



Refugee Council
of Australia

REPORT ON AUSTRALIAN NGO AND REFUGEE ADVOCACY IN GENEVA – JUNE-JULY 2019

MOMENTUM BUILDS AS UNHCR PLANS FIRST GLOBAL REFUGEE FORUM

The growing impact of refugee-led advocacy and plans to use December's first Global Refugee Forum to build momentum behind the Global Compact on Refugees were key themes of a series of international meetings in Geneva attended by Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) representatives between 25 June and 5 July 2019.

Protection concerns for refugees in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, raised by refugee communities in Australia, and the impacts of Australia's offshore processing policy were discussed in private and public meetings with staff of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). A question posed by RCOA in the opening plenary of the UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs to UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi prompted him to describe the Australian Government's treatment of refugees and people seeking asylum on Manus Island and Nauru as a "festering wound".

Strength of refugee representation

Refugee representatives Muzafar Ali from Adelaide and Fadak Alfayadh from Melbourne joined RCOA chief executive officer Paul Power for UNHCR's Annual Consultations with NGOs, the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR), the second preparatory meeting for the Global Refugee Forum, network meetings with NGOs and meetings with UNHCR and UN Human Rights Council officials. Fadak and Muzafar were selected for RCOA's John Gibson Refugee Community Leadership Grant after a national expression of interest which drew applications from 37 refugee representatives interested in participating in the meetings. Their participation was financially supported by Australia for UNHCR, Australian Council for International Development, MDA Ltd, Foundation House and RCOA with Muzafar's role as Australia's refugee representative at ATCR supported by the Department of Home Affairs.



Muzafar Ali and Fadak Alfayadh at the second preparatory meeting for the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva.

The biggest event was the UNHCR NGO Consultations, which attracted 520 delegates from 300 organisations based in 85 countries. Of the 27 Australian representatives, 14 of them were people of refugee background. Most of them were participating as volunteers of different organisations and several

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funded their own travel to participate in the meeting. The Australian team worked closely with the nine New Zealand representatives, eight of whom were former refugees.

The Global Refugee-led Network (GRN), formed in January after last year's Global Summit of Refugees, and the Global Youth Advocacy Council were active throughout the meetings, leading several seminars and workshops with NGOs, UNHCR and government representatives on meaningful refugee participation in decision-making. The resettlement dialogue (the ATCR) included the first joint refugee statement in its 25-year history, led by the Refugee Advisory Group formed by the ATCR co-hosts, British Refugee Council and UK Home Office.

With the sharing of good practice which can be replicated elsewhere being a significant theme in the meetings, Muzafar Ali and Fadak Alfayadh took opportunities to share lessons learned from projects in which they have been involved.

While a refugee, Muzafar was one of four co-founders of the [Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre](#), the first community school initiated and run by refugees in Indonesia. This school has encouraged other refugee-led initiatives in Indonesia in education, income generation, legal aid and practical support. Fadak shared her experiences of using her family's story of escaping Iraq to engage Australians in dialogue about the journey of refugees, as part of the [Meet Fadak](#) campaign. Fadak's experience in communicating through social media was drawn on in a UNHCR NGO Consultations workshop on using social media to drive change.



Fadak Alfayadh takes a selfie while presenting at the social media workshop at UNHCR's NGO Consultations.

Refugee women from several regions of the world were also involved in working with the University of New South Wales' Forced Migration Research Network on a gender audit of proceedings related to the Global Refugee Forum, drawing attention to issues of gender equality and women's empowerment by monitoring whether and how these issues are referred to in discussions about forced displacement.

Preparations for the Global Refugee Forum

A key part of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) passed last December by the United Nations General Assembly is a Global Refugee Forum to be held every four years to seek pledges and commitments for the next stage of implementing the GCR and to review progress to date. The first [Global Refugee Forum](#) will be held at the Palais des Nations in Geneva on 17-18 December 2019. On 25 June, UNHCR hosted the second of three preparatory meetings for the Forum, engaging governments, NGOs and refugee networks in discussions about how to make the Forum as effective as possible.

The goal of the Global Refugee Forum is to encourage governments, UN agencies, local authorities, NGOs, the private sector, refugee groups and local communities to make practical [pledges and contributions](#) for the benefit of refugees over the coming four years. The pledges being sought could include: financial, material or technical assistance; resettlement places and improved access to complementary migration pathways; and policy change, practical steps or initiatives to enhance refugee inclusion. UNHCR is focusing discussions on six key needs: responsibility sharing, education, jobs and livelihoods, energy and infrastructure, protection capacity and solutions (including voluntary repatriation, resettlement and complementary migration pathways and local solutions in countries where refugees now live). In the lead-up to the forum, UNHCR is encouraging States and organisations to share [examples of good practice](#) relevant to these six key needs.

The forum will be co-hosted by UNHCR and the government of Switzerland, with Turkey, Ethiopia, Costa Rica and Germany serving as co-sponsors. Around 1200 people from 300 delegations are expected to attend, including Ministers and senior officials from many governments. UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner Volker Turk told the Forum preparatory meeting that UNHCR was looking for bold and ambitious pledges and commitments, saying that the Forum could be regarded as a success if UNHCR is able to collect a wide range of pledges and contributions which have a direct and positive impact on the lives of refugees and host communities.

Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement

The 25th Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR), held on 1-2 July 2019, was the largest ever with more than 300 delegates from UNHCR, 30 governments, NGOs from 20 resettlement countries, refugee representatives from six countries, nine international NGO networks, six inter-governmental agencies, International Organization for Migration, academics and speakers. Co-chaired by the UK Home Office and British Refugee Council, the ATCR focused particularly on UNHCR's ambitious [three-year strategy on resettlement and complementary pathways](#), being developed in preparation for the Global Refugee Forum. This strategy is linked to a 10-year plan to see one million refugees resettled between 2019 and 2028 and two million refugees achieve complementary migration outcomes in third countries. UNHCR's goal is to expand the number of countries involved in resettlement from 29 to 50 over that period.

Another major theme of the ATCR was on building more meaningful participation of refugees. The ATCR's [first-ever refugee statement](#) was coordinated by the UK Refugee Advisory Group formed to provide input to the ATCR and the March 2019 Working Group on Resettlement meeting in Sheffield. In the joint statement, the refugee representatives appealed for resettlement states to address the long delays refugees experience between being offered a resettlement place and being resettled. Welcoming the opportunity to participate in the ATCR, they said "we do not want to be simply a topic of conversation. We want to be recognised as full and equal participants. We are uniquely positioned to contribute to discussions on resettlement. We want to be involved as experts by experience in all stages of the resettlement process and urge each of you to work towards increases and improving refugee participation in your programs." Members of the Refugee Advisory Group spoke on a panel discussion with Paul Power of RCOA and representatives of International Catholic Migration Commission, Migration Yorkshire and Danish Refugee Council on models for improving refugee participation.



Refugee representatives read the first-ever Refugee Statement at the ATCR.

As in previous years, UNHCR launched its [Global Resettlement Needs](#) document for the coming year, detailing the 1.44 million refugees in need of resettlement in 2020 across Africa, the Middle East, Turkey, Asia and the Americas. The report also noted that in 2018 only 55,680 refugees were resettled through UNHCR processes and only 92,424 through UNHCR and government-run processes. This was less than half the 189,291 refugees resettled in 2016. The ATCR looked in more detail at groups of refugees with particular priority needs: those with acute medical needs, refugees who have been evacuated to emergency transit centres, children and adolescents at risk and LGBTI refugees. Discussions also focused on community sponsorship options, complementary migration pathways and support for new resettlement states.

UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs

The theme of the [UNHCR NGO Consultations](#), held from 3-5 July, was “Working Together Better”. The agenda was more skewed than in previous years towards UNHCR’s relationship with the NGOs it funds to conduct programs in the low-income and middle-income countries. The better use of data to improve the protection response for refugees and improving partnership integrity were major sub-themes over the first two days of the event. The final day of the consultation focused on preparations for the Global Refugee Forum.

UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi spoke in the opening plenary in a discussion with Guled Mire, a former refugee from Somali who was resettled in New Zealand where he is a prominent advocate on refugee and migrant issues. Their discussion covered topics including the scale of displacement, the challenges of finding durable solutions for refugees, countering anti-refugee rhetoric, including refugees in decision-making and his hopes for the Global Refugee Forum.

The role of refugees in national advocacy: From the plenary gathering of 500 participants, the first question to Mr Grandi came from Fadak Alfayadh from the RCOA team, who asked about the representation of refugees in western nations and what NGOs should do to dismantle the negative narrative about refugees. In his response, Mr Grandi focused on the participation of refugees, noting both the complicated issue of which particular refugees speak on behalf of others and the positive growth of refugee representation in international forums. “In a forum like this, the global consultations, this is where we need refugees to come and be advocates of their cause – in terms of protection needs, in terms of presenting themselves as contributors, as assets and not as a burden. Their voice is stronger than ours. But really where refugee participation is crucial is at the country level. That’s where it can make a difference. There we need to make more progress. ... I hope [UNHCR’s] decentralisation, which is really a strengthening of the country offices and moving the directorates that coordinate the country offices closer to them, will also intensify the debate on how to assist refugees to move into the decision-making, into the planning, into the evaluations, into the local advocacy, which is really where we need their presence and their leadership.”

Australia’s offshore detention ‘a festering wound’: Questions to Mr Grandi were also posed through the online platform Pigeonhole with participants voting for the question they most wanted asked. The most popular question was posed by RCOA: “In many countries, refugees suffer due to lack of resources. On Manus Island and Nauru, Australia has spent billions of dollars to make 800 remaining refugees suffer for six years. How do we stop this?” In reply, Mr Grandi said: “I have three quick points to make on this important question. One, as you all know, we disagree with Australia on the Manus Island-Nauru solution ... We disagree because it is not a solution, clearly. And it has inflicted on people that were in a difficult situation, whether they were refugees or not, it has inflicted untold suffering, sometimes the ultimate suffering. That needs to be stressed again. Second, linked to that, we need those two festering wounds, or the festering wound of this so-called solution, to be resolved. As the new government of Australia took power recently, we have again renewed our invitation to find a solution to close these places and to bring people to safer places. We believe Australia has a primary responsibility in solving this problem. Third, there is the issue of resources. I won’t judge how much money has been spent on these islands. Certainly, it is absurd to have spent so much money on something which is not a solution. It has actually created a very bad precedent.” Mr Grandi went on to describe how UNHCR was only able to achieve half of its required annual budget of around US\$8 billion and, as a result, had to make very difficult choices about pressing priorities it could not meet.

Moving UNHCR’s regional bureaux out of Geneva: A major point for discussion was UNHCR’s plan to move its regional bureaux out of its Geneva headquarters into the regions they serve. Between September and December 2019, the Asia Bureau will move to Bangkok, the Middle East and North Africa Bureau to Amman, the Americas Bureau to Panama and the Africa Bureau will be split between regional offices in Nairobi, Pretoria and Dakar. The Europe Bureau will remain in Geneva. Mr Grandi said that UNHCR’s regionalisation process was prompted by an organisational review which concluded that the headquarters was too disconnected from UNHCR’s field operations.

In the closing session, UNHCR foreshadowed that it will work towards holding regular consultations with NGOs in each of its regions. As a result, the 2020 global consultations will be a smaller event held later in the year.

Australian delegates' meetings with UNHCR regional bureaux

RCOA coordinated meetings for Australian refugee community and NGO delegates with representatives of UNHCR's bureaux for Asia-Pacific, Africa, the Middle East and Europe

In the **Asia Bureau** meeting, RCOA and other Australian NGO delegates raised:

- concerns about the human impacts of Australia's offshore processing;
- research conducted by RCOA board member John Roc into current thinking among Myanmar refugees in India, Thailand and Malaysia about protection challenges and durable solutions;
- issues for refugees in Indonesia regarding access to registration, resettlement, pressure to return home and mental health concerns;
- lack of affordable access to tertiary education for refugees in Pakistan.



Director of UNHCR's Asia Bureau, Indrika Ratwatte (second right), with RCOA's CEO Paul Power and board members Dr Melika Sheikh-Eldin and John Roc.

In the meeting with the **Africa Bureau**, Australian delegates discussed a variety of protection concerns for refugees from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea in neighbouring countries which included Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, Sudan, Rwanda and DRC.

In a joint meeting with staff of the bureaux responsible for the **Middle East** and **Turkey**, Joseph Youhana of Brotherhood of St Laurence raised a series of issues reported to him by refugees during a six-day visit to Lebanon the previous week. Other Australian delegates raised issues related to: Afghan, Iraqi and Iranian refugees in Turkey; Palestinian refugees displaced from Syria and Iraq; internally displaced Yazidis in Iraq; and the situation for refugees in Jordan, Libya and Yemen.

UN Human Rights Council

The UNHCR meetings coincided with the 41st session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, providing an opportunity for RCOA delegates to observe some of the Council's formal proceedings and side meetings and discussions which take place while the Council is in session. RCOA delegates were present to hear the [statement made by Abdul Aziz Muhamat](#) to the Human Rights Council meeting on behalf of the hundreds of refugees and people seeking asylum being held by Australia on Manus Island and Nauru. Aziz sought refuge in Switzerland after travelling to Geneva in February to accept the Martin Ennals Award for human rights. Speaking as a representative of the Human Rights Law Centre, he called on the United Nations and the international community to demand that the Australian Government act humanely to end the humanitarian crisis it created on Manus Island and Nauru.

*Paul Power
CEO, Refugee Council of Australia
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MUZAFAR ALI'S REFLECTIONS ON ADVOCATING IN GENEVA

I am writing this reflection on my way back home, flying over a thin layer of cottony clouds, leaving Geneva and its very fresh memories behind.

Looking back to March 2019, when I applied for John Gibson Community Leadership Grant, I knew that the grant would be highly competitive. My continuous work with refugee education and community work in Indonesia and advocacy in Australia gave me the courage to apply anyhow. The call confirming my selection

was overwhelmingly pleasant. As my debut visit to Geneva, I received tremendous support from Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), from the visa application process to advice on catching buses in Geneva, and coordination meetings to shape up our topics to discuss during the consultations. The coordination process was impressively led by RCOA which helped me to understand the significance of this global event. In short, the pre-Geneva process was a great opportunity to meet



Muzafar Ali discusses refugee-led initiatives in Indonesia during the second preparatory meeting for the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva.

some key organisations and persons actively involved in refugee advocacy in Australia, and to better grasp the pressing refugee issues that the participants wanted to raise during the consultation.

I am grateful to Paul Power for being patient with me to comprehend the unfolding events in Geneva. His knowledge about refugee issues was hugely helpful for me to enter in any discussion; no wonder I shadowed him most of the time! He was kind to introduce me to a broad network of advocates, UN and NGO staff members. His introduction of my work to his contacts provided me the pitch to engage in discussions.

I found the UNHCR NGO Consultations as the biggest stage for advocacy, showcasing good practices, learning from other organisations' approaches, UNHCR priorities on concerning issues, such as education, protection and humanitarian assistance for refugees. I was particularly amazed to learn about new approaches, such as music concerts for refugees organised by South American NGOs.

As a former refugee and co-founder of Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre in Indonesia, I grasped the opportunity to raise some important issues with UNHCR such as:

1. Establishing better and effective access mechanisms for refugees in UNHCR offices in South East Asia, particularly Indonesia. I echoed refugees' concerns that UNHCR offices and personnel do not have good communication with them, and they usually do not listen to refugees' concerns.
2. Forming partnerships with refugees to address some of the challenges, particularly education. Focusing on refugees being part of the solution, in an overwhelming global refugee crisis, I raised the "bottom-to-top" idea with UNHCR Asia Bureau, the Global Refugee Forum team, ATCR sessions and at the UNHCR NGO Consultations.

The responses in regard to my questions from UNHCR were immensely interesting. Responses regarding refugees-led educational initiatives were slightly contradictory from different UNHCR officials. While one UNHCR officer felt refugees should not establish educational centres but should somehow be included in

Indonesia's overcrowded schools, another official saw initiatives such as CRLC as a solution to education problems for refugees.

Apart from sharing ideas, raising concerns and getting to know other organisations; I also got the opportunity to assist Arash Bordbar with his session on resettlement by providing him some data, first-hand information about resettled refugees and their experience in the middle of their journey.

My honest conviction about UNHCR NGO Consultation is that the forum is overwhelmingly a "top-to-bottom" approach, and hugely influenced by the donor countries' efforts to manage refugees. The stakeholders mostly talk about funds, resources and the problem, which in fact is gigantic. However, UNHCR and NGOs working with refugees overlook the solutions within refugees and refugee communities. Therefore, George Okoth-Obbo (UNHCR's Assistant High Commissioner for Operations) was the only high ranked official who talked about "refugee agency" after my question regarding refugee participation.

Now I believe that refugee advocates should talk about refugee participation on the grounds for addressing education, humanitarian and psychosocial support. I also believe that top-to-bottom approach can only be successful if UNHCR runs a parallel bottom-to-top approach simultaneously. For that purpose, I am interested to advocate on this issue in the next consultations and events. My experience with UNHCR-NGO Consultations has given me new energy and scope to work even harder as an advocate to proliferate the idea that refugees can be a part of the solution and not just labelled as a burden or problem. For this, I am already looking forward to participate in the Global Refugee Forum and next year's Consultations and other platforms, because I think we need to be ready for a long marathon till refugees are considered as a key partner to address this global crisis.

Muzafar Ali
July 2019