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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 2340 (2020)[1]

Humanitarian consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for migrants and refugees

Parliamentary Assembly

1. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 outbreak a pandemic, bringing much of the world to a halt, closing national borders and restricting freedom of movement. Everyone has been affected, but vulnerable groups – such as migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – are often the first to suffer and are doubly affected in situations of crisis.

2. Tens of millions of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have been stranded or sorely affected due to travel restrictions and their inability to return to their home countries or countries where they reside or work. Many have found themselves in a precarious economic situation, losing their incomes and jobs and being forced to use the money they had saved. There has also been a resurgence of discrimination and intolerance partly due to unjustified fears that foreigners spread disease and, in economically challenging times, take away jobs from the host population.

3. Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have faced many additional problems: the closing of borders has led to new irregular migration movements, with even longer and more perilous journeys at a time when search and rescue at sea has been curtailed, the risk of "pushbacks" has increased and disembarkation has become a bone of political contention. Irregular migrants and asylum seekers have also had to face prolonged periods of detention in cramped conditions, with a severe risk of rampant spread of the disease. There has been a build-up in the backlog of asylum and other claims to be processed; education for children, already often sub-par, has often been put on hold; and women and children have become even more vulnerable to domestic violence while living in complicated and stressful situations.

4. It is certain that member States of the Council of Europe, like all other countries, are struggling to meet the burden of healthcare and the prevailing economic recession; under these circumstances, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers will not necessarily be considered a high priority. However, many member States rely heavily on migrants, including cross-border and seasonal workers, to do essential jobs in healthcare, agriculture, sanitation, transportation, etc.

5. Countries of origin of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, including those on Europe's frontiers, were initially less affected by the pandemic, but this situation is changing and will have consequences for member States of the Council of Europe. The evolving economic crisis will hit countries of origin harder than Europe's comparatively stable economies, which benefit from widely available healthcare and social support. In African countries, the lack of access to health services and social benefits, combined with the economic downturn, will have significant negative consequences. These countries will also face reduced foreign investment and development assistance, and migrant remittances will drop by 23% in 2020 according to the World Bank. All of this will create significant additional migratory pressures and migration management issues for countries of origin, transit and destination.

6. On a more positive note, the first six months of the pandemic have illustrated that even during the Covid-19 crisis it has, to a large extent, been possible to provide humanitarian assistance to those in need. Furthermore, many refugee camps have been able to check the spread of the virus, despite the often highly

1. *Text adopted by the Standing Committee*, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 13 October 2020 (see Doc. 15142, report of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, rapporteur: Mr Pierre-Alain Fridez).

cramped conditions, although there is unfortunately an increasing number of new outbreaks being reported. Organisations on the ground have shown that activities such as screening and registration of asylum seekers can continue, provided that appropriate preventative measures are applied. Furthermore, some of the exceptional measures taken by member States during the pandemic, such as regularisation programmes, release from migration detention or broader employment possibilities for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, have shown that migration management can be carried out under less restrictive conditions. This is something that the Parliamentary Assembly has sought to underline for many years.

7. Without a vaccine or a cure for the virus, it is important to learn from the experience acquired so far. It is in this context that the Assembly recommends that member States:

7.1. do not succumb to a fortress mentality and recognise that Covid-19, as well as migration and asylum is a global phenomenon, and that responses and solutions need to be found at both national and international levels;

7.2. continue including the special needs of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in national Covid-19 emergency response plans, even if national budgets are stretched;

7.3. continue to implement the Global Compact on Refugees, notwithstanding the pandemic, and abide by commitments made at the Global Refugee Forum to support refugees and others of concern to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), along with host countries and communities;

7.4. apply its Resolution 2329 (2020) on lessons for the future from an effective and rights-based response to the Covid-19 pandemic to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

8. In relation to migrants in general, the Assembly recommends that member States:

8.1. keep their borders open and lift unnecessary travel restrictions;

8.2. recognise the value of migrant workers, including seasonal and cross-border workers, as an essential part of the workforce that ensures essential services in healthcare, agriculture, sanitation, transportation, etc.;

8.3. implement the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which provides an effective framework for international co-operation on the governance of international migration and its impact on migrants;

8.4. follow the guidance of the International Organization for Migration for employers and businesses to enhance migrant worker protection during the current health crisis.

9. Concerning refugees, asylum seekers and migrants where appropriate, the Assembly recommends that member States:

9.1. show solidarity with front-line countries currently taking the brunt of arrivals, and support relocation efforts wherever possible;

9.2. take into account and promote the UNHCR's Practical Recommendations and Good Practice to Address Protection Concerns in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic, and in particular:

9.2.1. ensure access to their territory while protecting public health through medical screening, testing and quarantine. Where entry bans or border closures are implemented, consider an explicit exemption for asylum seekers, combined with enhanced health measures;

9.2.2. continue providing adequate reception conditions, adapting them as necessary to reduce the risk of transmission of Covid-19;

9.2.3. maintain systems of registration and documentation. This is particularly important for identification of those who are most vulnerable, including women and children, the elderly and victims of violence and trafficking. Also, allow for extended deadlines and flexibility in procedures where necessary;

9.2.4. prevent transmission of Covid-19 during the reception and detention processes by avoiding detention where possible, taking into account that alternatives often exist, evaluating the size and layout of camps in the context of a risk analysis and shifting to independent private accommodation or smaller collective centres, if at all possible;

9.2.5. continue to provide avenues for asylum and adapt asylum procedures where necessary, allowing for remote interviews and flexible deadlines;

9.2.6. include migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in efforts to educate and inform about the risks relating to Covid-19;

9.2.7. prioritise communication with and between migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, taking into account that information can be lifesaving;

9.3. in relation to irregular migrants, suspend forced returns and returns that are not strictly voluntary in nature, so as to prevent the spread of the virus;

9.4. pay particular attention to the needs of children, especially regarding education, taking into account the lack of access to online learning for many in camps or other settings: unaccompanied minors have to be relocated as soon as possible;

9.5. take measures to preserve family unity and prevent family separation, as long as they do not endanger the health and safety of family members. Furthermore, all possible steps should be taken to protect people from going missing as a result of Covid-19. These steps should include systematic registration of admissions in health facilities and facilitating communication between family members that have been separated;

9.6. pay attention to preventing domestic and other violence and protecting those who may be vulnerable during lockdowns and restrictive periods.

10. The Assembly recommends that member States show greater solidarity towards developing countries in the global context of the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences for migration management and asylum. They should:

10.1. consider possible cancellation, reduction or restructuring of the national debts of developing countries;

10.2. maintain or increase development co-operation, accompanied by improved audit mechanisms on the use of public finances in beneficiary countries;

10.3. implement measures to simplify the transfer of remittances by diasporas to developing countries as a direct means of assistance.

11. The Assembly recommends that member States show greater solidarity among themselves and refrain from using migrants, asylum seekers and refugees as political pawns. In the context of arrivals by land and sea, they should stop “pushbacks”, prevent violence at borders and ensure that “boat people” are promptly disembarked at ports without international haggling and negotiation.

12. The Assembly invites the European Union, in the context of the pandemic, to promote solidarity among member States, provide more financial assistance globally, preserve access to the asylum process and expand and improve regular migration pathways.

13. The Assembly invites national parliaments to look not only at the impact of Covid-19 on their own countries, but also to have a perspective of its impact on developing countries – including countries of origin of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – and respond accordingly for the benefit of everyone’s future.