

20 June 2020 - World Refugee Day

Statement by Public Services International

Refugee and IDPs Protection is Integral to the Pandemic Crisis Response and Recovery in Africa

While a number of countries that battled the pandemic are now exiting from the lockdown, the virus infection, however, continues to rage on, reaching 8 million cases globally and currently impacting developing country regions, such as in Africa, Asia and Latin America that are also host to a disproportionately high number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Across Africa, millions of refugees and IDPs are left in a dire situation, having lost their meagre income due to the lockdown. They live in overcrowded camps with no access to necessities, hygiene, food, drinking water and sanitation. Refugee and IDP women and girls face a high risk of gender-based violence, with very little support and access to basic services. Children suffer from malnutrition and are deprived of access to food, care, and education. The more than 1.2 million internally displaced persons in the northeast of Nigeria constantly live in fear and hardship as violent extremist attacks continue amid the lockdown.

Caught between conflict, violence, extreme poverty and the pandemic, these people have nowhere else to go and their lifelines are fast diminishing. With the imposition of travel restrictions and border closures, states have temporarily pushed-back asylum-seekers and unaccompanied children at the frontiers. Support for those who are stranded in camps and transit areas has been stopped on grounds of safety and closed borders to stop the virus, without giving thought to how these people will survive deprivation and isolation.

On 20th June World Refugee Day, we demand that states put refugee and IDP protection as an integral part of the pandemic crisis response and recovery.

The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres in his address to member states on the 3rd of June stressed that “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.” As the pandemic continues to devastate lives and livelihoods for the many, refugees and IDPs, owing to their situation, are facing a triple crisis, namely, a *health crisis*, a *socio-economic crisis*, and a *protection crisis*. In response, he urged member states to abide by four tenets to advance the safety and inclusion of people on the move during and in the aftermath of the pandemic, namely:

- *That exclusion is costly, while inclusion pays off for everyone.* The pandemic has shown that solidarity is the best measure to protect public health and promote inclusion. In times of crisis, universal access to quality public services

and social protection mechanisms help countries survive the crisis and recover faster.

- *Responding to the pandemic and protecting human rights of people on the move are not mutually exclusive.* Measures to slow down the pandemic can be safely implemented in full respect of international human rights, humanitarian and international refugee law and labour standards.
- *No one will be safe until everyone is safe.* Lifesaving humanitarian assistance must continue to reach persons in need even during times of lockdown. Migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and IDPs must be able to access quality public services without fear or discrimination, and that they must be part of national COVID-19 crisis response.
- *People on the move are part of the solution.* The pandemic crisis highlighted the essential role of migrant and refugee workers on the frontlines: as healthcare workers, agricultural workers, sanitation workers, grocery and delivery workers and as workers in many other essential services. Women migrants represent a large part of the nurses and care workers who are battling covid-19 at the frontlines.

Public Services International (PSI) supports the call of the UN Secretary General to abide by these four tenets. As public service trade unions, we stand to defend the human rights of all migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons and their access to quality public services.

We call on all African member states to uphold their obligation to human rights and international protection, including the protection of the rights of internally displaced persons and to work for durable solutions.

We continue to fight fascism, racism, racist violence and xenophobia in our workplaces and communities. The pandemic has starkly exposed entrenched racism and inequalities in our societies. Yet it has also ignited a movement across the globe demanding redress to these ills and injustice.

We demand that all workers, regardless of their employment, immigration, or other status, be protected at work, and even more so in a situation of a health crisis. As the trade union movement, we have called on governments and occupational health and safety bodies around the world to recognise COVID-19 as an occupational hazard and an occupational disease, thereby requiring measures for worker protection and representation.

We defend the rights of all workers to decent work and to occupational health and safety, including access to the necessary personal protective equipment (PPEs) and training. All workers must be guaranteed the right to join trade unions. Refugees and migrant workers are among the millions of workers who have lost their jobs due to

the pandemic. Mechanisms for compensation, along with access to justice and social protection, must include these workers.

We demand for just and publicly funded and publicly delivered social protection mechanisms that ensure universal health care, basic income, and worker protections for all, which are crucial in this time of the pandemic.

Protecting the Rights of Internally Displaced Persons in Fighting the Pandemic in Nigeria

It is particularly important to consider the plight of IDPs in Nigeria from a protection, human right, and public health perspective, especially at this point where community infections are on the increase. To this end, PSI demands the following:

Adoption into national policy response and measures the *Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Interim Guidance on COVID-19 Readiness and Response Operations in Humanitarian Situations* and the *World Health Organization Guidance on COVID-19 Outbreak: Rights, Roles, and Responsibilities of Health workers, including key considerations for occupational safety and health*.

Inclusion of IDPs in the strategy, plans and operations of government in limiting community infections in IDPs camps and host communities.

Strengthening access to justice to ensure accountability mechanisms for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). Women and girls in conflict-affected states, particularly Borno, Yobe and Adamawa, are at increased risk of GBV due to the deprived living conditions. Policy responses to GBV must ensure the ability of the justice system and law enforcement to act as mechanisms of accountability, leverage opportunities to create a more transparent justice system, and use technological innovations to protect the rights of women and girls.

Protection of health worker rights in COVID19 outbreak and the need for adequate supplies for infection prevention and control (IPC) and protective personal equipment (PPEs: masks, gloves, goggles, gowns), hand sanitizer, soap and water, cleaning supplies in sufficient quantity in the camps' healthcare facilities.

Government to address all gaps in protecting the human rights of people on the move to access quality public health services, which is even more urgent in this period of a health crisis.

Finally, we call for the domestication of the African Union Kampala Convention on IDPs through the passage of a National IDP Law in Nigeria.

The Public services international, is a global federation of public service trade unions representing more than 30 million workers delivery public services in 192 countries. In the health sector, PSI is represented by its two major affiliates in Nigeria: National Association of Nigeria Nurses and Midwives (NANNM) and Medical and health workers Union (MHWUN). The members of these unions are frontline actors in emergency situations and in the past two

years have been working in the North Eastern Nigeria to defend the human rights of IDPs to quality public services. We have been supporting the NCRMI to advocate for National IDPs policy and access of frontline actors to decent work and social protection.

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