



International Organization for Migration (IOM)  
The UN Migration Agency

TENTH SESSION OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES TO THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

**2(c): Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air**

Renate Held, IOM Regional Director,  
Regional Office for South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Asia

*check against delivery*

Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

This year we mark a special milestone with the **20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime**. Smuggling of migrants is a transnational organized crime. It is an opportunity to celebrate the achievements and successes of the international community in countering transnational organized crime. It is also a moment for reflection on lessons learned and current and future challenges.

**Many migrants still resort to using migrant smugglers as they do not have the option to travel in a regular manner.** Consequently, migrant smugglers are an integral part of the irregular migration journey resulting in significant profits for criminal networks. Smuggled migrants are left particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. All too often, migrants pay with their lives: they suffocate in containers, perish in deserts, or drown at sea. Just last week, several migrants traveling from Yemen have died at sea after being forced off a boat by smugglers at the coast of Djibouti.<sup>1</sup>

Overreliance on unilateral restrictions of migration often serves only to alter the routes used by irregular migrants, rather than effectively reducing migrant smuggling. **Countering migrant smuggling requires a holistic and whole-of-government response in countries of origin, transit and destination.** It is important to address the multiple factors which drive and enable migrant smuggling.

**IOM has a broad migration management mandate, including facilitating migration, regulating migration, and addressing forced migration.** Based on its longstanding experience and expertise, IOM has developed a Comprehensive Approach to Counter Migrant Smuggling.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> IOM Twitter 04/10/2020 <https://twitter.com/UNmigration/status/1312830959713226752>

<sup>2</sup> See [https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our\\_work/DMM/IBM/IOM-Approach-to-counter-migrant-smuggling-Brochure.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/DMM/IBM/IOM-Approach-to-counter-migrant-smuggling-Brochure.pdf)

**IOM's Comprehensive Approach to Counter Migrant Smuggling** consists of 4 pillars: first, protection and assistance of smuggled migrants; second, addressing causes of migrant smuggling; third, disrupting migrant smuggling; and fourth, promoting research and data collection on the phenomenon. Please allow me to elaborate on these four pillars.

**Pillar 1 - Protection and Assistance to Smuggled Migrants** - includes interventions such as: search and rescue operations; ensuring access to reception and assistance or referral services, based on screenings for vulnerabilities and human rights abuses; and assisted voluntary return and reintegration schemes.

**Pillar 2 - Addressing Causes of Migrant Smuggling** – includes establishment of regular travel and migration channels through well-administered visa and entry schemes; programmes for community stabilization for conflict prevention, transition and recovery; as well as resilience building activities and disaster risk reduction.

**Pillar 3 - Disrupt Activities of Smugglers** – involves development of legal frameworks, organizational structures, procedures and skills that enable law enforcement agencies and criminal justice authorities to more effectively target migrant smugglers.

**Pillar 4 focuses on Research and Data Collection** on modus operandi, routes, economic models of smuggling networks, links between trafficking in persons and other crimes, financial transfers and on the factors that shape the smuggling industry. This is important for the development of evidence-based global, regional and national policies and public awareness raising on the consequences of migrant smuggling

Guided by this Comprehensive Approach to Counter Migrant Smuggling, IOM has been supporting and building capacities of States across the globe. **The Comprehensive Approach has been tested during the so-called “migration crisis” in 2015/16** during which a record number of over 1 million irregular migrants navigated the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe<sup>3</sup> with an estimated 90% using migrant smugglers to facilitate their crossing<sup>4</sup>.

**The COVID-19 pandemic brings new challenges and changes in migrant smuggling operations.** For example, early evidence in Niger suggests smugglers are moving toward more clandestine routes, which may also be more dangerous. On the Venezuela-Colombia border, officials have expressed concerns about migrants forced into making risky mobility decisions that include hiring organized smuggling operations following Colombia's decision to close many border checkpoints.<sup>5</sup>

**It is crucial to build capacities of border guards at points of entry** to protect travelers and themselves from COVID-19 while also effectively combatting new forms and modus operandi of smuggling of migrants. IOM is supporting States in this regard with assessments, trainings, standard operating procedures, and equipment.

In these times, more than ever, close cooperation and coordination of all stakeholders involved in countering migrant smuggling is key. I would like to take this opportunity to **thank our Members States and partners and for their good work and cooperation.** Particularly, I would like to thank UNODC for their commitment to the UN Network in our joint support to Member States in implementing the GCM.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

<sup>4</sup> Europol-INTERPOL (May 2016), Migrant Smuggling Networks

<sup>5</sup> Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime Policy Brief on the impact of a pandemic on organized crime