

Public Services International - 20 June 2020 – World Refugee Day Statement

COVID-19:

Secure the Right to Health of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons and their Inclusion in Public Health Care Systems

The COVID-19 virus has made landfall in the developing country regions of the world, as feared. This has been with severe consequences, including for refugees and Internally Displaced Persons. In South Asia, infections are rising, with India reporting its highest single-day spike of 12,881 new cases in 24 hours. Aid workers in Bangladesh are scrambling to avert a health crisis, as the virus has reached the refugee camps of Cox's Bazaar that host half a million Rohingya refugees. Home to the world's largest refugee and IDP camps, the African region is battling the rate of infections, which is now heading towards 300,000 and a death toll of more than 7,000.

But the biggest worry is in Latin America and the Caribbean, which has been declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the new epicenter of the pandemic. Burdened with years of on-going conflict, poverty, joblessness and weak public healthcare systems, the region faces a compounded crisis of unprecedented scale. Caught in the midst are the millions of refugees and internally displaced persons within the region, including around 4.5 million Venezuelans, who now comprise the second largest refugee group, after Syrians.

Not long ago, we have been following the caravan of thousands of Central American migrants and asylum seekers, including unaccompanied children and minors, who are now stranded on the borders between Mexico and the United States. Now they are met with border closures and deportations as the US suspends asylum claims on the grounds of halting the virus. Sick migrants and asylum seekers are deprived of access to treatment. Others, who were held in detention centres, have contracted the disease. Living in poor conditions, trapped in poverty and with no access to health, nutrition, hygiene and other basic services, refugees, asylum seekers and IDPs are the most at risk to infections and are also subject to xenophobia and stigmatisation.

Rosa Pavanelli, General Secretary of Public Services International (PSI):

"As we commemorate World Refugee Day, we call on governments around the world to secure the right to health of refugees and IDPs and to include them in public health care systems. With the epidemic having reached the poorer countries of the world that also host 85% of the world's refugees and IDPs, public health services remain the best and only recourse to saving lives. We have to make sure that these services are properly funded, well-staffed and are accessible to everyone, especially the most vulnerable. Governments at both national and local levels must guarantee the right to health for everyone, including and particularly, in this time of crisis."

PSI is mobilising its unions across the world with our "Safe Workers, Save Lives" campaign. Responding to the pandemic, the campaign calls for universal health care for all through well-funded and adequately equipped public health services, and with health care workers working in safe and decent conditions. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and in Sub-Saharan Africa, PSI runs projects with its health sector unions, representing health and social workers at the frontlines and in IDP camps, to defend the human rights of refugees and IDPs and their access to quality public services.