PILnet

Legal Community Dialogues on the 75th Anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention

A contribution of the Global Refugee Forum Legal Community Pledge to UNHCR's Year of Action and Dialogue on the 75th Anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees

Concept Note · PILnet Global Forum · Cape Town · November 10 to 13, 2026

I. Background

2026 marks the 75th anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 65th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. The anniversaries come at a critical moment. Some 25 million refugees, almost seven in ten worldwide, have lived in exile for five years or more, and 14.5 million rely on humanitarian aid to meet their basic needs.

For 75 years, the Refugee Convention has guaranteed the rights of those forced to flee. Through legal assistance and advocacy, the legal community, including refugee and stateless advocates, has helped it remain a living instrument, responsive to new forms of persecution and displacement. Yet for many refugees and stateless people, these rights remain unrealized in practice.

Access to asylum is being eroded through accelerated procedures, arbitrary detention and externalization measures. Legal advocates face growing political hostility, intimidation and, in some contexts, prosecution for representing displaced and stateless clients. These pressures coincide with severe reductions in resources across the humanitarian sector.

As the High Commissioner has noted, UNHCR's workforce has fallen from nearly 20,000 in 2024 to under 12,000, and its 2026 budget stands at approximately 35 percent of requirements. The number of countries in which UNHCR conducts refugee status determination has fallen from 51 to 32 in two years. Concerns have been raised that legal assistance, registration, child protection and community based protection have been significantly reduced, often without responsible transition arrangements to national or local actors. In emergencies, where needs are acute and response capacity is most stretched, legal assistance is too often treated as secondary to other forms of humanitarian aid, even though registration, documentation and protection against refoulement can themselves be life-saving.

In this context, UNHCR has launched its 50 by 35 vision, which aims to halve, by 2035, the number of refugees in protracted displacement in low- and middle-income countries who rely on humanitarian aid. UNHCR has made clear that self-reliance must reinforce, and not replace, international protection. Self-

reliance depends on legal foundations: secure legal status, documentation, the right to work, and effective access to property, services and justice, all of which call for the engagement of the legal community.

Throughout 2026, UNHCR is convening a Year of Action and Dialogue to ask how the international protection system can respond more effectively to the realities of displacement today. National, regional and global dialogues are structured around ten actions and will culminate in the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection and Solutions in Geneva on December 7 and 8, 2026. The outcomes of this process will inform UNHCR's Strategic Directions for 2027 to 2031, built around four mutually reinforcing priorities of protection, solutions, emergencies and self-reliance, as well as preparations for the 2027 Global Refugee Forum.

II. Purpose and Objectives

The Legal Community Dialogues are undertaken in the context of the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) Legal Community Pledge, coordinated by PILnet. As international resources contract, the role of the legal community in refugee protection is set to grow, and so will the importance of its partnership with displaced and stateless communities, who must be able to drive the legal advocacy and solutions that affect their lives. The Dialogues will therefore provide a structured legal community contribution to UNHCR's anniversary process, while also informing the priorities and partnerships of the Pledge in the lead up to GRF 2027.

The Dialogues will consider the question at the center of UNHCR's Year of Action and Dialogue, from the perspective of the legal community:

> ***How can the legal community, in partnership with refugees and stateless communities, respond more effectively to the realities of displacement today, and how can UNHCR, States and other partners ensure that they are enabled to do so?***

The Dialogues have the following objectives:

1. To provide UNHCR with action-oriented recommendations from the legal community on strengthening protection and solutions, for consideration at the High Commissioner's Dialogue and in setting UNHCR's priorities in the years ahead.
2. To identify key gaps between international and national protection and nationality commitments and their implementation, and the legal and institutional barriers that prevent displaced and stateless people from accessing their rights.
3. To identify where the legal community has advanced protection and solutions, and where further progress is possible, so that effective approaches can be strengthened and replicated.
4. To identify how the legal community can work more effectively, including with and alongside displaced and stateless people, and to agree the priorities and ways of working that will guide the GRF Legal Community Pledge, including toward the 2027 Global Refugee Forum.
5. To ensure that the expertise and leadership of forcibly displaced and stateless people shape the recommendations of the Dialogues and the design, implementation and monitoring of legal advocacy and programming.

III. Framework

The Dialogues are structured around UNHCR's ten actions for the 75th anniversary dialogues, grouped into three clusters. For each cluster, participants will consider where legal expertise can contribute, what needs to change for the legal community to respond more effectively, including in its own ways of working, and what support, partnerships and changes to national asylum and protection systems are required.

Cluster	UNHCR actions	Contribution of the legal community	Related sessions
Access to protection and the rule of law, including in emergencies	Actions 1 to 4: adherence to the international protection framework; fair, efficient and credible asylum systems; mixed and onward movements; security challenges	Support for fair, efficient and credible asylum systems, including representation and quality legal advice in asylum procedures; legal assistance in humanitarian and emergency settings, including registration, documentation and protection against refoulement; strategic litigation; engagement with international and regional human rights mechanisms; scrutiny of safe third country and transfer arrangements; protection of legal advocates	Opening panel; human rights mechanisms; strategic litigation; the right to seek asylum; Pledge Workshop
Inclusion and solutions	Actions 6 to 9: complementary pathways and resettlement; inclusive national systems and self-reliance; voluntary repatriation; local integration	The legal foundations of self-reliance and the 50 by 35 vision: secure legal status and documentation, the right to work, housing, land and property rights, family reunification, and access to naturalization and citizenship	Citizenship and statelessness session; Pledge Workshop
Partnerships and participation	Actions 5 and 10: partnerships for protection; meaningful participation of displaced and stateless people	Pro bono ecosystems and collective models; equitable partnerships with refugee-led and stateless-led organizations; tools to measure meaningful participation	Pledge Workshop; November Monthly Exchange

The prevention and reduction of statelessness, and the protection of stateless people, will be addressed across all three clusters, notably through the session “From Clinic to Court to Community: Building Pro Bono Ecosystems to Advance Citizenship and End Statelessness.”

IV. Structure of the Dialogues

The Dialogues comprise an opening panel, a series of thematic sessions during the PILnet Global Forum, a workshop of Pledge members in Cape Town, and an online exchange so that Pledge members around the world can contribute.

Opening Panel: From Paper to Practice: The Legal Community and the Refugee Convention at 75 | *November 11, 2026*

Bringing together experts from the judiciary, UNHCR, academia, a law firm and refugee-led organizations, the opening panel will introduce UNHCR's Year of Action and Dialogue and frame the dialogues. Reflecting

on current protection and solutions challenges, the panel will examine the importance of the Convention in guaranteeing refugee rights and the role of the legal community in ensuring those rights are experienced in practice. It will highlight where progress has been made and remains possible, including through strategic litigation, UN human rights mechanisms, paralegal work on statelessness and narrative change, and the need to partner with people with lived experience in the design, implementation and monitoring of legal advocacy and programming. The panel will explore the role of the legal community in strengthening national asylum systems and identify key inputs to be shared with UNHCR ahead of the High Commissioner's Dialogue in December 2026.

Thematic Forum Sessions | *November 10 to 12, 2026*

Session	Focus
Leveraging Pro Bono for Refugee Rights: International and Regional Human Rights Mechanisms	Use of UN and regional human rights mechanisms to secure refugee rights, and the role of pro bono counsel
Refugee Rights Strategic Litigation	Litigation and advocacy strategies to uphold protection standards in a shrinking protection space
The Right to Seek Asylum and Safe Third Country and Other Transfer Agreements	Externalization, transfer arrangements and safeguards for access to asylum
From Clinic to Court to Community: Building Pro Bono Ecosystems to Advance Citizenship and End Statelessness	Legal assistance, paralegal networks and law reform to secure nationality

GRF Legal Community Pledge Workshop | *November 13, 2026, hosted by Deneys with the support of UNHCR*

The in-person Dialogues will conclude with a closed-door workshop consisting of two sessions convened by the Pledge Core Group. Session one will draw together the discussions of the Forum and identify priorities, recommendations and opportunities for collective action, including on legal assistance in humanitarian settings and other areas where this year's PILnet Forum program offers less coverage. Session two, co-led by the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR), the South African Refugee-Led Network (SARLN) and PILnet, will unpack how to measure and advance meaningful refugee participation within legal advocacy and programming, including introducing APNOR's Meaningful Refugee Participation Index.

GRF Legal Community Pledge November Monthly Exchange | *November 19, 2026, online*

To ensure that Pledge members who are unable to attend in Cape Town can take part, the Dialogues will continue at the Pledge's November Monthly Exchange. Draft recommendations emerging from the Forum will be presented for discussion, and all Pledge members will then be invited to provide written feedback on the draft before the outcome report is finalized.

V. Guiding Questions

Discussions will center on four groups of actors, to whom recommendations will be directed:

THE LEGAL COMMUNITY

- As the operational presence of UNHCR and its partners contracts, where can legal assistance and advocacy make the greatest difference for refugees and stateless people?
- How can the legal community support UNHCR and States to strengthen asylum systems that are fair, efficient and credible, including through quality legal advice and representation, training and monitoring?
- How can the legal community help establish legal assistance as a predictable part of emergency preparedness and response in humanitarian settings, including through rapid mobilization, technological tools and partnerships with local legal actors?
- How can the legal community support self-reliance and the 50 by 35 vision, including by addressing legal barriers to documentation, work, property and services?
- Beyond legal work, how can law firms, bar associations and other legal actors use their influence, networks and public voice to counter negative sentiment toward refugees and migrants, and keep public discourse grounded in rights, legality and human dignity?
- How can the legal community work more effectively and collaboratively, including in partnership with refugees and stateless people, and what ways of working would ensure their meaningful inclusion and leadership in legal responses?

UNHCR

- How can legal assistance, access to justice and the rule of law be prioritized during the High Commissioner's term, including within the 50 by 35 vision and Strategic Directions?
- How can legal assistance be recognized and resourced as a core component of protection in emergencies, including within humanitarian coordination and funding mechanisms?
- Where UNHCR is reducing its role in refugee status determination, registration or legal assistance, how can responsible transition to national and local legal actors be ensured?
- How can UNHCR, through its engagement with States and donors, encourage investment in legal identity, legal assistance and the rule of law?

STATES

- What changes to law, procedure and public investment are required to ensure fair asylum systems, access to legal identity and legal assistance, and effective remedies?
- What measures are needed to prevent and reduce statelessness, including the reform of discriminatory nationality laws and practices?
- How can States safeguard independent legal advocacy and ensure the meaningful participation of refugees and stateless people in decisions affecting them?

DONORS AND PARTNERS

- How can funding and institutional support sustain legal aid and strengthen local capacity, particularly where civic space is restricted?
- What support do refugee-led and stateless-led organizations require to shape and deliver legal responses?

We note these groups are not homogeneous. Where relevant, recommendations can also be directed towards specific members of these groups, such as the judiciary, NGOs and pro bono providers.

VI. Expected Outcomes and Follow-up

The Dialogues are expected to produce the following outcomes:

Outcome	Description	Intended for	Timing
Submission to UNHCR	Priority recommendations, organized by actor and linked to UNHCR's ten actions, prepared in line with UNHCR's guidance on dialogue inputs	High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection and Solutions	20 November 2026
Outcome report	Consolidated findings, protection gaps, promising practice, and recommended actions with responsible actors, including common messages for national and regional engagement with States	Legal community, UNHCR, States, donors and partners	1 December 2026
Pledge priorities	Collective priorities and recommendations to guide the GRF Legal Community Pledge	Pledge Core Group and members	Discussed at Pledge Workshop; finalized early 2027

The outcomes will be taken forward through the governance structures of the Pledge. They will inform its strategy and pledge development ahead of the 2027 Global Refugee Forum, as well as the legal community's continued engagement with UNHCR as it develops its Strategic Directions for 2027 to 2031.

VII. Participation and Partnerships

The meaningful participation of forcibly displaced and stateless people is a guiding principle of the Dialogues as a whole. Recognized as an emerging norm within the global refugee regime, it is also an important form of accountability, which the Pledge seeks to reflect at all levels of its coordination and implementation. Refugees and stateless people are not only rights-holders, but also advocates, paralegals, community navigators and lawyers in their own right. Refugees and stateless people are often first to identify where systems fail and must be involved in designing, implementing and monitoring legal programming and policy development.

This principle has shaped the Dialogues from the outset. The themes and sessions of the 2026 PILnet Global Forum were directly informed by APNOR and SARLN, together with local legal actors from South Africa and other core partners. Refugee-led and stateless-led organizations and individual refugee experts will contribute as co-leads, speakers and participants, including in a dedicated session on measuring and advancing refugee participation within the law at the Pledge Workshop.

While the PILnet Global Forum is the anchor for the Dialogues, participation is not limited to those attending in person. Pledge members unable to travel to Cape Town have been invited to provide written input on the guiding questions, and all members can provide input to the draft recommendations at the Monthly Exchange on November 19, 2026, or in writing before they are finalized.

UNHCR is a key partner in the Dialogues. While the Dialogues are convened independently by PILnet and the GRF Legal Community Pledge, they have been developed in close collaboration with UNHCR. UNHCR colleagues will speak at several sessions, including the opening panel and the Pledge Workshop. This partnership connects the legal community’s independent contribution directly to UNHCR’s Year of Action and Dialogue, and helps ensure that the outcomes of the Dialogues can inform the High Commissioner’s Dialogue and UNHCR’s Strategic Directions for 2027 to 2031.