GLOBAL INITIATIVE ON PROTECTION AT SEA
THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

UNHCR’s Global Initiative on Protection at Sea is an initial two-year plan of action with the core goal of supporting action by States to:

- **REDUCE LOSS OF LIFE AT SEA**, as well as exploitation, abuse and violence experienced by people travelling irregularly by sea, and

- **ESTABLISH PROTECTION-SENSITIVE RESPONSES** to irregular mixed migration by sea.

Achievement of these objectives must be underpinned by effective search-and-rescue (SAR) systems, including predictable arrangements for the disembarkation of those rescued at a safe place. It also requires early identification of those needing international protection, humane treatment and prevention of *refoulement*, as well as access to fair and efficient asylum procedures and, ultimately, timely solutions.

Limiting loss of life further requires addressing the drivers of irregular movements in a way that preserves access to asylum and international protection. Countries of departure, transit and destination all play a part. The Global Initiative thus recognizes that action to protect people fleeing persecution by sea cannot be isolated from the broader regional challenges of mixed migratory flows.

Regional cooperation and predictable burden-sharing is essential to both SAR and providing alternatives to sea movements. Insufficient regional burden-sharing is often a disincentive to SAR and disembarkation. Non-coastal and other States play an important role by sharing responsibilities with those that enable disembarkation.

Discussions on how to respond to people risking their lives at sea are not new, yet implementation of existing tools and frameworks could have a real impact. A number of these are listed later in this document.
BACKGROUND

The challenges of protecting refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless people and migrants travelling irregularly\(^1\) by sea are complex and ever more urgent. Desperate people risk death by taking to the sea, often in dangerous and unseaworthy vessels, or as stowaways. Increasingly, they also face exploitation, abuse and violence during their journey.

This global phenomenon will continue as long as there are drivers of maritime flight, among them: conflict and war, protracted refugee situations, statelessness, the absence or inadequacy of protection systems, family separation, poverty and economic inequality.\(^2\) When people are found in distress at sea, the first priority is to protect life by ensuring timely rescue and safe disembarkation, regardless of immigration or refugee status.

Strengthening SAR arrangements and addressing the causes of irregular flight by sea require regional cooperation and burden-sharing by coastal as well as non-coastal States. Further, as those fleeing conflict or persecution by sea typically travel alongside people moving for other reasons, efforts to address irregular migration and limit loss of life must not jeopardize access to international protection for refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless people.

The 2014 High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection at Sea presents an opportunity to develop a broad consensus on rescue-at-sea issues, disembarkation arrangements and responsibility sharing, and the need for comprehensive approaches to protection at sea. The Dialogue and the *Global Initiative on Protection at Sea* described below build upon UNHCR’s 10-Point Plan of Action on Refugee Protection and Mixed Migration\(^3\) and a series of regional consultations on mixed migration.\(^4\)

---

\(^1\) “Irregular” movement by sea is commonly understood to refer to travel involving unauthorized departure or arrival by sea.

\(^2\) Climate change and natural disasters are also potential drivers of forced migration by sea. The *Nansen Initiative on Disaster-Induced Cross-Border Displacement* is a key intergovernmental process to address the challenges of cross-border displacement in the context of natural disasters.


\(^4\) These include, among others, the Djibouti Expert Meeting on Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Distress at Sea (see infra, note 7); the Caribbean Regional Conference on the Protection of Vulnerable Persons in Mixed Migration Flows, held in Nassau in 2013 (Summary Report available at: [http://www.refworld.org/docid/51e3c0384.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/51e3c0384.html)); and the Regional Roundtable on Irregular Movements by Sea in the Asia-Pacific Region, held in Jakarta in 2013 (Co-Chairs’ Summary available at: [http://www.refworld.org/docid/51e3bcfe4.html](http://www.refworld.org/docid/51e3bcfe4.html)).
ACHIEVING PROTECTION AT SEA

© UNHCR / A. D'Amato
REDUCING LOSS OF LIFE AT SEA REQUIRES:

- strengthening regional and national SAR capacities and coordination
- removing disincentives to rescue, including agreeing on regional mechanisms for identifying “safe places” to disembark those rescued and not penalizing those undertaking rescues
- implementing the existing international legal framework and IMO guidelines on SAR and disembarkation.

ENSURING THAT RESPONSES TO PEOPLE TRAVELLING BY SEA (INCLUDING RESCUED PEOPLE) TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION NEEDS OF SPECIFIC INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS REQUIRES:

- access to safe territory and protection from refoulement, so individuals are not disembarked or returned to a place where they may be at risk
- humane treatment and attention to immediate needs, including medical treatment, shelter, food and water, contact with family members
- early identification of those needing protection, including refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless people, as well as victims of trafficking, unaccompanied or separated children
- access to fair and efficient asylum procedures and to solutions, or to other forms of international protection, for refugees and asylum-seekers
- referral to appropriate processes and support for victims of trafficking, unaccompanied or separated children and others with specific needs
- limiting and finding alternatives to deterrent, punitive and burden-shifting responses.

Regional arrangements for cooperation and responsibility sharing following rescue operations could be based on the Djibouti Model Regional Framework, which provides a good model that can be adapted to different contexts.7

---

6 See infra, note 7.
Analysis by States, UNHCR and other stakeholders of “lessons learned” will identify best practices. One objective of the Global Initiative is to facilitate inter-agency cooperation for the creation of a global knowledge base on irregular mixed migration by sea, including information on incidents of distress, rescue, interception and stowaways, and on current practices by States and others.

UNHCR will work with its partners to develop and disseminate guidance materials for State, international and commercial actors.
UNHCR’s 10-Point Plan on Refugee Protection and Mixed Migration provides practical suggestions to assist States in forming strategies.9

The Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme (ExCom) has adopted a number of Conclusions on rescue, protection and interception measures at sea and stowaway asylum-seekers.10

The Djibouti Summary Conclusions on distress and rescue at sea propose tools for incidents involving asylum-seekers and refugees. These include mobile protection response teams and a model regional framework agreement on SAR, disembarkation and burden-sharing.11

The international normative framework for SAR, which codifies maritime custom, makes clear the obligation to assist those in distress at sea. It also regulates the global SAR system. The International Maritime Organization’s (IMO) guidelines and principles on the treatment and disembarkation of persons rescued at sea provide important directions to States.12

Recent jurisprudence has reinforced the principle of non-refoulement in the context of “pushbacks” and interdictions at sea.13

UNHCR’s Central Mediterranean Sea Initiative sets out a 12-point plan to prevent deaths in the Mediterranean.14

The Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime has endorsed a regional cooperation framework on irregular movements and refugee protection in Southeast Asia.15

The Jakarta Declaration and Sana’a Declaration lay foundations for regional mobilization on protection at sea.16

UNHCR’s guidelines on temporary protection or stay arrangements and on inter-State arrangements for the transfer of asylum-seekers are relevant to some rescue-at-sea situations.17

---


THE HIGH COMMISSIONER’S DIALOGUE

The High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges takes place annually and provides a unique forum for open exchange of views between States, non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations, the academic community and other stakeholders. The 2014 Dialogue, to be held on 10-11 December, will be on protection at sea, with the aim of reinvigorating action to address the global challenges of refugee protection at sea.

PARTNERS

The partners with whom UNHCR cooperates to advance protection at sea include States; private actors, such as shipping companies; civil society partners; and international agencies, including the International Maritime Organization, the International Organization for Migration, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Children’s Fund, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the United Nations Office of Legal Affairs.