

JOINT STATEMENT

NGOs Urge Government of Kenya to Reconsider Intended Closure of Refugee Camps

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) providing assistance to refugees in Kenya acknowledge the hospitality and responsibility that the Government of Kenya has borne over decades. Despite the huge economic and social pressure, Kenya continues to host close to 600,000^[1] refugees and asylum seekers from neighbouring countries, the majority being from Somalia and South Sudan. In addition, the Burundi conflict has also led to an influx of refugees from the country into the Kakuma refugee camp. Fifty-six percent of this current refugee population in Kenya comprises women, children and the youth who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse while in displacement. The acceptance of refugees in Dadaab, Kakuma and those living in urban settings is a reflection of good practice and gesture exhibited by the Government of Kenya and host communities over the years.

However, we the undersigned NGOs view as unfortunate the position assumed by the Government of Kenya, in a statement issued by the Ministry of Interior on the 6th of May, 2016 that disbands the Department of Refugee Affairs (DRA) and indicates that this will be followed by the closure of the Dadaab and Kakuma camps within the shortest time possible. The recent announcement will have far reaching implications for the thousands of refugees and asylum seekers who have called Kenya a place of refuge, namely:

- The directive to close the camps violates the general principle of voluntary repatriation of refugees living in Kenya in a safe and dignified manner back to their countries of origin. Additionally, the directive will draw back on the gains made so far in the repatriation process.
- Kenya, over the years, has been recognized as a safe haven for persons seeking refuge from conflict and environmental disasters. Shutting down the refugee camps will mean increased protection risks for the thousands of refugees and asylum seekers – majority of who are women, children and unaccompanied minors. The current humanitarian situation in Somalia and South Sudan remains dire and fragile. Somalia is faced with drought and other security risks that are likely to see an increase in displacement and vulnerability. In South Sudan, despite the return of the Vice President, Riek Machar to Juba, a positive step towards ending the on-going conflict in the country, the humanitarian crisis is far from being over. Currently, displacements continue both within the country as well as to neighbouring countries and the situation could be exacerbated by the forced return of refugees from Kenya.
- The Department of Refugee Affairs (DRA) as established by the Refugee Act, 2006 delivers crucial administrative services for refugees and asylum seekers and its disbandment would create an immediate critical service provision and coordination gap for management of refugee affairs. Additionally, DRA plays an extremely vital role in the current voluntary repatriation process under the Tripartite Agreement and the decision to disband it will stall these process.

^[1] UNHCR data: As of 30th April 2016 the refugee population in Kenya stood at 598,646 (refugees and asylum seekers)

We acknowledge the concerns raised by the Government of Kenya and do share in the need to reinforce security in the country as security is an integral part of any nation and for providing a conducive asylum environment. We therefore ask that:

- The international community provides predictable and sufficient financial support towards refugee programmes in Kenya including supporting the Government of Kenya;
- The Government of Kenya continues with its more sustainable security approach of boosting police reforms and improving community policing and ownership particularly within the refugee camps and the host communities in order to facilitate timely information sharing, mitigation and response to security threats;
- The Government of Kenya continues to uphold the protection and rights of refugees who are prone to human rights violations and especially vulnerable groups like women and children. An abrupt closure of the two camps would mean a humanitarian catastrophe for the region as neighbouring countries especially Uganda, Tanzania and Ethiopia are already shouldering huge refugee populations.
- Durable solutions must inform returns, including long-term safety, security, freedom of movement, access to basic services and livelihoods options availed to returnees and host communities. Refugee laws and asylum regimes are under attack and especially in Europe. Kenya should not follow that path but instead continue to host refugees while getting much more support to do so from the international community.
- The international community should expand its resettlement quotas for refugees coming from the Horn of Africa in order to compliment return and integration strategies as well as share the burden of hosting refugees, on the Government of Kenya.
- The Government of Kenya supports dialogue with other key stakeholders on this decision in a bid to facilitate sustainable solutions to the current refugee situation in Kenya.

The NGO community is committed to continue supporting the Government of Kenya in the search for long-term and sustainable solutions for refugees. We therefore urge the Government to withdraw the directive to disband the Department of Refugee Affairs and reconsider its intention to close refugee camps in the country in line with its good record of upholding its obligations towards hosting refugees and asylum seekers.

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This statement has been signed on by the following agencies:

