

Executive Committee (ExCom) of the High Commissioner's Programme

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Agenda item 4(a): International Protection

Collective NGO Statement

Oral Statement

Dear Chair, Excellencies, and Distinguished Delegates,

This statement was drafted in consultation with a wide range of NGOs, including organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless people.

Conflict, persecution, climate change, shrinking civic space, and unprecedented funding cuts are converging with weakening multilateralism and growing challenges to international humanitarian and refugee law. The 75th anniversary of the Refugee Convention and 65th anniversary of the Statelessness Convention must be a renewed call for States to translate commitments into practice.

Access to asylum is being restricted through pushbacks, summary returns, procedural barriers, and reduced access to legal representation and information. Collective expulsions and direct or chain refoulement must cease.

Externalization arrangements, from offshore processing to “return hubs,” risk transforming responsibility-sharing into responsibility-shifting, moving people and obligations out of sight. Deterrence is increasingly replacing protection, while protection needs along mixed-movement routes go unidentified.

Civic space is also contracting. NGOs, refugee-led organizations, human rights defenders, faith actors, and volunteers face restrictive laws, intimidation, surveillance, and reprisals. When civic space contracts, protection contracts with it. Humanitarian assistance, rescue, and solidarity must never be criminalized.

Women and girls, children, persons with disabilities, stateless persons, older persons, persons with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics, trafficking survivors, and others face compounded risks. UNHCR's Age, Gender, and Diversity approach must be a genuine protection priority, not a compliance exercise.

Legal aid, information, documentation, and legal identity are fundamental to protection. Without them, refugees and stateless people are shut out of asylum, services, and work, while gaps in birth registration perpetuate statelessness across generations.

Funding cuts are reducing legal assistance, registration, child protection, and community protection precisely when needs are greatest, often without transition plans. Local and refugee-led organizations are absorbing these responsibilities and risks without corresponding resources and recognition. The UNHCR localisation guidelines are strong on paper – we need to see them in reality.

We welcome the High Commissioner's 50 by 35 vision, but self-reliance cannot be built on reduced assistance or premature return. It depends on rights: freedom of movement, the right to work, education, and inclusion in national systems. Return must remain safe, voluntary, and dignified, never compelled by cuts.

It also depends on resettlement, family reunification, and complementary pathways which remain far short of need. Climate-related displacement is an expanding protection frontier requiring rights-based responses and adequate resources.

Excellencies, we call on States to:

- **Defend access to asylum and non-refoulement**, end pushbacks and unsafe returns, and ensure that externalization arrangements and border governance comply fully with international law;
- **Foster rights-based self-reliance** and expand durable solutions and responsibility sharing, including through resettlement, family reunification, and complementary pathways;
- **Protect civic space and principled humanitarian action**, ensuring that humanitarian actors in all their diversity -can operate safely and independently;
- **Protect legal space**, guaranteeing access to legal representation and information in formats and languages accessible to displaced populations; and
- **Ensure that digital technologies, biometrics, and artificial intelligence are governed by human rights safeguards.**

We call on UNHCR to keep protection at the core of its work. The current funding context makes its protection mandate more essential, not less.

Dear Excellencies,

The international protection system cannot be preserved in principle while being progressively weakened in practice.

Seventy-five years after the Refugee Convention, access to asylum, non-refoulement, human dignity, meaningful participation, and international solidarity must remain the foundations of our collective response.

Thank you.