

## Members of the Mixed Migration Consortium<sup>1</sup> call on the governments along the Central Mediterranean Route to protect the lives of all, regardless of status

The journey along the Central Mediterranean Route is a highly dangerous one that many migrants and refugees undertake to seek safety, security and a better future. In 2019, thousands of lives were lost along this route at sea and in the desert.<sup>2</sup> As governments are shutting borders and limiting cross-border movements to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants and refugees have found themselves de facto left behind. Some find themselves abandoned at borders by smugglers, others in need of international protection are denied access to safe countries, and thousands of others are stuck in limbo or in crowded and unhygienic detention facilities in Libya, Niger, and Mali. As humanitarian agencies working with refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in countries along the route - Libya, Niger and Mali - **we are calling for governments and local authorities to protect the lives of all, regardless of status, and to ensure all migrants and refugees are equally included in all phases of the emergency response.**

To ensure an effective response to COVID-19 while adhering to obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law, governments must safeguard access to asylum and respect the principle of non-refoulement. Migrants and refugees in need of international protection should never be returned. It is imperative that governments do not misemploy extraordinary measures to contain the spread of the pandemic in order to evade their accountability and responsibility towards people in need of protection.

Libya, Niger and Mali have already reported a number of COVID-19 cases.<sup>3</sup> In these fragile countries, health care systems are weak and response capacities are limited. Migrants and refugees have limited access<sup>4</sup> to existing services; this health emergency will further limit the support they receive. Moreover, thousands of migrants, refugees and the communities hosting them live in poor conditions in overcrowded ghettos or in detention facilities, which puts them at high risk of exposure. There are still approximately 1,500 migrants and refugees in Libya's official detention centers living with poor hygiene conditions, limited food and at risk of abuse, rape, forced labor and trafficking. **To reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission, and in line with international human rights standards, detained migrants and refugees must be urgently released.** Authorities must ensure their safety and include all migrants and refugees in appropriate preparedness and prevention measures while long-term solutions are sought.

"Despite the COVID-19 preventive measures authorities have put in place and in the midst of escalating violence, our partners are continuing to provide emergency and primary medical assistance to migrants and refugees in health clinics around Tripoli. Meanwhile, our IRC team in Niger has adapted to a remote approach providing case management support by phone, and our DRC team has developed a mixed approach combining remote modalities in Bamako, where most COVID-19 cases are reported, with continued field engagement in other areas such as Mopti and Gao. In all locations, our teams maintain continued communication with community focal points by phone. **Now more than ever we need to stand in solidarity with people at risk and ensure unimpeded humanitarian access to the people we serve who would otherwise become even more 'invisible' "**, says Hara Caracostas, Head of the Central Mediterranean Mixed Migration Consortium.

An increasing number of people evacuated from Libya to Niger since 2017 remain forgotten as they await European countries to deliver on their resettlement pledges. Thus far, 18% of the total pledges have been met. Many others, including those who are forcibly expelled from Algeria, are stranded in transit centers and across Niger due to the COVID-19 pandemic as their only option to go back home, through Voluntary Humanitarian Returns, have been indefinitely postponed as borders remain closed. Those who wish to get back, should be

<sup>1</sup> The Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee and Mixed Migration Center

<sup>2</sup> See IOM Missing Migrants project and MMC 4Mi project.

<sup>3</sup> Latest number according to <http://covid-19-africa.sen.ovh/>, as of April 3: Niger (98), Mali (39) and Libya (11).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/libya/document/2020-libya-humanitarian-needs-overview-hrp>

able to reach their homes and agencies together with governments must look into viable options to make this happen.

In this respect, the Mixed Migration Consortium members are calling on:

1. **UNSC and other states with influence to work with the parties to the conflict in Libya to secure a cessation of hostilities and press parties to agree to a ceasefire, in line with the UN Secretary-General's global ceasefire call.**
2. **Governments of Libya, Niger and Mali to preserve unimpeded humanitarian access and facilitate movements of essential staff.** This enables humanitarian and other relevant organisations to provide emergency health assistance and support to local health systems in order to respond to the needs of all refugees and migrants, as well as vulnerable host communities, during the COVID 19 emergency.
3. **All governments along the Central Mediterranean Route to uphold respect for fundamental principles of international human rights and refugee law, including the principle of non-refoulement. To this end:**
  - a. The immediate orderly release of migrants and refugees from detention must be guaranteed while long-term alternatives to detention are sought; meanwhile, alternative accommodation should be provided to ensure their safety and protection.
  - b. In cases where the quarantine of migrants and refugees is enforced, such as in Niger, this must be carried out in a dignified and safe manner; this includes guaranteeing that the spaces used are not crowded, provide decent sanitary conditions and access to basic services.
  - c. Interceptions at sea must stop and those already disembarked in Libya must not be brought to detention facilities. Migrants should be released in conditions that allow them to apply appropriate COVID-19 prevention measures and have access to much needed humanitarian assistance.
4. **Governments of Libya, Niger and Mali and all humanitarian actors engaged in the COVID-19 response to consistently adopt a conflict sensitive approach to this emergency.** This will ensure actions taken do not cause nor fuel intra/inter-communal tensions, due to heightened risks of stigma, discrimination linked to the spread of the virus. Sensible, transparent and factual communication with all communities affected will be key in this matter.
5. **Donors to guarantee flexibility of funds to implementing partners,** including UN agencies and INGOs, especially in countries along migratory and displacement routes. Donors must urgently put flexible funding behind multilateral UN efforts - a good first step is the UN's Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) for COVID-19 - serving the most vulnerable, and ensuring refugees, women and other groups are not left behind. At least 30% of this funding should be directed to frontline NGOs, already positioned to scale up in local communities. More funding must also be made available depending on the needs and reflecting the evolution of the crisis and needs on the ground. No funds should be redirected from equally critical sectors in order to fill in current and future gaps.

*The Mixed Migration Consortium is a partnership between the Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, Mixed Migration Center and the Start Network, that manages the implementation of a DFID-funded mixed migration programme assisting refugees and migrants across West and North Africa.*