

M&R BULLETIN ON COVID-19

Context

The virus has been affecting over a million people throughout the world, bringing the health system and the economy of several states to their knees, but above all it is also causing an alarming number of fatalities even in developed countries.

To date over 100 countries are reporting local transmission of COVID-19. Of those, 34 countries have refugee populations exceeding 20,000 people, among whom as of 10 March no infections have been reported. [UNHCR COVID-19 measures](#)

However, in overcrowded conditions such as refugee or IDP camps and immigration detention centres, social distancing is difficult or impossible. With crowded populations, very poor sanitation, no access to hand-washing facilities, very poor disease surveillance and very poor health services, “If we let the virus spread like wildfires [...] it would kill millions,” U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres. And this is not yet getting enough global attention.

Furthermore, “while all countries need to respond to COVID-19, countries with existing humanitarian crises are particularly vulnerable and will require all humanitarian partners to look at their existing operations to see how they can be reprioritized and adapted [to tackle the virus]” (*UN source*).

Indeed, as the arc of the pathogen spreads from global capitals to war zones and refugee camps, U.N. relief officials and aid organizations are bracing for what they fear could be a cataclysmic second phase of the pandemic: spreading in the close-quarters encampments of the world’s more than 25 million refugees and another 40 million internally displaced people.

Furthermore, U.N. and other relief agencies have to ensure the health of their own staff while delivering care to needy communities. “Many humanitarian operations are scaling back physical presence, recommending their international staff return home and closing offices.” [FP "The next wave" U.N. and relief agencies concerns](#) (23 March 2020)

Why this weekly bulletin?

In order to better understand the impact of the current COVID-19 crisis on the situation of migrants, refugees, IDPs and victims of human trafficking throughout the world, the Migrants & Refugees Section is studying the available data and the reflections elaborated by different actors.

The purpose is to keep displaced and vulnerable people in mind and in view during the pandemic spread. Although the entire humanity is called to fight the COVID-19 virus, we should not stop assisting people who are already in need of help and protection. Indeed,

as already extremely vulnerable, they are likely to be even more harshly affected in case the virus spreads among them.

“The risk is we focus on ourselves and forget that there are people in the world who continue to flee war, persecution, hunger!” Fr Carmelo La Magra, parish priest in Lampedusa

In view of the above, this M&R newsletter seeks to share initiatives and good practices adopted by different Catholic actors around the world who seek to assist displaced people during this crisis and prevent the spread of the coronavirus amidst their communities.

Why them?

The question should be: *Why not?*

The current COVID-19 emergency is called pandemic, from the two Greek words: pan, meaning “all”, and demos, meaning “people or population”. COVID-19 teaches us we are one human community, says the Holy Father. “We can only get out of this situation together, as a whole humanity”. For this reason, we have “to look at each other with a sense of solidarity”. “To remind humans, once and for all, that humankind is one community. And how important and decisive is universal brotherhood. We have to think that it will be a bit like a post-war period. There will no longer be “the other”, but it will be ‘us’” [Interview with La Stampa](#) (20 March 2020).

To defeat the virus, no one must be left out. COVID-19 doesn’t discriminate, “the virus can affect anyone and it is our collective responsibility to ensure that the global response includes all people,” said Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. “Allowing full access to health services, including for the most marginalized members of the community, is the best way to protect us all. Everyone on this planet – including refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people– should be able to access health facilities and services.”

There are new situations of poverty or need related to the disease, and the existing ones persist and worsen. “Many people, already at the margins of society don’t have the luxury of taking some of the voluntary means that others have about social distancing, especially migrants... They don’t always have access to good and factual information, so we as an organization are trying to supply that.” Mons Robert Vitillo, Secretary General of the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC). [Covid-19: Learning from the past for the present_Vatican News](#) (26 March 2020)

Main Concerns:

- Risk of virus spread:

- Immigration detention centres: NGOs in different parts of the world have demanded a release of all immigration detainees – most of whom have committed no crime – who are at risk of becoming infected and not receiving adequate health care in detention.

Further, operating returns is not possible due to the movement restrictions put in place across the globe. [Europe](#) ; [Australia](#)

- Camps: Overcrowded refugee camps and urban slums with lack of sanitation increase the possibility for a highly contagious disease like COVID-19 to spread rapidly.

Given the lack of adequate sanitation services and the severely limited medical care, the risk of the virus spreading amongst the inhabitants of the camps in Greece is extremely high once they have been exposed. And as the first case has been confirmed on Lesbos, a Greek citizen, the evacuation of the camps has become more urgent than ever. [Greek refugee camps](#)

Activists are warning that conditions at crowded camps in southeast Bangladesh are leaving a million Rohingya refugees at risk of contracting the virus. [Bangladesh refugee camps](#)

Worry over COVID-19 spreading in African refugee camps [African refugee camps](#)

Most refugees and IDPs live in countries that are less prepared to combat the outbreak, where IDPs already suffer from limited access to essential services and decent healthcare. [vulnerable populations at risk in South Sudan](#)

- Closed borders:

UNHCR has published a [paper](#) with key legal considerations on access to territory for persons in need of international protection in the context of COVID-19. It affirms that while States may put measures in place which include health screening or testing of persons seeking international protection upon entry and/or putting them in quarantine, such measures should not result in the denial of the effective opportunity to seek asylum, or in *refoulement*. [Filippo Grandi statement \(UNHCR\)](#)

'Restore legality to protect refugees amidst the pandemic' [ECRE open letter](#)

- Stop to repatriations and resettlements

UNHCR and IOM announced a temporary suspension of resettlement travel for refugees due to the COVID-19 global health crisis. [UN News](#)
Stopping resettlement and repatriation causes homelessness as most of them released accommodations because of the planned trip.

- Stop/reduction of humanitarian aid and funds

Mediterranea, the platform for civil society conducting search and rescue operations in the central Mediterranean, [states](#) that it has to suspend rescue operations due to practical and health challenges resulting from the Corona virus. [Mediterranean emergency](#)

Ongoing restrictions of travel, suspension of flights and international staff returning home are likely to continue disrupting humanitarian operations. Moreover, "some of the biggest donors are seeing global recession about to hit them," said a senior relief

official. “How generous are they going to be when they have a crisis looming in their own backyards?”

- Most vulnerable among vulnerable

- Children: Lockdowns and school closures are affecting their education, mental health, and access to basic health services. The risks of exploitation are higher than ever, especially for refugees and IDP children. [COVID- 19 increases risk of child abuse](#)

- Women: During social isolation, the likelihood of tensions in households may increase and fuel domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV).

- Migrant workers:

Most irregular migrants find work as hourly workers or, worse, as illicit workers. In the current crisis, they are at great risk of hunger or eviction from their homes and being excluded from welfare measures. If they contract COVID-19, they are least likely to seek and receive health care. They might be forced to return to their place of origin or remain stuck where they are with no means of supporting their family. [Kashmir migrant workers](#)