

EXPERT STATEMENT ON INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

October 2, 2015

We, a group of experts, met at Georgetown University on August 24, 2015 to discuss ways to improve responses to the current situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs). The workshop concluded that there is urgent need to raise the visibility of IDPs in two principal regards: gaining access to IDPs in acute crises, such as Syria, in order to provide effective protection; and finding solutions for IDPs in the many protracted situations of displacement that have already lasted for decades.

We believe that the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), which will take place in Istanbul in May 2016, provides an important opportunity to bring attention to the plight of IDPs. IDPs fall naturally within the theme of the WHS relating to “Serving the Needs of People in Conflict,” though issues related to internal displacement are also related to disasters and adverse effects of climate change and fit within the other themes of the WHS as well. We urge the Secretary General to reference both problems in his report to the WHS and urge governments to reinvigorate their efforts to ensure the protection of IDPs as a specific population of concern in conflict settings who have special needs that are too often being neglected. This approach is consistent with the scoping paper for the theme, which recognizes that “specific categories of persons can ... face specific risks” and specifically references that “displacement, in particular, deprives people of many of their ways to deal with risks they already face.” Our recommendations are also consistent with Restoring Humanity: Global Voices Calling For Action, the synthesis of the WHS consultations, which states: “The global community is urged to equally protect, assist and find durable solutions for internally displaced people in accordance with humanitarian principles and international law, and through new national and regional instruments.” The Secretary-General’s leadership is greatly needed to transform this recognition of special needs into actions that will improve protection.

Based on the workshop discussion, we recommend that the Secretary-General’s report and any document that comes out of the summit call for:

1) Higher priority among national governments, international organizations and donors to IDPs as a population of special concern during conflict. While there has been great progress since the promulgation of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, there are still problems in gaining access to IDPs during conflict, which presents barriers to delivery of life-saving humanitarian assistance. There are also far too many IDPs who have been displaced for decades, often living in camps or with little access to mainstream services in urban areas. The SG’s report can reinforce that concerted effort on the part of the entire international community is needed to address these problems: to ensure access to all IDPs and to find solutions for IDPs as soon as is practicable. Setting goals of a) increasing the proportion of IDPs with access to assistance and protection by 50%, and b) reducing the number of IDPs in protracted situations by 50% could be an effective way to raise visibility of these issues.

2) Institutional reforms to enhance the protection of IDPs both in situations of armed conflict and disasters. Many at the workshop noted need for a ‘visible face’ for the protection of IDPs. Whether because of the downgrading of the position of Special Representative to Special

Rapporteur or because of the limits of the strictly human rights approach, there appears to be a vacuum of leadership in bringing attention to the needs of IDPs. At the same time, the cluster system has improved responses in many humanitarian crises but protection of IDPs remains a weak link in the response system. UNHCR's willingness to lead the protection cluster for conflict IDPs is welcome but UNHCR faces numerous barriers to its ability to fulfill its responsibilities. These include its lack of a clear mandate regarding IDPs (as compared to its strong mandate regarding refugees), inadequate financial support from donors for its work on IDPs, and security constraints in reaching IDPs as well as other conflict affected populations. The problems UNHCR faces are compounded by the weak role that some humanitarian coordinators play with regard to protection of IDPs. The Secretary-General in his report should recognize the important role that the humanitarian coordinators and the protection cluster could play with adequate support and pledge that he will make serious efforts to strengthen their activities in this area or make changes in the institutional architecture. The report should also call on donors to increase the funding that they provide for assistance and protection of IDPs and do so in a way that does not diminish their support for other vulnerable populations such as refugees. Finally, the report could urge that there be regular briefings or reports to the Security Council by the Emergency Relief Coordinator on barriers to access to IDPs and others at risk in their country and ways to overcome them.

3) The Secretary-General should urge regional bodies to adopt declarations and conventions on IDPs, citing the Kampala Convention as a model and promote implementation of these instruments. He should also urge governments to adopt national laws and frameworks based on the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and develop country strategies -- together with donor governments, international organizations, civil society and IDPs themselves -- to implement the agreed goals and work toward resolving displacement situations.

4) Because displacement has many phases, including return, settlement and reintegration, the SG should strongly encourage an early role for development actors in conflict situations as well as an enhanced role for outside political actors, so that situations of mass displacement can be in part prevented or reduced and more effectively resolved. The report should prioritize efforts to support self-reliance and economic initiatives so IDPs do not need humanitarian assistance for prolonged periods. These initiatives should be undertaken in ways that support IDPs and host communities and involve, as much as possible, local governments and civil society organizations.

As a particularly vulnerable population, the fate of IDPs rests with the strong commitment of the international community to work with governments to ensure adequate protection, assistance and solutions. The WHS is the perfect forum to reinvigorate the role of the international community in this regard.

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