

April 15, 2020

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau, Minister Gould, Minister Champagne, and Minister Mendicino,

Mennonite Central Committee Canada (MCC) expresses deep appreciation for the calm, measured, and united response of the Canadian government to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the current pledge of \$159.5 million allocated to support global efforts. We applaud the hard and dedicated work of all members of governments to respond to this crisis inside and outside of Canada.

MCC was formed 100 years ago in response to the crisis of famine and forced displacement in Russia in 1920, in the aftermath of the First World War. For a century, we have responded to the needs of the most vulnerable in Canada and around the world. We celebrate our centennial by reflecting on a history of work through local community partners and faith-based groups in over 50 countries, based on a belief in peacebuilding, human dignity and right relationships between all peoples. A defining feature of MCC is our work with refugees, internally displaced peoples, asylum seekers and other vulnerable populations on the move.

As a ministry of Anabaptist churches, we recommit ourselves to caring for our neighbors, whether across the street or across the globe, and being people of service and generosity during this time of pandemic. This is a time to look to the needs of vulnerable people everywhere. We encourage the Canadian government to continue to do the same, especially when it comes to the needs of displaced peoples, some of the most vulnerable in this current crisis.

In these moments, it takes courage to focus outside of Canada. We therefore deeply appreciate the Canadian government's commitments made in recent days to support efforts to reach the most vulnerable through designated funding to multi-lateral organizations and specific requests. Pandemics do not do away with previous needs but exacerbate existing fragilities and inequalities. When we look at the scale of response needed, especially for displaced people, we encourage Canada to continue to do more to support humanitarian and development responses combined with long-term human rights and peace support, internationally and at home on our own border.

Support for Displaced Populations Internationally

From our experience working with local partners and faith communities, crisis moments are an opportunity to support local initiatives and organizations who are already responding with creativity and expertise. This is a time for bold commitments to Official Development Assistance, with targeted flexible and long-term funding directed to local community organizations. We also encourage localized, context specific responses with a human rights and peacebuilding focus, especially for people on the move. All interventions, whether humanitarian, trade, or other policy, should include an analysis of the underlying root causes of conflict and forced displacement, based on the nexus of aid, development, and peace.

We know you share our concern with the increase in xenophobia around the world and rhetoric that blames migrants for the spread of COVID-19. Many migrant populations already do not have access to proper sanitation, health resources, basic income or access to government supports to withstand social distancing measures. Government restrictions and travel bans, even when carried out for public health reasons, further limit humanitarian access. Xenophobia and suspicion compound these concerns and place human rights in jeopardy, especially those of women and girls.

Despite borders closures, deportations from areas with high concentrations of COVID-19 continue. Our Latin American partners are reporting cases of returned migrants from the United States testing positive for COVID-19. A refugee and migrant shelter we partner with in Guatemala City, for example, has been forced to close their doors to transiting and returned migrants because of a lack of capacity to deal with health concerns around the spread of COVID-19. Partners globally note an increase in attacks and human rights violations carried out against migrants, including denial of health care, with a lack of state response. As a result of these incidents, we believe it is important that any multilateral or bilateral agreements and coordination from Canada include provisions for migrant and refugee human rights protections, regardless of status. Relief packages should explicitly include allocation of funds to address the needs of migrants and refugees without discrimination based on legal status or citizenship.

In the face of pressing challenges, local organizations and faith communities continue to be the best positioned to respond for immediate humanitarian relief and continued human rights advocacy and peacebuilding work. These groups are well placed to support and encourage social networks for information sharing and care during times of physical distancing. Local actors have an in-depth knowledge of the risks facing displaced peoples and how to respond, while at the same time engaging communities and local governments in process of conflict mediation, resolution, and advocacy. We appreciate Canada's support of the UNHCR and also encourage funding commitments designated for the most vulnerable, no matter their country of origin, directed to local organizations and those led by people on the move. This includes recognition of the gendered nature of migration and responding to the particular challenges faced by migrant women.

MCC local partners also tell us that Palestinian refugees, especially those in Gaza, are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of COVID19 in the Middle East. Due to the Israeli blockade of Gaza, there are very limited medical supplies and few possibilities of physical distancing or adequate hygiene measures. There are shortages of key medicines, broken water and sanitation systems, and an under resourced and weakened medical system that has already been forced to respond to three large scale military offensives in the last decade. MCC partners, and other local organizations, however, have experience in responding to challenging situations and dealing with lockdown conditions. They are already responding creatively but need additional supports to magnify their efforts. We therefore appreciate the recent commitments made to UNWRA and encourage long-term sustained support to continue to address the needs of Palestinian refugees. We also encourage support of local peacebuilding and justice initiatives, alongside humanitarian aid.

Support for Asylum Seekers

While we appreciate the government's approach to responding to challenges facing Canadians, efforts must also be in place to support the most vulnerable people at our own borders. We are concerned about the government's plans to return asylum seekers to the United States. In our work our around the world, we know that asylum seekers are often desperate in their quest for protection and a durable solution. That is especially so in a crisis situation. We suspect that when facing the threat of being turned back at the Canadian border, people may seek discrete ways to enter Canada. That means that the government will have no way to track them and ensure self-isolation is enforced. This puts all of us at greater risk to the spread of COVID-19. It could also fuel an increase in anti-migrant sentiments and xenophobia that will divide communities during a time when it is more important than ever to work together. We are also concerned that returning asylum

seekers to the US may open them to refoulement. We appreciate the government's statements that it is in conversation with the United States about those concerns and encourage the conversation to arrive at a prompt resolution that respects human rights. It is important for us to maintain our values to care for victims of violence everywhere, remembering that we are all connected.

Our wellbeing depends on one another. This pandemic reminds us that borders do not keep us safe; our safety depends on our ability to care well for each other in ways that allow for access to health care and human dignity, and support for all to be able to do the same. Pandemics may not be time for optimism, but they are a moment for deep hope. We are hopeful in our ability to come together, as a global community, in response to the most vulnerable of our global neighbours, remembering the connections and humanity we share.

As always, we offer our prayers for you and your colleagues in these trying times, and our support as you provide vital leadership in Canada and globally.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rick Bauman", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rick Cober Bauman
Executive Director
MCC Canada