

World migration day: COVID-19 is exacerbating existing vulnerabilities of migrants

Joint statement, 18 December 2020

Geneva (OMCT) - Today, as we celebrate World Migrants Day, the members of the Migration and Torture working group in Africa would like to highlight that the current Covid-19 health emergency is exacerbating the vulnerability of migrants. Torture, discrimination and other forms of ill-treatment against people on the move have increased at borders, during transit and at destination, both within Africa and in Europe. We remind world leaders that they have an obligation to adopt torture-free immigration policies while preventing the spread of the virus in their countries.

Some of the 272 million migrants worldwide are more vulnerable than others because of personal, social, situational and structural factors. Although the Covid-19 pandemic creates strong mobility constraints, migrants continue to travel clandestinely, fleeing violence and poverty in search of a better life. State border closures have made it riskier for migrants to travel, while humanitarian interventions have become more difficult due to the constraints related to the current situation. From May to November 2020, Twenty-eight percent of the total number of migrants worldwide came from the 20 countries most affected by the Covid-19 epidemic^[1].

Heightened risks for migrants

In this situation, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are highly vulnerable, as they suffer from discrimination and risk being overexposed to Covid-19. It is more difficult for them to benefit from fundamental rights, such as access to basic services, information and prevention, testing, provision of masks, housing for self-isolation and medical care. Administrative procedures that could allow them to enjoy their rights and protection have been slowed down or even completely stopped because of the pandemic. Moreover, it often happens that migrants and internally displaced people find themselves living in camps where sanitary conditions are unhealthy and do not allow for social distancing or regular hand sanitizing. Governments must take steps to ensure the health of migrants, and as they prepare to receive a Covid-19 vaccine, they must include migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in their distribution policies.

Closed ports and borders policy

In many countries, travel restrictions are passed to contain the virus, including by deploying security forces at the borders to prevent new entrances. Some other countries, especially in Europe, have closed their ports entirely and prevented migrant vessels from disembarking. Many boats carrying rescued migrants in the Mediterranean have been blockaded for up to 12 days without access to water, healthcare, food, and sanitation.

Ensuring protection for children and women

In some countries, migrants have been forcefully tested and quarantined, resulting sometimes in separation from their families. This destroys the family unit of already weakened people and risks exacerbating problems related to the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of forced migrants. In this context, women and underage migrants are particularly vulnerable. States must ensure that they are protected with appropriate care and that family ties are maintained to the fullest extent possible.

A call for solidarity

The Migration and torture working group in Africa is concerned about the inevitable social and economic crisis that could have a negative effect on the most vulnerable groups. Given the current development of a new vaccine to prevent the spread of the disease, migrants should be incorporated in countries' vaccination policies. The Group calls for:

- Immigration services to extend document validity to allow refugees and asylum seekers to benefit from the same covid-19 related social measures as the rest of the population;
- Security forces at borders to treat asylum seekers and migrants with dignity;
- Social protection entities to provide basic safety nets for all forced migrant populations, regardless of legal status;
- Governments to ensure access to health care for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants and revoke all medical charges during the Covid-19 period;
- Governments to ensure availability of masks and emergency accommodation and safe shelter for those leaving in overcrowded camps or those who are homeless. When the vaccine is available, they should include migrants in their vaccination plans;

- Governments to ensure that migrants and refugees have access to mental health services to manage the effects of isolation and quarantine, which have exacerbated gender-based violence.

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[1] Migration data relevant for the COVID-19 pandemic, Last updated on 23 November 2020, <https://migrationdataportal.org/themen/migration-data-relevant-covid-19-pandemic>

The SOS-Torture Migration and torture Working in group in Africa, is a group of 10 experts from the OMCT SOS-Torture network, which aims to analyze first-hand information in order to set out authoritative research and recommendations for the protection of migrants against torture and other punishments or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. The group is sponsored by the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) and the Collectif des Associations Contre l'Impunité au Togo (CACIT).

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