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## **Coronavirus - Impact on Migrants and Refugees**

As the world confronts the COVID-19 pandemic, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean salutes the immense efforts to date to combat this crisis and urges that all – including migrants regardless of migratory status, refugees and displaced persons – are included in national and international efforts to mitigate and roll back the impact and consequences of the pandemic.

Migrants and people on the move face the same health threats from COVID-19 as host populations, but may face particular vulnerabilities due to the circumstances of their journey and the poor living and working conditions, in which they can find themselves, or obstacles in accessing health care.

Many refugees are already struggling to survive around the world, and failing to counter the spread of the virus among at crowded refugee camps could undercut any success in containing the outbreak and enable it to spread further, thus causing devastating consequences. Aid and health workers are warning that a coronavirus outbreak would be devastating for nearly a million displaced people in North-West Syria, especially now that the first case of COVID-19 in the country has been reported.

To that end, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean considers essential a comprehensive approach to the current health crisis, which includes migrants, regardless of status, refugees and displaced persons, as an integral part of any effective public health response, ensuring equitable access to treatment.

On 20 March, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) disseminated a plan to address these aspects of the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic with a new funding requirement of USD 116.1 million. On 23 March, WHO reported that the outbreak has affected some 166 countries with approximately about 380,000 confirmed cases. Close to 16,000 people have so far lost their lives. According to IOM, the COVID-19 outbreak is fast becoming the largest mobility crisis ever seen. It is changing patterns of and acceptance toward migration, services offered by airlines, attitudes towards foreigners, as well as border and migration management regimes. An unprecedented number of people are becoming stranded on their journeys. As a result, many United Nations interventions, including refugee resettlement operations, have been scaled back or suspended temporarily. The new IOM COVID-19 Global Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (SRP) covers all regions of the world, and comprises a wide range of on-going and planned activities. These include, inter alia, emergence of humanitarian needs in new settings; cross-border coordination; capacity-building for government staff on disease surveillance; setting up or enhancing hand-washing facilities at entry points; support with case management; monitoring and mapping of people's movements within and across borders; improvement of displacement sites to ensure site safety and hygiene and that livelihoods are sustained; and the dissemination of information on how to stay healthy, specifically targeting migrants, refugees and displaced persons. The SRP spans 10 areas of work: coordination and partnerships, risk



communication and community engagement, disease surveillance, point of entry, national laboratory system, infection prevention and control, case management and continuity of essential services, protection, displacement tracking, as well as logistics, procurement and supply chain management. The geographic prioritization of the appeal is based on existing national and IOM capacities, and out of the 116.1 million requested, over USD 43.4 million are to cover interventions in Eastern, Western, and Central Africa; and more USD 17 million are for the Middle East and Northern Africa.

In order to avoid a rapid spread of the virus, PAM recommends its Member States to contribute to the OIM appeal and to put in place the necessary national and regional measures to protect the health of migrants in immigration screening, transit and/or detention centres, which are too often overcrowded and lack adequate healthcare and sanitation, and urgently establish non-custodial alternatives to detention as a measure to mitigate these risks. In this regard, PAM calls also for international support to help host countries step up these services, in line with the PAM resolution on migration and refugee flows adopted one month ago.

Moreover, PAM wishes to recall that the measures taken to tighten controls at the borders in an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19, must respect human rights and be implemented in a non-discriminatory manner, in line with international law, in full regard of the right to seek asylum, and prioritizing the protection of the most vulnerable.

Further, it is important that migrants and refugees are included in measures that are being introduced to mitigate the economic downturn caused by COVID-19. With the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s estimating a potential of 25 million persons losing their jobs worldwide, because of the economic slow-down and possible recession, migrants and refugees will remain among most vulnerable population groups to be affected and at risk of stigmatization.

No country today can wall itself off from the impact of the coronavirus, both in the literal sense and – as falling stock markets and closed schools demonstrate – economically and socially. Only with an inclusive approach and international cooperation, we can overcome this global crisis of unprecedented magnitude and proportions.

