

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS ON COVID-19 AND PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

New York, 3 June 2020

COVID-19 continues to devastate lives and livelihoods around the globe — hitting the most vulnerable the hardest.

This is particularly true for millions of people on the move — such as refugees and internally displaced persons who are forced to flee their homes from violence or disaster, or migrants in precarious situations.

Now they face three crises rolled into one.

First, a health crisis — as they become exposed to the virus, often in crowded conditions where social distancing is an impossible luxury — and where basics such as health care, water, sanitation and nutrition are often hard to find.

This impact will be even more devastating to the large number of people on the move who live in least developed countries. One-third of the world's internally displaced population live in the 10 countries most at-risk to COVID-19.

Second, people on the move face a socio-economic crisis — especially those working in the informal economy without access to social protection.

In addition, the loss of income from COVID-19 is likely to lead to a colossal \$109 billion drop in remittances. That's the equivalent of nearly three-quarters of all official development assistance that is no longer being sent back home to the 800 million people who depend on it.

Third, people on the move face a protection crisis.

More than 150 countries have imposed border restrictions to contain the spread of the virus. At least 99 states make no exception for people seeking asylum from persecution.

At the same time, fear of COVID-19 has led to skyrocketing xenophobia, racism and stigmatization.

And the already precarious situation of women and girls is ever more dire, as they face higher risks of exposure to gender-based violence, abuse and exploitation.

Yet even as refugees and migrants face all these challenges, they are contributing heroically on the frontlines in essential work.

About one in eight of all nurses globally, for example, is practicing in a country different from where they were born.

The COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity to reimagine human mobility.

Four core understandings must guide the way:

First, exclusion is costly and inclusion pays. An inclusive public health and socio-economic response will help suppress the virus, restart our economies and advance the Sustainable Development Goals.

Second, we must uphold human dignity in the face of the pandemic and learn from the handful of countries that have shown how to implement travel restrictions and border controls while fully respecting human rights and international refugee protection principles.

Third, no-one is safe until everyone is safe. Diagnostics, treatment and vaccines must be accessible to all.

Fourth and finally, people on the move are part of the solution. Let us remove unwarranted barriers, explore models to regularize pathways for migrants and reduce transaction costs for remittances.

I am grateful to countries, especially developing countries, that have opened their borders and hearts to refugees and migrants, despite their own social, economic, and now health, challenges.

They offer a moving lesson to others in a period when doors are closed. It is essential that these countries are provided increased support and full solidarity.

We all have a vested interest to ensure that the responsibility of protecting the world's refugees is equitably shared and that human mobility remains safe, inclusive, and respects international human rights and refugee law.

No country can fight the pandemic or manage migration alone.

But together, we can contain the spread of the virus, buffer its impact on the most vulnerable and recover better for the benefit of all.

Thank you.