

## USG Jemilah Mahmood Presentation

### Safety and Dignity Along the Trail

Thank you Mr. Chair, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is a pleasure to join you today on this important panel discussion. As a representative of IFRC, our national societies work in 190 countries through 165,000 local branches and millions of volunteers around the world. It is the fact that we are on the ground delivering much needed services and accompanying migrants and vulnerable people on their journeys, that we need to ensure our discussions focus on people, their safety and dignity as they move.

#### Introduction:

- As others have pointed out, **migration is a global phenomenon that is here to stay**, and there are 240 million migrants around the world. While our media is flooded with images from the Mediterranean and rightfully so, those not in the limelight – from Africa, Asia, the Pacific and elsewhere, suffer the same challenges and face the same dangers.
- RCRC Approach to Migration: **As mentioned before, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is focused on addressing the needs of vulnerable migrants, whatever their legal status and wherever they may be found.** We strive to provide assistance and protection, uphold their rights and dignity, and empower them in their search for opportunities and sustainable solutions, as well as promote social inclusion and interaction between migrants and host communities.
- **RCRC work on migration is vast, and covers many aspects of the issue. As we are a truly global Movement —we are present at every stage along the journey.** Our National Societies are working to **build resilience in vulnerable communities in countries of origin, and many, such as the Ethiopian Red Cross are targeting populations likely to end up as irregular migrants to build their economic security and reduce migratory pressures.**
- At the other end of the spectrum, **our National Societies are working to facilitate and encourage integration in destination countries**, by connecting

newly arrived migrants with host communities, **for example through “buddy programs” led by Netherlands Red Cross, or our vast work to restore family links, facilitate family reunification, and promote social inclusion and humanitarian values through education, volunteering, and work with youth.**

- **As our work on Migration is so vast, and I cannot do all of it justice in the 5-6 minutes that I have—today I want to focus on a specific issue—the risks to safety and dignity that migrants face in their journey,** and the importance of information in the work of our National Societies to assist them.

### **Safety and Dignity along the trail:**

- **The vulnerability of migrants along the journey is extreme. It took the tragic and visible death of three year old Aylan Kurdi on the shores of Turkey, to wake the world up and take more notice of the dangers of the sea crossing—both in the Mediterranean and elsewhere, including the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean.** It seems that every week we hear of another 100s or thousands people who have lost their lives in this watery grave, as they pay \$1000s to traffickers in an attempt to seek safety and a better life in makeshift boats, without food or water or even life jackets.
- **What is perhaps less understood is that this perilous sea crossing is often the safest and shortest part of the journey.** Over the past year, there has been much attention on those making the journey from Turkey to Greece in the dead of the night, and we all know of the large movements that have occurred in this context. However, **for others—making the long journey across the Sahel, Sahara, and war-torn Libya to give just one example—the journey does not last for a few hours or a few days, but often many years. Similarly protracted journeys through extraordinarily difficult conditions are present in many regions—the migration corridor through Central America and into the southwestern desert of the United States is another example.**
- **Throughout this journey—the dignity and safety of migrants is violated in unimaginable ways.** By the time they arrive on Europe’s shores or the American border, they have been subjected to incredible trauma, and unfortunately are

often met with collective indifference that contrasts with the compassion and commitment shows by ordinary people and volunteers when they arrive. Allow me to share the stories of two people who have made this journey—a woman from Nigeria and a man from Cameroon—let's call them Biyodu and Jean--who were received by our dedicated Italian Red Cross volunteers in the port of Catania, Sicily.

- **Constantin, 40 yrs:** The journey from Cameroon to Catania took a year and a half. After leaving his wife and daughters in Cameroon due to **threats to his life, he first attempted to cross the Nigerian border, but was unable to as Boko Haram had destroyed the bridge.** The situation was too volatile for him to stay, and **he decided to continue on to Libya, although he had no information on the situation** there. After arriving, he was approached and asked for papers. **When he was unable to produce papers, he was jailed for 15 months, during which time he was regularly beaten, subjected to forced labor, and given far too little to eat.** One day, he was blindfolded and put onto a boat with 50 other people, where **he spent two days on the sea with no food and no water. Some of those around him died or drowned, while he was able to survive by drinking his own urine.** Today, he is safe in a reception center in Italy and has claimed asylum. He waits, although he has no contact with his wife or daughters.
- **Nigerian Woman (Biyodu alias)—23:** This woman acknowledges **she left Nigeria to find a better life in Italy.** Her **journey, from leaving Nigeria to arriving in Italy, took almost 5 years. During her journey across the Sahel and Sahara, there was no assistance or food provided. She was constantly preyed upon by traffickers and soldiers, who demanded more and more money, and those who did have it were beaten, raped, or married off to local men.** When she arrived **Libya, she was imprisoned on five separate occasions, and witnessed a great deal of suffering and sexual exploitation.** Her **journey across the Mediterranean was also risky, in a wooden boat**

**with 400 other people over two days.** The boat had started to leak and water was pouring in—when luckily they were intercepted by a rescue boat and taken to Sicily. **Upon arrival in Sicily they were finally provided with adequate food, clothes, and shelter by the Italian Red Cross.** Her story reminds us to ensure significant attention of gender and gender based violence

- **Example from Central America (Jose—young male, seeking work “in the North”):** “how about if I tell you what this journey is like, but I don’t tell you my name? To start with, everybody treats you like a freak because you’ve decided to leave your country. **Nobody wants to help you; they don’t even want to tell you where to find a chemist if you need a medicine.** And **there are thieves on the way.** You have to be extremely careful because when they see you, they know who you are, and they follow you to take all your money. **That’s why I have no worries now, they took everything I had, so I’m making this trip without a penny.** I’ll see how I can manage on the road”.
- I highlight these stories to bring the reality of what happens on the ground where our volunteers work, so that we increase our compassion and understanding for what migrants experience--but also to emphasize that when it comes to safety and dignity, legal status is irrelevant—**whatever the reasons for migration, it is unacceptable that any human is subjected to such treatment—and we must #stopindifference to their plight.**

#### **What does the Red Cross Red Crescent do to address these vulnerabilities?**

- The Movement, through our national and local RCRC staff and volunteers, IFRC and our movement partner ICRC **are present at all points along the trail—and our primary role is to provide essential services to vulnerable migrants. As Auxiliaries to governments,** we are able to work closely with governments and other partners to ensure needs are being met. In Italy, **we are present at all disembarkation centers across Sicily, which allows us to ensure continuity, consistency, and quality of response. We benefit from the tremendous**

**commitment of our volunteers—in Catania alone, there are 1,000 active Red Cross volunteers who are moved by a desire to #protecthumanity and assist people in need.** Similar commitment and scale is present all across our global network.

- That vulnerable migrants' need for basic services, such as food, shelter, and health, is well understood. However, **we often forget that access to timely, relevant, and accurate information is absolutely essential to ensure safe and dignified migration. Without information on where they can access services, on what their legal avenues to protection are, on what administrative procedures they need to follow, etc., migrants often are forced to place their own safety and dignity at risk.** We must remember that they do not arrive as blank slates—they are **often provided with inaccurate and dangerous information by traffickers and smugglers that leads them to make poor choices, be placed in situations of undue risk, and compromise their access to protection in the long term.** Unfortunately, **governments often withhold or provide unclear guidance and information—as anyone who has applied for a work visa knows, navigating the system can be difficult for even the most educated among us.**
- **Lack of clear, reliable, and disseminated information is even becoming a problem for aid workers in the forefront of humanitarian action.** Vulnerable migrants look to us to provide them with this, and if we don't have the latest and most accurate information from governments, the trust that migrants have in us is decreased and it compromises our ability to deliver services.
  - **Europe/Turkey:** In part to address this—we have launched a new tool — the **Virtual Volunteer**. This allows migrants to access geo-located information about where they can access services, hospitals, transportation, and well as information re: asylum and protection. We have launched already in Greece, and are planning to do so in Italy, Turkey, and Sweden shortly.
  - **Central America:** Throughout Central America, the RCRC Movement is coordinating and working together to provide support to vulnerable

migrants. Mexican Red Cross, Honduras Red Cross, Guatemala Red Cross, and El Salvador among others (supported by ICRC) have established “Migration Assistance Centres” near borders, where migrants can receive food, water, call their families, and receive information about their journey. The centre near the Honduran-Mexican border serves about 1,200 people a week.

- Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen. As I walked to this meeting room today, I did some internal reflection on how migrants have impacted my life, past and present. I would not be here today if not for the excellent education I received from migrant Irish nuns who fled the famine in Ireland and taught in my country. My Uber driver in NYC is almost always a migrant who is making a living and providing me much needed services. And when I order food from Seamless, it is delivered by a migrant. The reality is migrants have been an important part of all our lives and there is irrefutable evidence of the positive economic impact they bring to a country. We need to reverse the toxic narrative and xenophobia that permeates some parts of society’s views on migrants. We have to meet and address their protection and rights and tell their story better. I hope it begins here, with you and me. Thank you.jay