufficient to present a global picture of the socio-economic challenges, opportunities and overall impact of the pandemic as compared to national populations.

33. Despite the effects of the pandemic, some encouraging initiatives helped boost refugee access to employment in formal economies. Chad adopted legislation granting refugees legal access to the labour market, and Ethiopia issued residence and work permits to refugees. Donors supported refugees through cash transfers and small loans to entrepreneurs, including in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. In El Salvador, the Government defined a strategy to guarantee that refugees could access public services, jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities. The Netherlands funded the Prospects Partnership, with participation from the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), together with the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNHCR and the United Nations

Children's Fund (UNICEF). This initiative helped displaced and host communities in the areas of education, protection and employment in Egypt, Ethiopia, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Uganda and Sudan. Azerbaijan facilitated access to decent work for refugees. In Brazil and Mexico, UNHCR collaborated with partners on the voluntary internal relocation of almost 70,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, facilitating access to stable employment, accommodation and health services. In both countries, UNHCR's private sector partners, including Accenture, Ingka Group, IKEA Foundation, Mabe, Palliser Furniture, and Woolworths, agreed to hire refugees. Initiatives, including those led by Settlement Services International, helped connect refugees to employment opportunities across borders and create complementary pathways through employment. Progress was made on the International Chamber of Commerce's pledge to support their 45 million member companies in hiring refugees. For example, the Kenya National Chamber of Commerce and Industry signed a memorandum of understanding with UNHCR on refugee employment.

34. The pandemic provided opportunities for refugees with experience in health care and community leaders to be recruited in Colombia, Mexico, Peru and several countries in Europe, including Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Spain and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The European Qualifications Passport for Refugees supported Council of Europe efforts to bring refugee health workers into the COVID-19 response.

35. Many refugees adapted their businesses and contributed, alongside local enterprises, to the production of essential personal protective equipment (PPE), including face masks. The African Entrepreneur Collective supported more than 14,600 refugee and host community entrepreneurs in Kenya and Rwanda, providing one-time COVID-19 relief grants. UNHCR collaborated with development partners to improve the digital skills of refugees, advocating on behalf of female entrepreneurs and supporting women and girls with training and computer skills. UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme are preparing to launch a joint consortium in 22 countries that will mobilize employers to provide digital work for refugees and host communities.

36. UNHCR supported the inclusion of displaced and stateless populations in social protection systems, from the comprehensive social security schemes of developed economies to cash and in-kind transfers in developing countries. Advocacy was reinforced in favour of refugee inclusion in national social protection schemes, vital statistics systems and economic development plans. UNHCR supported the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in convening a High-Level Experts Meeting on the Implementation of the Kampala Declaration on Jobs, Livelihoods and Self-Reliance for Refugees, Returnees and Host Communities. Among key issues discussed was the protection of income-generating assets, such as businesses and agricultural assets, to ensure that refugee entrepreneurs could re-build their livelihoods once COVID-19 measures were eased. In Brazil, refugees had access to emergency relief programmes, including COVID-specific subsidies. Together with partners, UNHCR provided livelihood support to over 1.24 million vulnerable displaced persons and host community members affected by COVID-19. The Poverty Alleviation Coalition, a consortium led by UNHCR, provided economic recovery and self-reliance support to 13,700 refugee and host community households in 2020 through the "graduation approach". In Zambia, refugees were included in the Farmer Input Support Programme, an initiative of the Ministry of Agriculture aimed at ensuring resilience of the agricultural sector and protecting rural livelihoods and food security in light of severe weather conditions. In Rwanda, refugees and host communities were included in agricultural projects with financial support from development partners, including Denmark, under the GRF.

37. UNHCR and ILO promoted refugee access to national employment services, while collaborating on the Approach to Inclusive Market Systems, which promotes market system development for entrepreneurs, and small and medium enterprises in forced displacement settings. UNHCR established partnerships with 19 financial service providers in 12 countries in Africa and the Americas. In 2020, these financial service providers introduced measures to support refugee borrowers, including the re-structuring or refinancing of loans, introduction of repayment moratoria, promotion of digital services and provision of access to recovery credit.

38. As of June 2020, \$2 billion had been allocated under the World Bank's IDA18 regional sub-window for refugees and host communities to 14 eligible countries in Africa and Asia. UNHCR is working closely with the World Bank on the development and roll-out of a Refugee Policy Review Framework to systematically review refugee policy and institutional environments in eligible countries. It aims to shed light on the extent to which World Bank engagement has helped support policies on issues including freedom of movement, decent work, environmental management and access to services such as education, healthcare and social protection.

B. Education

39. COVID-19 had a devastating impact on the enrolment of refugee children, especially girls, with associated protection risks. Children with disabilities were at increased risk of being left behind as measures to support home-based learning fell short of their learning needs. Alongside the pandemic, deteriorating security in the Sahel forced thousands of schools to close, threatening to undo hard-fought gains in the number of refugee children attending school. COVID-19 also undermined protection services delivered through schools, including psychosocial assistance, academic support for refugee learners and school feeding programmes. Worsening poverty and income losses meant families had to deprioritize spending on education. Continuous violence, insecurity, destruction of infrastructure and lack of teaching capacities in Iraq, Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, aggravated by domestic economic decline, put tremendous stress on overstretched educational systems. This jeopardized previous investments and progress made on improving access and learning outcomes for displaced and stateless children. Rising teenage pregnancies and child trafficking, as well as child labour, were observed, particularly where adults lost jobs due to lockdowns or greater competition for work. A study by the Malala Fund based on lessons learned from past Ebola epidemics showed that 50 per cent of refugee girls in secondary education were at risk of not returning to school. This rose to 100 per cent in some countries where enrolment rates were low before the pandemic. In the United Republic of Tanzania, when schools re-opened in June 2020, only about 50 per cent of refugee girls in secondary education returned to school, confirming the risks highlighted by the study.

40. School closures had extreme and varied impacts on the academic progress, safety, protection, social-emotional wellbeing and health of displaced children and youth. Because education serves an essential protection function, it is vital that they, especially the most marginalized, can return to school. In response, Malawi took steps to include refugees in their Growth and Development Strategy III, which includes education as a key priority area. Brazil's Ministry of Education resolved to ensure that refugee and migrant children, regardless of their status, were able to exercise their fundamental right to education by creating flexible requirements.

41. In its annual education report 2020, "[Coming together for refugee education](#)," UNHCR warned of the dire consequences of the pandemic for education. Previously, a refugee child was twice as likely to be out of school as a non-refugee child. This worsens when parents and guardians are unable to afford school fees or essential remote learning tools. UNICEF and UNHCR collaborated through their "[Blueprint for Joint Action](#)" to boost refugee enrolment, aimed at reaching up to 10 million refugee children and host communities. In countries where refugee children and youth were included in national response plans and efforts to ensure the continuation of learning during school closures, lessons continued through television and community radio broadcasting, digital platforms, small group tutoring sessions and self-study packs in low-resource contexts. UNHCR assisted 934,000 students in 74 countries to follow distance- and home-based learning. Continuity in education during school closures helped protect refugee children and youth and offered alternatives to negative coping mechanisms. In countries where refugee teachers were not part of the national education workforce, UNHCR advocated with donors and partners to ensure that teachers continued to receive incentive payments during school closures.

42. UNHCR worked with stakeholders to facilitate safe return to school for refugee children, teachers and the wider community. Water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure, a key factor in ensuring the safe re-opening of schools, was strengthened through the

construction and rehabilitation of school sanitation facilities and the distribution of health and hygiene kits. Teachers and educational personnel participated in training sessions on hygiene and health safety, and were provided with PPE.

43. The Accelerated Education Working Group, chaired by UNHCR, leveraged partner expertise to guide educational institutions on how to help learners catch up. It also engaged with the [Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies](#), hosting webinars on alternative education and key recommendations in light of COVID-19.

44. UNHCR's tertiary education scholarship programme continued to support refugee students throughout closure periods. Italy offered educational corridors for refugee university students. In Brazil, 329 refugees and asylum-seekers are completing their undergraduate studies and 76 had their diplomas revalidated through the activities of the Sergio Vieira de Mello Academic Chair, a joint initiative by UNHCR and more than 25 higher education institutions. Some higher education partners, for example in Kenya, provided laptops, smartphones and data bundles to refugees, and verified that students had access to electricity in camps through partnerships with onsite organizations.

C. Health

45. Many displaced and stateless persons faced increased risk of infection, living in conditions that prevented them from observing social distancing and implementing hygiene measures. In some situations, they were prevented from accessing treatment for health conditions. While recognizing that many countries hosting large refugee populations have overstretched health systems, ensuring access to health is an essential precondition to the enjoyment of rights associated with international protection and durable solutions. Many States did, however, extend COVID-19 health services to refugees and other displaced persons, consistent with their GRF pledges on inclusive access to health care.

46. Some States require support to address the health needs of host communities and displaced populations. Financial and technical assistance is crucial to strengthen national health systems, in line with the GCR. UNHCR advocates the inclusion of displaced and stateless populations in national vaccination plans, on par with citizens and in line with the COVAX allocation principles and the Humanitarian Buffer. In areas where UNHCR invested in building relationships of trust with communities before the pandemic, operations were better placed to respond to COVID-19 and ensure continued critical services. In Lebanon, more than 450 refugees with medical skills were mobilized as community health volunteers, focusing on COVID-19 awareness, hygiene, surveillance and the provision of initial advice. Playing a crucial role in sensitizing refugees about COVID-19 testing, they worked to mitigate community concerns and reduce the risk of stigmatization.

D. Mental health and psychosocial support

47. Mental health among displaced populations is a critically under-served need. To combat the growing mental health crisis, strengthen positive coping skills and protect the psychosocial well-being of refugees and other displaced persons, the Olympic Refugee Foundation launched an initiative to provide opportunities for sport to help displaced persons cope with the effects of the pandemic. Brazil's Santos Football Club and Peru's Club Alianza Lima partnered with UNHCR to support refugee integration, pledging to provide scholarships for refugees to attend sports camps and train coaches to address xenophobia. Recognizing the mental health and psychosocial impact of the pandemic, community members in Dohuk, Iraq were trained remotely in psychological first aid and positive coping mechanisms. Outreach volunteers supported the development of COVID-19 health and psychosocial support materials in Arabic and Sorani Kurdish, to be shared through radio programmes, WhatsApp networks and social media platforms.

48. The pandemic underscored the importance of prioritizing mental health and psychosocial support among displaced persons. The lack of economic opportunities increased the strain on mental health, contributing to increased gender-based violence, domestic violence and self-harm among the displaced.

E. Persons with disabilities

49. A five-year “Action plan on disability inclusion” to advance the rights of persons with disabilities was launched across UNHCR’s workforce and operations in 2020. Access to education for children with disabilities during lockdown, such as developing tele-counselling sessions with parents and children with disabilities, and access to COVID-19 socioeconomic efforts, providing targeted access to livelihoods, were key areas of focus. Persons with disabilities were involved in COVID-19 response planning in Ethiopia, Jordan and Kenya, and in the Americas region. UNHCR collaborated with the Latin American Network of Non-Governmental Organizations of Persons with Disabilities and their Families to adapt information materials and communication channels on COVID-19 and GBV prevention and response, to ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities. Similar adaptations were reported in Kenya, Lebanon, Rwanda, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania. In the Middle East and North Africa region, a research study entitled “Power of inclusion”, which mapped the needs of refugees with disabilities, provided operational guidance to strengthen responses to COVID-19 and gender-based violence.

F. Older persons

50. [UNHCR’s guidance on working with older persons in displacement](#) settings was updated in early 2021. Operations reported dedicated measures to ensure the inclusion of older persons in the COVID-19 response. This included initiatives to facilitate targeted access to cash, food and hygiene materials.

G. Social cohesion

51. Cities around the world helped ensure that local efforts to address the pandemic did not exclude anyone based on their immigration or refugee status. UNHCR collaborated with the Mayors Migration Council, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, IOM and others to develop key messages and policy guidance for cities. In follow-up to its GRF pledges, the city of Bristol, in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, established the #WeAreBristol campaign to support social cohesion, promoting an inclusive local identity and preventing discrimination and xenophobia. UNHCR and the city of São Paulo, Brazil, jointly developed a standard operational protocol to guide aimed at preventing discrimination in access to social assistance services and food distribution for transgender migrants and refugees.

52. In Colombia, UNHCR’s [Somos Panas Colombia](#) campaign discouraged xenophobia and encouraged solidarity towards Venezuelans. In the framework of the regional [response for Venezuelans \(R4V\) coordination platform](#), UNHCR and partners advocated the inclusion of refugees and migrants in national vaccination plans and countered misinformation through an inter-agency social media package on COVID-19 vaccinations. In November 2020, the Department of the Interior and Local Government in the Philippines instructed local government units to promote the inclusion of displaced and stateless persons in response to the pandemic.

53. Religious leaders came together to support displaced and stateless populations. In April 2021, Religions for Peace and UNHCR launched the Multi-religious Council of Leaders, with the objective of advocating conflict prevention, reconciliation and peacebuilding in challenging humanitarian and displacement contexts. Leading up to the next GRF in 2023, the Council will work to counter xenophobia, strengthen multi-religious efforts to address the root causes of conflict and displacement, and support peacebuilding, reconciliation and the inclusion of displaced and stateless persons at the global, regional and national levels. In October 2020, UNHCR released guidance on addressing racism and xenophobia.

IV. Solutions

A. Voluntary repatriation

54. In 2020, 250,000 refugees returned to their countries of origin, a decrease of 21 per cent over 2019. Organized returns were hampered by the suspension of voluntary repatriation operations following COVID-19-related border closures, while the pandemic triggered premature returns or onward movements, particularly when individuals faced difficulties in host countries. Returns continued to be limited as obstacles persisted in many countries of origin, including ongoing insecurity and a lack of essential services and livelihood opportunities to ensure the sustainability of this solution.

55. Among other challenging developments in the context of COVID-19, a drastic reduction in returns was observed in the Middle East and North Africa region, where some 38,600 Syrian refugees returned home. This represented a decline of 60 per cent compared to the previous year. In the Syrian Arab Republic, UNHCR provided returning refugees and other vulnerable populations with humanitarian assistance and other services through a network of community centres. In support of the fundamental right of refugees to return home, UNHCR continued efforts to create the conditions for voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity when the situation permits. In anticipation of further returns when conditions improve, UNHCR and partners strengthened preparedness and planning for returns, guided by the “[Comprehensive protection and solutions strategy: A roadmap to advance resettlement and complementary pathways in the Syria crisis](#)” and the GCR.

B. Resettlement and complementary pathways to admission

56. Movement restrictions and lack of access to refugees because of the pandemic meant UNHCR and its partners had to significantly scale back resettlement activities, while States had to cancel most selection missions. Resettlement and complementary pathway admissions were also affected by travel restrictions, contributing to the lowest resettlement rates in two decades. Despite the pandemic, UNHCR was able to submit the resettlement cases of over 39,500 refugees to 25 countries for consideration. This represented approximately half of the submissions made in 2019. However, in 2020, only 22,800 refugees departed for resettlement with UNHCR’s assistance.

57. The interim report on UNHCR’s “Three-year strategy (2019-2021) on resettlement and complementary pathways”, reported on progress achieved, notwithstanding the limited number of available resettlement places and departures in 2020. Under the joint UNHCR-IOM Sustainable Resettlement and Complementary Pathways Initiative, capacity-building initiatives were carried out in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, with the initiation or revision of national action plans on resettlement.

58. The number of complementary pathways remains limited. A joint study from UNHCR and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “[Safe pathways for refugees II](#)”, analyses data on refugees accessing complementary pathways from 2010 to 2019. Despite State efforts during the past decade, the study highlights that existing costs and documentation requirements, among other barriers, continue to prevent families from being reunited, and skilled refugees from accessing employment opportunities in third countries.

V. Stateless persons

59. Stateless persons were disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and related mitigation measures due to their lack of nationality. In many contexts, they were unable to access testing and treatment in the absence of legal status and were excluded from social services. The loss of livelihoods and limited access to education and other social services worsened existing inequalities and increased protection risks.

60. To be effective, vaccination programmes need to be inclusive, with prioritization based on public health considerations. Stateless persons risk exclusion from national immunization plans, regardless of whether their age, health status or role in society would otherwise place them in a priority group.

61. In other respects, the protection of stateless persons improved in several countries. In Iceland, steps to align domestic laws with international standards on the protection of stateless persons culminated in the country's accession to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons in January 2021. The Government subsequently developed standard operating procedures to give effect to a 2018 Act establishing a dedicated statelessness determination procedure. Statelessness determination procedures are key to the ability of governments to identify stateless persons and provide them with protected status. Statelessness status ensures that individuals can enjoy a range of basic rights, including access to healthcare, education and social security. Statelessness determination procedures were established in Côte d'Ivoire, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, with Côte d'Ivoire becoming the first country in the African continent to take this important step. Sudan ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, paving the way toward the removal of gender discrimination in nationality law.

62. Several States adopted legislative amendments and resolutions to regularize the stay of stateless persons and grant them associated rights. In January 2021, Thailand's Cabinet approved a resolution providing access to legal immigration status and permanent residency for registered stateless persons residing in Thailand for at least 15 years. The resolution enhances entitlements for up to 400,000 registered stateless persons and will facilitate access to Thai nationality. Similarly, in February 2021, the Russian Federation endorsed amendments according to which stateless former citizens of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) will be able to obtain identity cards and be granted the right to work, obtain residency and access naturalization. In November 2020, the Philippines issued a circular to ensure that displaced and stateless persons have uniform access to basic services and assistance at the local level, particularly in public emergencies. A comprehensive overview of developments on statelessness, including efforts to prevent and resolve statelessness, in line with the goal of the #IBelong Campaign to End Statelessness by 2024, is contained in EC/72/SC/CRP.11 available from <https://www.unhcr.org/standing-committee-meetings.html>.

VI. Internally displaced persons

63. At the end of 2020, more than 48 million persons were internally displaced due to conflict, violence and human rights violations. Countries witnessing the most conflict-related new displacements included Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Niger, Nigeria, Mozambique, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. Disasters, including climate-related, triggered millions of new displacements, including in 45 out of 50 countries with conflict-related internal displacement.

64. Despite widespread support for the United Nations Secretary General's call for a global ceasefire during the COVID-19 pandemic, armed conflict continued to pose major protection challenges. Countries most affected by internal displacement were also among those with the most reported civilian casualties, including Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mozambique, Somalia, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. While noting recent advances in Afghanistan, Sudan and Ukraine, the inclusion of internal displacement in national protection of civilians frameworks and policies is critical in order to reduce or mitigate the risk of displacement, ensure civilians can flee to safety when needed, safeguard protection and facilitate the achievement of durable solutions.

65. UNHCR has long promoted the development and implementation of national IDP laws and policies, recognizing that internal displacement must be addressed as a matter of legal obligation and national interest. Since the establishment of the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, States adopted more than 80 IDP laws and policies. During the reporting period, UNHCR supported over 10 countries through the provision of legal and

technical advice as well as capacity-building, and by consistently advocating the direct participation of affected communities in developing legal frameworks.

66. UNHCR continued to chair the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) Task Team on Law and Policy, a platform bringing together humanitarian, human rights and development partners. Regionally, UNHCR collaborated with the African Union, as well as ECOWAS, IGAD and the Southern African Development Community, on the ratification, domestication and implementation of the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa. Domestication processes were initiated in Burkina Faso and Mozambique. UNHCR also strengthened its dialogue with the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region to advance protection and durable solutions for IDPs.

67. Throughout the reporting period, UNHCR engaged in 33 countries with internal displacement, ramping up its engagement in rapidly evolving IDP emergencies in Azerbaijan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique and Niger. In Burkina Faso, UNHCR provided support to host communities providing land to IDPs, while in conflict-affected areas of Nigeria, UNHCR partnered with the national bar association to facilitate access to justice for vulnerable IDPs.

68. While exacerbating the protection concerns of already vulnerable displaced populations, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for public health responses that are inclusive of IDPs. UNHCR increased its support to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on IDPs, nearly all of whom live in low- and middle-income countries or those with infrastructure devastated by conflict. UNHCR and the International Committee of the Red Cross issued common protection messages on COVID-19 to all country representatives and delegations, and issued operational guidance to all clusters through the GPC. In countries such as Burkina Faso, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras and Sudan, UNHCR worked alongside partners to ensure displaced persons had access to healthcare by directly supporting regional health authorities to strengthen their prevention and response capacity. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique and Somalia, UNHCR strengthened awareness-raising on COVID-19 prevention and ensured communication even when IDPs could not be reached in person. To address the risk of eviction, UNHCR increased cash assistance to vulnerable IDPs, particularly in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq and Ukraine.

69. UNHCR strengthened efforts to address climate-related displacement in implementing its 2019 IDP policy and its “[Strategic framework on climate action](#)”. In 2020, through the twentieth anniversary of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (GP20) initiative, UNHCR co-organized a regional exchange on disaster displacement in Asia, together with the Disaster Displacement Working Group for Asia and the Pacific, the PDD and the Secretariat of the High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement.

70. In fostering multi-stakeholder action on internal displacement, UNHCR continued to co-chair and host the Secretariat for the “[GP20 plan of action](#)” through its third and final year. UNHCR, along with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of IDPs, spearheaded efforts to galvanize stakeholders on prevention, protection and solutions to internal displacement, including with a compilation of national practices capturing 22 country examples. In 2021, GP20 was succeeded by GP2.0 as an informal platform for joint initiatives and the sharing of good practices. UNHCR also collaborated with the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of IDPs on the provision of joint support at the country level, the organization of an intersessional seminar of the Human Rights Council on GP20, and on the Special Rapporteur’s report to the United Nations General Assembly and the GPC annual forum.

71. COVID-19 necessitated the improved collection and use of information on new or shifting protection challenges and on how the protection clusters were responding. The GPC focused on communicating the latest developments, including through regular situation reports. A Task Team on Human Rights Engagement under the GPC was established, bringing together more than forty NGOs and United Nations entities involved in humanitarian and human rights work. The objective is to reinforce engagement with national, regional and United Nations human rights mechanisms and entities, strengthening respect for the rights of IDPs.

72. UNHCR led the GPC in 29 out of 32 protection cluster and cluster-like mechanisms. The GPC undertook field missions to Ethiopia and Sudan, and provided remote support and technical advice to field protection clusters around the world. The GPC focused on gathering the latest evidence on protection matters, integrating data from national clusters. The 2020 Global Protection Forum brought together over 3000 humanitarian, peace and development partners, academics, States and donors to discuss contemporary challenges and lessons learned, and to provide direction to the protection clusters. More details on UNHCR's operational engagement with IDPs can be found in EC/72/SC/CRP.14 available from <https://www.unhcr.org/standing-committee-meetings.html>.

VII. Conclusion

73. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, positive examples of inclusion of refugees and other persons of concern, including access to health services and vaccines, education, and economic and livelihood opportunities, provide inspiration to States and other stakeholders on how to better manage the current and future crises. These examples highlight the firm commitment of many States to the values of international refugee law even in the face of unprecedented national challenges and demonstrate that addressing both are not incompatible. UNHCR underscores that public health measures do not justify breaches of the principle of non-refoulement or denial of access to asylum. It calls on all States to continue to honour the spirit and the letter of the 1951 Convention and the GCR, and to redouble efforts to ensure respect for the rights of refugees, IDPs and stateless persons through inclusion in national safety nets. To do so is in the interest of public health and global well-being. The purpose and intent of the 1951 Convention, born of a spirit of global solidarity to address the plight of millions of forcibly displaced persons in the wake of World War II, endures as humanity grapples with the scourge of conflict alongside many new challenges.
