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3 April 2020

Dear Partner,

At this time of unprecedented crisis, I wish to extend my appreciation to our NGO partners and to underscore our commitment to working together with you to meet the growing challenges ahead.

Over the decades, UNHCR has worked closely with many of you in preparing and responding to major emergencies. Yet this one is different – global in nature, with the potential to affect our operations in a most significant way. And we now have to balance the humanitarian imperative to protect the lives and well-being of refugees and others at risk, with our duty of care to our personnel and their families.

Our ability to come together across the humanitarian system and to leverage our respective strengths in the spirit of partnership and solidarity, will test our ability to respond to one of the biggest challenges we have ever faced.

UNHCR's overriding aim, working closely with governments, the World Health Organization, UN Country Teams and our NGO partners, is to secure the inclusion of refugees, internally displaced persons, stateless people and other marginalized communities in national preparedness and response measures.

Yet, with the vast majority of refugees hosted in developing regions, with extremely fragile health systems, we recognize that this requires substantial additional support to host governments. UNHCR is now working with many of you, in both camp and urban settings, to rapidly scale up and adapt our interventions in support of national efforts, and to address the complex protection risks now emerging.

Against this background, I am pleased to inform you that we are working swiftly on easing some of the hurdles resulting from contractual obligations which can prevent flexible responses. As you know, this initiative started before the COVID-19 crisis, and we are now advancing this process.

Last week, I declared an internal level-2 emergency to accelerate UNHCR's response to the COVID-19 crisis. This enables us to deploy emergency financial, material and human resources, and activates procedures that give greater authorities to our Representatives and that simplify certain administrative, procurement and other processes, including the ability to quickly engage new partners.

This crisis also demands that together with you, we rapidly examine our current programmes and adjust them to respond to emerging needs and vulnerabilities. In many operations, we will need to go through a process of realignment, reallocating resources from some activities to others.

Members of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, InterAction,  
and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response



Our aim is to work with existing partners, where possible, providing them with the flexibility needed to make adjustments in their activities in light of social distancing measures and travel restrictions. We are therefore waiving certain requirements, procedures and obligations that would otherwise hamper their ability to do so, and have issued guidance to our operations accordingly. This guidance:

- gives partners greater flexibility to make discretionary budget allocations;
- authorizes UNHCR operations to approve the release of the next instalment under a project in the absence of a verified financial performance report for the prior period;
- allows overtime to be charged to a UNHCR project, even if that will mean exceeding normal contribution limits;
- allows partners to charge the UNHCR project for costs incurred in respect of activities that will not be completed because of social distancing measures and travel restrictions;
- requests our operations to reduce reporting requirements to a minimum, to accept documents in electronic form (rather than hard copies) and to carry out verifications and monitoring by remote means.

Our aim is to work in dialogue with you to find flexible, pragmatic solutions that allow us to stay and deliver together, and to avoid the suspension or termination of current agreements, wherever possible.

We will continue to review these measures and, in coordination with other UN agencies and with donor countries, are working on additional measures that we hope to have in place in the coming days. These will also take into account recent guidance from the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Those being pursued include:

- further budgetary flexibility;
- simplification of results chains and instructions on budgeting;
- acceptance of more personnel-related costs;
- guidance on eligible expenditure for staff working remotely;
- a further expansion in electronic document submission;
- additional adjustments in timelines for financial reports; and
- a reduction in performance verifications.

As you may be aware, we have now initiated weekly consultations with our NGO partners, and a briefing on these matters was conducted with our Deputy High Commissioner, Ms. Kelly Clements, and other senior UNHCR staff earlier this week. I will be present for the discussion at the next NGO consultations, scheduled for Wednesday, 8 April, at 1330 hours (CET). Your personal attendance, together with your key colleagues, would be most appreciated.

In addition to the matters set out above, of course, we continue to work with you and other partners in different fora on how to address a range of shared challenges - in particular, the need for humanitarian exemptions, a number of supply chain and other logistical issues, and measures to ensure duty of care for our personnel. We have also already shared through the IASC Secretariat a set of key protection messages for your consideration and use.

I take this opportunity to thank you for your commitment to working closely and constructively together on the COVID-19 response.

Yours sincerely,

Filippo Grandi