**The rights and health of refugees, migrants and stateless must be protected in COVID-19 response:  
A joint statement by UNHCR, IOM, OHCHR and WHO** 

[Arabic](https://www.ohchr.org/AR/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25762&LangID=A) | [Chinese](https://www.ohchr.org/CH/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25762&LangID=C) | [French](https://www.ohchr.org/FR/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25762&LangID=F) | [Russian](https://www.ohchr.org/RU/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25762&LangID=R) | [Spanish](https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25762&LangID=S)

In the face of the COVID-19 crisis, we are all vulnerable. The virus has shown that it does not discriminate - but many refugees, those forcibly displaced, the stateless and migrants are at heightened risk.

Three-quarters of the world's refugees and many migrants are hosted in developing regions where health systems are already overwhelmed and under-capacitated. Many live in overcrowded camps, settlements, makeshift shelters or reception centers, where they lack adequate access to health services, clean water and sanitation.

The situation for refugees and migrants held in formal and informal places of detention, in cramped and unsanitary conditions, is particularly worrying. Considering the lethal consequences a COVID-19 outbreak would have, they should be released without delay. Migrant children and their families and those detained without a sufficient legal basis should be immediately released.

This disease can be controlled only if there is an inclusive approach which protects every individual's rights to life and health. Migrants and refugees are disproportionately vulnerable to exclusion, stigma and discrimination, particulary when undocumented. To avert a catastrophe, governments must do all they can to protect the rights and the health of everyone. Protecting the rights and the health of all people will in fact help control the spread of the virus.

It is vital that everyone, including all migrants and refugees, are ensured equal access to health services and are effectively included in national responses to COVID-19, including prevention, testing and treatment. Inclusion will help not only to protect the rights of refugees and migrants, but will also serve to protect public health and stem the global spread of COVID-19. While many nations protect and host refugee and migrant populations, they are often not equipped to respond to crises such as Covid-19. To ensure refugees and migrants have adequate access to national health services, States may need additional financial support. This is where the world's financial institutions can play a leading role in making funds available.

While countries are closing their borders and limiting cross-border movements, there are ways to manage border restrictions in a manner which respects international human rights and refugee protection standards, including the principle of non-refoulement, through quarantine and health checks.

More than ever, as COVID-19 poses a global threat to our collective humanity, our primary focus should be on the preservation of life, regardless of status. This crisis demands a coherent, effective international approach that leaves no-one behind. At this crucial moment we all need to rally around a common objective, fighting this deadly virus. Many refugees, displaced, stateless people and migrants have skills and resources that can also be part of the solution.

We cannot allow fear or intolerance to undermine rights or compromise the effectiveness of responses to the global pandemic. We are all in this together. We can only defeat this virus when each and every one of us is protected.

ENDS

**‘Overwhelmed’ health systems have little room for sick refugees, migrants, UN agencies warn**

**3 April 2020**

[**Migrants and Refugees**](https://news.un.org/en/news/topic/migrants-and-refugees)

**Four prominent United Nations system entities have called on countries to protect refugees, migrants, stateless persons and those forcibly displaced by disasters and conflict – some of the world’s most vulnerable populations – against the rapidly expanding COVID-19 pandemic.**

In a [joint statement](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/media.aspx?IsMediaPage=true) released today, the UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](http://www.unhcr.org/)), the International Organization for Migration ([IOM](https://www.iom.int/)), the UN human rights office ([OHCHR](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/pages/home.aspx)) and the World Health Organization ([WHO](http://www.who.int/en/)) stressed that refugees, migrants and displaced persons are at heightened risk of contracting the new [coronavirus](https://www.un.org/coronavirus) disease.

“Three quarters of the world's refugees and many migrants are hosted in developing regions where health systems are already overwhelmed and under-capacitated,” the statement reads.  It notes that many of them live in overcrowded camps, settlements, makeshift shelters or reception centres, where they lack adequate access to health services, clean water and sanitation.

**Human rights crucial to combatting COVID-19**

The joint statement voices particular concern about the situation for refugees and migrants held in formal and informal places of detention, including migrant children and their families as well as those detained without a sufficient legal basis.

“Considering the lethal consequences a [COVID-19](https://www.un.org/coronavirus) outbreak would have, they should be released without delay”, the statement reads.  “This disease can be controlled only if there is an inclusive approach which protects every individual's rights to life and health.”

The four agencies also stressed that Governments must do everything possible to protect the rights and health of all people, adding that doing so will in fact help control the spread.

Migrants and refugees, who are disproportionately vulnerable to exclusion, stigma and discrimination, must have equal access to health services and be effectively included in national responses to COVID-19 – including prevention, testing and treatment.

Meanwhile, countries around the globe are closing their borders and limiting cross-border movements to combat COVID-19.  The four agencies stress in their statement that all such actions must be taken in full respect for human rights and refugee protection standards – including the principle of *non-refoulement*, or no forced return.  Quarantines and health checks can help provide solutions.

**Building host country capacity**

While many nations protect and host refugee and migrant populations, they are often not equipped to respond to crises such as the current pandemic.

The joint statement emphasizes that States may require additional financial support to ensure that refugees and migrants they host enjoy adequate access to national health services.  It notes that the world’s financial institutions can play a leading role in making those funds available.

“More than ever, as COVID-19 poses a global threat to our collective humanity, our primary focus should be on the preservation of life, regardless of status”, the statement reads, calling for a coherent, effective international approach that leaves no one behind.

**Refugees playing active role, along with UN agencies**

Amid the looming threat of potentially devastating virus outbreaks in in refugee and displaced persons camps around the world, UNHCR is [liveblogging](https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2020/4/5e79e2410/live-blog-refugees-covid-19-crisis.html) its robust preparation efforts.

In Kenya, distributions of food, jerry cans and soap are underway.  Teams are providing hygiene kits to refugees in southern Yemen, as well as training sessions on safe behavior.  In Syria, disbursements of direct cash assistance continue in displaced persons’ camps, with UNHCR staff observing social distancing protocols.

Today’s joint statement also makes clear that refugees, displaced, stateless people and migrants, have skills and resources that can actively help combat COVID-19.

In Iran, refugees and Iranian women are working together to produce masks to keep health care workers safe.  Meanwhile, in Kenya’s Kakuma refugee camp, a young refugee entrepreneur is accelerating his soap production to meet the camp’s increasing demand.

“We can only defeat this virus when each and every one of us is protected,” the statement concludes.