

To the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Filippo Grandi,

The signing organizations have been closely monitoring the latest developments on the Central Mediterranean. While at the time of a similar crisis in the Mediterranean, the Cap Anamur, UNHCR urged the EU to adopt a clear position towards the protection of refugee rights¹, we now perceive with great concern a changing approach of UNHCR.

We are well aware of the challenges and limits that UNHCR is subjected in operations in Northern Africa. Nonetheless, at the intergovernmental level, UNHCR remains the central actor responsible for refugee protection, critically reminding states of their humanitarian and legal obligations. Within the last few weeks, UNHCR repeatedly stressed its willingness to act as an executive body for European migration policies, leaving open questions regarding human rights issues aside. We have perceived UNHCR's current position with concern.

Most of the signing organizations have been bilaterally or collectively in contact with UNHCR regarding UNHCR's concept note on regional disembarkation platforms. UNHCR has stated they will not take part of an arrangement that is not based on strong commitments from the EU to take responsibility towards refugees and act in solidarity.

Instead of underlining an European responsibility regarding the reception of asylum-seekers, these proposals are - once again - shifting responsibility to African countries. Looking at UNHCR's meeting with the European Commission on 30 July 2018, we hope that UNHCR will remind the European states of their responsibility towards refugees - a responsibility which cannot be transferred to third countries.

As of today, 40 potential refugees stranded at sea for two weeks on board of the SAROST 5 are most probably about to be disembarked in Tunisia. We urge UNHCR to take a resolute stand regarding past and future blockades of vessels at the Central Mediterranean and to insist on disembarkation to a place where people's dignity and protection can be fully guaranteed.

More broadly, we call upon UNHCR to take a stronger stand against the limitations to its activities posed by governments that result in hindering the fulfilment of its protection mandate in the Mediterranean area. Vulnerable populations could be spared of unnecessary sufferings and possibly death, when UNHCR is enabled to fully carry out its protection role.

Based on its essential role worldwide, we expect UNHCR to fulfil its mandate, which first and foremost is: the protection of refugees - people who strongly depend on the valuable assistance of UNHCR.



1 See: UNHCR, Briefing Note, "Italy boat: UNHCR urges disembarkation on humanitarian grounds" (9 July 2004), available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=40ee70780&query=ca>