**International Dialogue on Migration 2020**

**COVID- 19 crisis: Reimagining the role of migrants and human mobility for the achievement of the SDGs**

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**Statement by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)**

The COVID-19 pandemic has swiftly taken hundreds of thousands of lives, infected millions of people, upended economies, led to loss of livelihoods, and disrupted every aspect of modern life. It is more than a health crisis: it is an economic crisis, a humanitarian crisis, a security crisis and a human rights crisis. The pandemic has underscored fragilities, which extend far beyond global health, and provided new avenues for infiltration by criminal groups. Recovery will be an opportunity to address inequality, build stronger social safety nets and social protection systems and reinforce responses to organized crime in all its forms.

***I.  The Impact of COVID 19 on Trafficking in Persons (TIP)***

The widespread reality of exploitation has been made even more evident by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is exacerbating the trend of rampant exploitation of the most vulnerable, especially as a consequence of unemployment, lack of social protection and supply chain disruption. It also increases the risk of feminization of poverty and gender discrimination and fuels the worst forms of child labour, as children become the primary source of income for their families in crisis situations[[1]](#footnote-2).

Pre-existing social norms and gender inequalities, economic and social stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with restricted movement and social isolation measures, have led to an exponential increase in Gender Based Violence[[2]](#footnote-3), and is also being categorized as the new “shadow pandemic”[[3]](#footnote-4). Children are at heightened risk of exploitation, especially since school closures have not only precluded many from access to education, but also made them vulnerable to trafficking due to loss of livelihoods in their families, including online crimes.

Real challenges on the responses to human trafficking as a result of COVID-19 by key stakeholders - NGO's, law enforcement agencies, prosecution & judiciary, government departments etc., are - little time and priority for investigations and rescues of victims of trafficking in new cases, and delayed trials in courts. Media reports around the world suggested that COVID related duties were prioritized over responding to TIP cases. NGOs were grappling with lesser resources to deal with specific challenges of TIP related work as more time and resources were being diverted in providing essentials to people.

***II.  The Impact of COVID 19 on Smuggling of Migrants (SOM)***

Migrant smuggling is a highly profitable business, with criminal networks thriving on high demand for smuggling services and a low risk of detection and punishment. The crime is driven by political instability and conflict, severe socioeconomic conditions and a lack of opportunities, including for children and youth.

UNODC research[[4]](#footnote-5) on migrant smuggling along various routes indicates that COVID-19-related travel restrictions have not stopped migrant smuggling and may in fact, in the medium-to-long term, increase demand for migrant smuggling. The COVID-19 crisis is making the smuggling of migrants riskier and more expensive for people fleeing persecution, violence and conflict but it is not stopping smuggling activities.

The potentially lengthy delays in migrant journeys caused by COVID-19 has meant that migrants who cannot get money from home will quickly run out of funds. Decimated earning options in transit, and no further mobility, leads to migrants typically employing the services of smugglers, and are then forced to earn along their journeys becoming highly vulnerable to exploitation, including at the hands of trafficking networks.

COVID-19-related restrictions seem to have a different impact on smuggling of migrants who are fleeing conflict and persecution, as compared to other types of migratory movement. The intensification of measures to limit cross-border travel and immigration in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 will likely increase the demand for, and the difficulty of providing, smuggling services, making them more expensive and risky and thereby ultimately making more people vulnerable to human trafficking, as well as to other abuses[[5]](#footnote-6).

Many factors, thus shape the dynamics of these two criminal phenomena, from the international political and security landscape to macro socio-economic dynamics and national law enforcement capacity - all of which have been affected by the global pandemic. Whilst criminals and organized criminal groups are adjusting their ‘business models’ to the ‘new normal’ created by the pandemic, the capacity of state authorities and non-governmental organizations to provide essential services to the victims of this crime is in many instances impacted.

***III.  UNODC’s Responses and Recommendations to deal with the Impact of COVID on TIP and SOM***

In addressing the pandemic, UNODC focuses its action on the real and concrete risks that this unprecedented situation presents for vulnerable individuals and groups, first the victims of trafficking in persons as well as the smuggled migrants, who are among those most hardly hit by the consequences of COVID-19. The Office is committed to continue supporting efforts to eradicate trafficking in persons as well as the smuggling of migrants in close collaboration with other international and regional organizations, in line with SDG targets 16.2, 5.2, 8.7 and 10.7.

UNODC is the Coordinator of the Interagency Coordination Group Against Trafficking in Persons[[6]](#footnote-7) (ICAT), the lead policy forum of the United Nations, mandated by the General Assembly to improve holistic and coordinated responses to prevent and combat trafficking in persons.  Now comprised of 27 entities, ICAT’s mission is to facilitate policy coherence by setting clear priorities and sharing expertise, as well as supporting States, practitioners and civil society to translate such priorities into actions. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, ICAT has further strengthened its coordinated responses to trafficking in persons[[7]](#footnote-8), with a particular focus on the increased vulnerabilities of trafficking victims.

UNODC is further engaged in supporting Member States as they tailor responses under the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and provide enhanced protection and assistance to the most vulnerable populations, including stranded migrants, regardless of their status. In that regard, UNODC, as a member of the Executive Committee of the UN Network on Migration, is strongly committed to particularly support the implementation of the Global Compact’s objectives 9 and 10 on countering the smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons. UNODC is facilitating stronger coordinated action between ICAT and the UN Network on Migration.

In addition, UNODC continues to conduct research to inform policy development in the field of human trafficking and migrant smuggling. The UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons is a biennial flagship publication of the Office, mandated by GA resolution 64/293 (2010). The fifth edition of the Global Report will be launched in December 2020 and will include significant new features: next to the statistical analysis of the profiles of the victims and offenders detected between 2016 and 2019, to which the report owns much of its reputation. New sections will present qualitative insights on emerging aspects of trafficking in persons, including an analysis of the victims’ socio-economic vulnerabilities, trafficker’s organisations and methods, emerging risks connected to internet technologies, as well as of the social dimension of child trafficking and forced labour.

***UNODC’s Recommendations for Action* –**

1. Data collection and analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on trafficking in persons and the smuggling of migrants, should be strengthened and systematically pursued. In particular, disaggregated data by sex, age and disability should be collected to analyse the impacts, barriers and risks faced by different groups.
2. COVID-19 responses must be continuously monitored to ensure swift adjustment to emerging trends, increased vulnerabilities and the overall unfolding of the pandemic in the various regional and subregional contexts.
3. States should enhance awareness-raising efforts to educate the general public on the risks associated with the trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants, including the increased vulnerability of smuggled migrants to exploitation, abuse, gender-based violence and trafficking in persons in times of crisis.
4. Access to justice in all steps of the criminal justice continuum must be safeguarded.  States should enhance cooperation at the regional and international levels to respond to the investigation and prosecution of the crimes of trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants.
5. Livelihood interventions should be prioritised forthose most at risk of trafficking and exploitation, especially those in high-risk employment situations, those in the informal labour market, those dependent on their work for immigration/residency status, and those who live with their employer, among others.

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1. Report of the Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Maria Grazia Giammarinaro, submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 35/5. Reference – A/75/169 dated 17 July 2020.  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Gender Based Violence and COVID-19, UNDP Brief, May 11, 2020. Available at: https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/womens-empowerment/gender-based-violence-and-covid-19.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>. Also - <https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/251640> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. “How COVID-19 restrictions and the economic consequences are likely to impact migrant smuggling and cross-border trafficking in persons to Europe and North America”, UNODC, Research Brief (May 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *ibid*.  [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. http://icat.network [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. http://icat.network/sites/default/files/publications/documents/20200730\_WDAT%20ICAT%20joint%20statement%202020\_final.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-8)