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JOINT STATEMENT

by **CARITAS INTERNATIONALIS, COATNET, RED CLAMOR and RAEMH**
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Children on the Move: Rights Without Borders

When the Church speaks of children on the move, it starts with a concrete reality: lives that, even when marked by war, displacement, loss and violence, continue to look towards hope and rebuilding. The Church's concern for children on the move has long been present in its reflection on migration. In 2017, Pope Francis dedicated the World Day of Migrants and Refugees to the theme "Child Migrants, the Vulnerable and the Voiceless," recalling that migrant children are particularly vulnerable for three reasons: because they are minors, because they are foreigners and because they are particularly vulnerable to all sorts of abuses, away from their homeland and separated from the affection and protection of their families.

In his [Message on the 112th World Day of Migrants and Refugees](#), Pope Leo XIV brings this concern once again to the centre of the Church's attention. Under the theme "*Even Just One of These Children (cf. Mt 18:10)*" and inspired by Jesus' words "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (*Mk 9:37*), he reminds us that behind large migration flows are real faces and unique stories. Every child has dignity and rights and calls for a concrete response imbued with humanity, faith and solidarity to ensure their protection and create the conditions necessary for their full development, regardless of their nationality, migration status or place of birth.

The Church's social outreach worldwide, accompanying people on the move, witnesses how children are at the heart of many migration dynamics, even though official surveys do not always succeed in making their presence visible within human mobility flows. In many contexts, States neither produce nor make available age-disaggregated data, making it difficult to fully understand the scale of child mobility and to develop appropriate protection responses. As Pope Leo XIV warns, profound economic, political and military dynamics lie behind the conditions that force millions of children to leave their homes.

The commitment of Church organizations and the networks working on human mobility and against human trafficking to children on the move in local communities reveals journeys marked by armed conflict, widespread violence, food insecurity, persistent inequalities, the effects of climate change and protracted displacement. In many cases, children are forced to leave their homes repeatedly, cross borders, endure long periods of waiting and rebuild their lives in contexts of profound uncertainty.

According to the [World Migration Report 2026](#) (IOM) and other international sources, there were around 304 million international migrants worldwide by mid-2024, of whom an estimated 12 to 14 per cent were children. Based on the [2026 Global Report on Internal Displacement](#) (IDMC), 82.2 million people were internally displaced worldwide in 2025. About 13 million children were internally displaced due to conflict and violence in that year (estimate from the [Save the Children analysis](#)). The UN Refugee Agency estimated that 117.8

million people worldwide were living in situations of forced displacement at the end of 2025 ([UNHCR Global Trends Report 2025](#)). 41.6 million were refugees. Children accounted for 39 per cent of refugees and other people in need of international protection. These global figures demonstrate the scale of child mobility, while persistent information gaps at national and local levels reinforce the need to improve the collection and availability of disaggregated data to develop appropriate protection responses.

Particularly relevant as push factors, climate change and environmental degradation are increasingly exacerbating the conditions that drive displacement. Both sudden-onset disasters and slow-onset processes can undermine livelihoods, food security and the conditions necessary for families to remain in their territories. For children, these situations can mean repeated displacement, interruptions to their education, the loss of community ties and increased exposure to protection risks. These challenges are compounded by gaps in legal and protection frameworks.

For many children, displacement is a reality that spans much - or even all - of their childhood. Growing up for years in camps, temporary settlements or other contexts of protracted displacement means living with restrictions on access to education, healthcare, protection, freedom of movement and opportunities essential to their development. Recognizing these experiences requires responses that go beyond immediate assistance and ensure durable solutions, inclusion and opportunities to build a life project.

Likewise, deportation policies and forced repatriation processes constitute an additional factor in family separation. In many cases, parents are forced to return to different countries of origin, or some family members are deported while others remain in the host country, resulting in children being separated from their parents and siblings from one another. Such family fragmentation increases children's vulnerability, compromises their emotional and psychological well-being and constitutes a serious violation of the principle of the best interests of the child and their right to family unity.

Family separation can also occur when parents or caregivers migrate while children remain in their countries or communities of origin, often in the care of grandparents, relatives or other members of their community. Prolonged separation from parents and caregivers can have lasting consequences for children's emotional well-being and development. These situations require greater attention from protection systems, including strengthened family and community care networks and access to mental health and psychosocial support services. Unaccompanied children and adolescents face particularly serious risks during their journeys and after arrival, including trafficking, exploitation, violence and impacts on their mental health. These vulnerabilities are compounded, in some contexts, by failure to respect the presumption of minority. Family unity and reunification must be recognized as fundamental dimensions of child protection. At the same time, expanding safe and regular pathways, including family reunification, helps prevent families from being forced to resort to irregular and dangerous routes to be together again.

Among the many realities of children on the move are children born along migration routes. Many are born in shelters, temporary settlements, host communities or countries their parents never imagined. Their first language may be different from the language spoken by their family, and their birth certificate may have been issued in a country different from the one where their cultural roots lie. The irregular status of their parents might also be a reason to limit their access to birth registration and be stateless. For children born in contexts of mobility, birth registration and access to documentation are fundamental conditions for recognition of their legal identity and for preventing statelessness and invisibility.

Growing up in contexts of mobility can also mean encountering migration and border systems that do not always recognize or adequately respond to children's specific needs. Increased border control and securitization measures can expose children to violence, human rights violations and procedures that fail to adequately consider their best interests. In many contexts, this is compounded by insufficient reception facilities, services and protection mechanisms adapted to their age and needs. For these children, ensuring protection also means safeguarding the right to identity, memory and culture.

On World Day of Migrants and Refugees, we call on States, international institutions, key stakeholders, and host communities to:

1. **Guarantee the rights and best interests of every child, regardless of borders, of children's nationality, migration status or place of birth.** This includes expanding safe, regular and child-sensitive migration pathways, ensuring protection against refoulement and detention, particularly for unaccompanied children; upholding the presumption of minority in law and in practice; and ensuring the timely appointment of a legal representative for unaccompanied minors to reduce children's and adolescents' exposure to exploitation, trafficking, violence and other forms of abuse.
2. **Create the conditions necessary for the full development and psychosocial well-being of all children in situations of mobility.** This means creating spaces for listening, care and support for children, teenagers and their families in local communities, offering mental health and psychosocial support as essential components of humanitarian, pastoral and child protection responses, strengthening family and community relationships, resilience and the rebuilding of their life projects.
3. **Ensure access to legal identity, birth registration, citizenship and protection against statelessness.** States are called to ensure universal, free and timely birth registration and effective access to documentation, regardless of the nationality or migration status of the parents, and to take effective measures to prevent and reduce statelessness and multiple and intergenerational forms of exclusion and barriers to the full enjoyment of rights and essential services, such as education and healthcare, as well as to freedom of movement. Lack of documentation or irregular migration status must never become grounds for criminalization, discrimination or deprivation of rights.
4. **Preserve family unity and guarantee the right to family reunification.** States must adopt migration policies that prevent unnecessary family separation and ensure accessible, swift, flexible and safe family reunification procedures, guided by the best interests of the child, as Pope Leo XIV stated in his Message.
5. **Ensure effective and non-discriminatory access to essential services.** States are called to provide to all children on the move equal access to education, healthcare, food, housing and child protection systems, removing administrative, documentation-related, linguistic, economic and institutional barriers that hinder or prevent the effective exercise of these rights.
6. **Promote a sense of belonging, respect for cultural heritage and durable solutions for every child.** Humanitarian responses and public policies must guarantee every child's right to preserve their language, culture, spirituality and family and community ties, while also fostering their full participation in the communities in which they live. Integration creates the conditions for mutually beneficial coexistence and for learning from one another and being recognized as part of a vibrant society.
7. **Foster the effective participation of children and adolescents in decisions that affect their lives.** States, humanitarian organizations and communities must ensure that children on the move receive clear, accessible, timely and age-appropriate information about their rights, the procedures that affect them and decisions taken concerning their situation. They must establish safe and accessible mechanisms to listen to children's experiences and perspectives and ensure their active and informed participation in decision-making and policies that affect their lives.
8. **Improve the generation of data and knowledge on children on the move.** States and responsible bodies must improve the collection, availability and disaggregation of data by age, gender, disability, ethnicity and family situation. Adequate information is essential to make the diverse realities of children on the move visible, identify protection gaps and develop public policies and humanitarian responses based on their specific needs and rights.
9. **Combat their stigmatization and criminalization** by promoting narratives that recognize children and adolescents on the move as rights-holders, avoiding discourse and practices that portray them as a threat, unjustifiably question their status as minors, or fuel xenophobia, discrimination and rejection.

The measure of our humanity is found in how we welcome children who arrive at our borders, seek refuge in our communities, spend years in situations of displacement, or are forced to leave their homes and relationships behind. Our responsibility cannot be limited to ensuring their survival: we

are called to protect their present and safeguard their future. “In the life of the Church”, Pope Leo writes in his Message, we are called “to transform welcoming from an abstract concept into a stable pastoral practice”. Within the horizon of the different religions, he also reminds us that “the vulnerability of the young knows no religious boundaries and unites us in a shared humanitarian and spiritual responsibility”. Our response begins by recognizing every child — “even just one” — and making it possible for them to grow up protected, develop their full potential and look to the future with hope.