



From Pledges to Practice

Sustaining Action on Alternatives to Detention, Protection at Sea and Protection from Trafficking

Geneva, 30 June 2026



Summary

Approximately **110 participants** joined the UNHCR-hosted hybrid event held on **30 June 2026** as part of ongoing implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and preparations towards the next Global Refugee Forum 2027. The participants represented States, UN agencies, international organizations, civil society organizations, refugee-led organizations, academic institutions, and independent experts.

The event focused on sustaining action under three Global Refugee Forum multi-stakeholder pledges:

- [Protection at Sea](#);
- [Alternatives to Immigration Detention](#); and
- [Protection from Trafficking in Persons](#).

The discussion highlighted practical progress made since the 2023 Global Refugee Forum (GRF) while also recognizing persistent challenges relating to trafficking, the expansion of immigration detention, dangerous sea journeys, shrinking humanitarian space, and the growing criminalization of humanitarian action at sea and human rights defenders.

Participants welcomed the opportunity to review progress under the three Global Refugee Forum multi-stakeholder pledges and exchanged views on implementation challenges and opportunities. Throughout the discussion, speakers emphasized the value of route-based approaches, stronger coordination among stakeholders, peer learning, and greater complementarity between the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Migration. Participants also highlighted the importance of ensuring that civil society organizations, organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless persons, and people with lived experience remain central to pledge implementation and monitoring.

Key Action Points

- **UNHCR, States and partners:** Continue promoting the route-based approach as a framework for addressing protection challenges in mixed movements, including protection at sea, detention and trafficking.
- **Pledge leads and supporting entities:** Continue encouraging implementation of existing pledges and support the development of additional commitments ahead of the next Global Refugee Forum.
- **States and partners:** Strengthen peer learning and exchange of good practices on alternatives to detention, protection-sensitive maritime responses, and anti-trafficking measures.
- **All stakeholders:** Sustain reporting and sharing of progress through formal reporting mechanisms and dedicated discussion forums.
- **States and partners:** Continue placing civil society organizations, refugee-led organizations, and persons with lived experience at the center of policy development and implementation.

Opening and Objectives

Opening the event, Mr. Patrick Eba, Deputy Director of UNHCR's Division of International Protection and Solutions, recalled that the discussion was not merely about reviewing progress on pledges made at the GRF 2023 but about translating commitments into practical action. Participants were reminded that pledges alone do not save lives and that implementation remains the ultimate measure of success.

The opening remarks focused on three interconnected protection challenges:

Protection at Sea

UNHCR stressed that search and rescue remains a humanitarian imperative, a legal obligation, and a moral responsibility. Participants were informed about the 2026 launch of the Rescue Guide developed jointly by UNHCR, the International Maritime Organization and the International Chamber of Shipping to support responses to mixed movements at sea. Concern was also expressed about the increasing criminalization of humanitarian action at sea.

Alternatives to Detention

UNHCR highlighted that immigration detention continues to expand globally despite evidence of its harmful impacts. It was reiterated that detention should be a measure of last resort and that children should never be detained because of their legal or migratory status or that of their parents.

Protection from Trafficking

UNHCR highlighted that traffickers exploit protection gaps, inaccessible asylum systems, lack of legal pathways and shortage of durable solutions that exacerbate vulnerabilities of forcibly displaced and stateless people. Trafficking was described as a central protection challenge along mixed movement routes.

States and Partners' Updates on Progress, Challenges and Support Needs

Alexander Widmer, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

Speaking on behalf of Switzerland, Alexander Widmer highlighted the country's whole-of-society pledge made at the GRF 2023 to prevent and combat trafficking in persons, recognizing that forcibly displaced people face heightened risks not only upon arrival in destination countries but throughout displacement and along mixed movement routes. Switzerland has worked to strengthen victim identification mechanisms, including through asylum procedures for refugees arriving from Ukraine, while also supporting efforts to detect trafficking networks through financial investigations and anti-money laundering mechanisms.

At the international level, Switzerland has supported projects aimed at strengthening the capacities of national authorities and civil society organizations along mixed movement routes in Eastern, Western, and North Africa. Particular attention has been given to improving assistance, legal support, and awareness among frontline actors. Switzerland also highlighted partnerships with the OSCE to strengthen understanding of trafficking indicators among financial institutions and intermediaries, and providing valuable materials and tools. Reflecting on discussions held during the OSCE Alliance against Trafficking Conference and the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in Vienna, Mr. Widmer stressed the evolving nature of trafficking, including the rise of forced criminality and increasing links with transnational organized crime. He emphasized the need for better coordination, a protection-centred approach, and stronger international cooperation. Switzerland expressed its intention to include references on transnational organized crime and protection concerns during negotiations on the forthcoming UNHCR Omnibus Resolution.

Alioune Cissokho, Magistrate, High Authority for the Coordination of Maritime Security, Maritime Safety and Marine Environmental Protection (HASSMAR), Senegal

Alioune Cissokho shared Senegal's experience as both a country of origin and transit increasingly affected by migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons. He explained that national legislation clearly distinguishes between trafficking victims and perpetrators, ensuring that victims are not criminalized while traffickers and smugglers are prosecuted. Senegal reported thousands of interceptions at sea in recent years as part of efforts to address irregular maritime departures.

Mr. Cissokho highlighted several promising practices, including Senegal's network of *Maisons de Justice*, which provide alternatives to detention through mediation, awareness-raising, and community engagement. In addition, local committees have been established throughout the country to complement national structures by engaging directly with communities on the risks of irregular movements and dangers along the routes, particularly in areas where departures frequently occur. These mechanisms aim to reduce the risks of trafficking and smuggling by increasing prevention and awareness.

He also described Senegal's maritime coordination framework involving the navy, coast guard, and other security actors, as well as post-disembarkation support focused on providing immediate assistance, providing information on rights and supporting reintegration where relevant. While reaffirming Senegal's commitment to international protection standards, he noted several operational challenges, including insufficient information-sharing on departures, difficulties identifying people with international protection needs during rescue operations, limited adaptation of rescue frameworks to large-scale maritime incidents, and challenges ensuring sustainable reintegration of returnees who may attempt dangerous journeys again.

Siobhan Mullally, Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons

Special Rapporteur Mullally emphasized that trafficking risks often remain hidden or are normalized as "survival strategies" or "negative coping mechanisms" in humanitarian contexts, which is why the multi-stakeholder pledge seeks to improve responses to risks of trafficking. She argued that these practices constitute serious human rights violations,

and therefore require stronger identification and protection mechanisms to respond to all forms of exploitation, including forced labour, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, domestic servitude, and forced criminality

The Special Rapporteur underlined the importance of ensuring access to asylum and protection services, and expanding resettlement opportunities, rights-based family reunification, and safe mobility pathways as core trafficking prevention measures. She noted that transit stages of displacement often present the highest trafficking risks and highlighted the intersection and complementarity between work on trafficking, gender inequality, child protection, and statelessness. Particular attention was given to risks faced by stateless children and unaccompanied and separated children.

While welcoming increased awareness, screening efforts, referrals to assistance and reporting of trafficking cases in humanitarian settings, Special Rapporteur Mullally expressed concern about rising detention practices, accelerated asylum procedures, forced returns, and the risks of re-trafficking. She further highlighted efforts to integrate trafficking concerns within broader work on protection at sea and stressed the need to protect human rights defenders and search-and-rescue actors from criminalization.

Tasha Gill, Global Lead for Migration and Displacement, UNICEF

Tasha Gill focused on progress in advancing commitments to end child immigration detention under both the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Migration. She welcomed the adoption of paragraph 53 of the 2026 IMRF Progress Declaration, describing it as a major achievement that provides an operational mandate for the UN Secretary General, with the support of the UN Network on Migration, to provide practical recommendations for States on child-sensitive alternatives to detention.

Ms. Gill stressed that community-based alternatives are more humane, less costly, and more effective than detention. She emphasized that evidence increasingly demonstrates high compliance rates and improved outcomes for children and families when governments invest in child protection systems, alternative care arrangements, and referral mechanisms. UNICEF, together with UNHCR and other partners, will continue supporting States towards these goals with regard to the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

Mexico was highlighted as an example of positive progress. Through legislative reform, the development of alternative care systems, and new commitments announced during the IMRF, Mexico has demonstrated how coordinated government action can translate global commitments into practical measures for migrant and asylum-seeking children.

Ezekiel Simperingham, Manager, Migration and Displacement, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)

Ezekiel Simperingham reaffirmed that addressing the needs of refugees and migrants remains a core priority of the IFRC network. He explained that the Federation's route-based approach is not simply a policy framework but also an operational model that enables Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies to support refugees and migrants across entire mixed movement routes, including maritime corridors.

Mr. Simperingham highlighted the Federation's joining the multi-stakeholder pledge and partnership with SOS Méditerranée, through which more than 8,600 people, including over 2,200 children, were rescued in the Central Mediterranean. IFRC provided post-rescue services including medical care, psychosocial support, restoration of family links, and information on international protection. Although that partnership ended due to resource constraints, IFRC remains committed to supporting refugees and migrants along maritime routes worldwide.

He also highlighted growing engagement by National Societies in safe and dignified disembarkation efforts, particularly in contexts such as Lampedusa in Italy, linked to the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. At the policy level, IFRC welcomed progress made through the IMRF Declaration and the development of practical recommendations on saving lives and preventing deaths along the routes. He emphasized the importance of complementarity between organizations, sectors, and global frameworks in addressing shared protection challenges.

Voices from Practice: Civil Society, Refugee-Led Organizations and Persons with Lives Experience

Carolina Gottardo, Executive Director, International Detention Coalition (IDC)

Carolina Gottardo observed that migration and asylum continue to be among the most politicized global issues, contributing to detention, deportation, pushbacks, and increasingly restrictive policies. Nevertheless, she highlighted growing evidence and political momentum in support of alternatives to detention.

She pointed to promising examples including Thailand's alternatives-to-detention framework benefiting almost 2,000 children and caregivers, Colombia's non-detention and regularization policies, Australia's support for regional peer learning, and new commitments adopted in Southern Africa. IDC continues to support governments through technical assistance, peer learning, evidence generation, and cooperation with partners complementarily under both the GRF and IMRF processes.

Maria Juliana Prieto Gracia, Action Réfugiés Montréal

Drawing from personal and professional experience, Ms. Maria Prieto described Action Réfugiés Montréal's work assisting migrants and asylum-seekers in detention in Canada. The organization provides legal representation, psychosocial support, family accompaniment, and practical assistance both during detention and following release.

She noted concerns regarding recent legislative changes affecting asylum procedures and increasing vulnerabilities among people seeking protection. Particular attention was given to the impacts of family separation, risks faced by women, unaccompanied children, and gender-diverse people, as well as the links between detention, deportation, trafficking, and forced labour. Action Réfugiés Montréal continues to advocate for family reunification, access to work permits, and more people-focused approaches within the asylum system.

Discussion: Good Practices, Peer Exchange and Follow-up

Amanuel Mehari, Chief of Migrant Protection Division, International Organization for Migration (IOM)

Mr. Amanuel Mehari reaffirmed IOM's commitment to victim-centred and rights-based approaches across mixed movement routes. He stressed that trafficking, detention, and protection-at-sea challenges are interconnected and require coordinated responses that bridge humanitarian, migration, and protection frameworks.

He highlighted recent IOM research examining the relationship between climate change, environmental degradation, mobility, and trafficking vulnerabilities. IOM continues to support Member States through policy reform, operational assistance, and capacity-building initiatives and remains actively engaged in promoting alternatives to detention and route-based protection responses.

Carolina Hernandez, Migration Unit Coordinator, OHCHR

Ms. Carolina Hernandez highlighted OHCHR's efforts to strengthen implementation through monitoring, reporting, advocacy, and normative guidance grounded in international human rights law. The Office has worked to highlight evolving forms of trafficking and exploitation while advocating for early identification, victim protection, and application of the non-punishment principle.

She also emphasized OHCHR's work on protection at sea, including support for search and rescue, safe disembarkation, and recognition of maritime spaces as humanitarian spaces. Particular attention was given to ensuring that digital technologies used in border management include safeguards protecting human rights and facilitating identification and referral of vulnerable persons.

Abdelaziz Muhamat, Refugee Advocacy Coordinator, Global Detention Project

Mr. Abdelaziz Muhamat expressed concern about increasing externalization policies and the expansion of detention infrastructure in locations where monitoring and accountability remain limited. Drawing on research conducted jointly with WHO, he noted that many States continue to fail to implement recommended reforms relating to health and protection in detention facilities.

He cautioned that alternatives to detention must not become forms of detention by another name and argued that they should always function as safeguards against arbitrary deprivation of liberty. Mr. Muhamat urged States to ensure that commitments made under the Global Compacts remain rooted in existing human rights obligations and standards.

Closing Reflections and Next Steps

In his concluding remarks, Mr. Ziad Ayad, Senior Policy Officer, UNHCR, reflected on the broad range of examples shared by States, UN agencies, international organizations, civil society organizations, and independent experts. He noted that participants had provided both encouraging examples of progress and candid reflections on continuing challenges relating to immigration detention, trafficking in persons, and protection at sea.

A key message emerging from the discussion was the value of the route-based approach in addressing the interconnected protection risks faced by refugees and migrants along routes. Participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of coordinated responses that bring together actors across countries of origin, transit, asylum, and destination to address detention, trafficking, protection needs at sea, and other risks encountered during movement.

Mr. Ayad also underscored the strong complementarity between the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). While each Compact has its own purpose and mandate, both seek to strengthen cooperation and improve responses for people on the move. The examples shared during the discussion demonstrated that practical collaboration, peer learning, and partnership across the two frameworks can help translate global commitments into concrete action.

Reflecting on the theme of the event, *From Pledges to Practice*, he emphasized that commitments only have value if they translate into tangible improvements in people's lives. The discussion demonstrated that meaningful progress is possible when governments, international organizations, civil society organizations, refugee-led organizations, and affected communities work together toward common objectives.

Looking ahead, Mr. Ayad noted that 2026 is an important year within the Global Refugee Forum cycle. As the international community prepares for the next GRF in 2027, continued dialogue and engagement will be essential to mobilize high-quality pledges and strengthen implementation of existing commitments. He informed participants that UNHCR is developing a new pledging framework and welcomed continued feedback from stakeholders to ensure that the process remains collaborative, effective, and fit for purpose.

Mr. Ayad concluded with three specific appeals to participants:

- **Continue reporting on progress and sharing implementation updates**, both through formal reporting channels and through stakeholder exchanges such as this event.
- **Sustain momentum toward implementing the Compact through pledges**, ensuring that commitments are translated into practical protection outcomes.
- **Keep civil society organizations, refugee-led organizations, and people with lived experience at the centre of this work**, recognizing their essential role in shaping effective responses and maintaining accountability.

The meeting concluded with a shared recognition that continued cooperation, complementarity between the Global Compacts, and sustained engagement by all stakeholders will be critical to advancing protection for people on the move and to carrying the momentum of these pledges forward toward the 2027 Global Refugee Forum.

Annex – Agenda

Time	Session
15:30–15:40	Opening and objectives of the follow-up event. Patrick Eba, Deputy Director, DIPS, UNHCR
15:40–16:10	States and partners' updates on progress, challenges and support needs - Alexander Widmer, Head of Staff Multilateral Affairs and NGOs, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Switzerland - Alioune Cissokho, Magistrat au niveau de la Haute Autorité chargé de la Coordination de la sécurité maritime, de la Sûreté maritime et de la Protection de l'Environnement marin (HASSMAR), Senegal - Siobhan Mullally, Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, especially women and children - Tasha Gill, Global Lead for Migration and Displacement, UNICEF - Ezekiel Simperingham, Manager, Migration and Displacement, IFRC
16:10 -16:25	Voices from practice: civil society, refugee-led organisations and persons with lived experience - Bianca BENVENUTI, Head of International Advocacy and Public Positioning, SOS Med - Carolina Gottardo, Executive Director, International Detention Coalition - Maria Prieto Garcia, International Lawyer, Action Réfugiés Montréal
16:25 -16:55	Discussion: good practices, proposals for regular follow-up and peer exchange (States, IO partners, NGOs)
16:55 -17:00	Closing remarks and next steps Global Compact on Refugees Section, UNHCR



Route
Based
Approach

Strengthening protection and solutions
in the context of mixed movements



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For more information

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