

23 March 2020



**Dear Mr. Filippo Grandi**

UNHCR, The High Commissioner  
Case Postale 2500  
CH-1211 Genève, 2 Dépôt  
Switzerland

Your excellency,

We write to understand your policies regarding internet access, and to impress the need for universal, resilient, open, secure, and affordable access to information and communications technologies for all those you serve.

In the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic, we have witnessed, at the local and global level, the fundamental importance of access to information.<sup>1</sup> Access to timely and reliable information is essential for the public to receive health alerts and understand state and humanitarian responses to the crisis, and to make informed decisions and take precautions to protect themselves, their families and their communities. Overall, access to information and communications is of paramount importance to stop the spread of the virus and allow people to remain in touch during these challenging times.

Internet access ranks alongside food and shelter atop the priorities of destitute populations, and for good reason. The internet remains an essential enabler of a range of human rights. Locating and accessing relief services, corresponding with displaced loved ones, and organizing to document and advocate for individual and communal rights count among the urgent needs that people fill through internet-enabled devices and services. UNHCR recognizes this utility, and posits another benefit: a connected population “can play a critical role in enabling organizations such as UNHCR to innovate effectively and to improve the quality of services that we provide.”<sup>2</sup>

You consider access to the internet and ICTs a priority for those you serve, and to achieve your organization’s mission. UNHCR has identified “availability, affordability and usability” as its strategic priorities.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as you also note, “the digital revolution transforming the world is leaving refugees behind.”<sup>4</sup>

As we become more dependent on information and communications technologies, the deprivation of access constitutes a deep and growing barrier to the meaningful exercise of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, and even our ability to meet basic daily needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Access Now, [#KeptOn: internet shutdowns during COVID-19 will help spread the virus!](#) (17 March 2020).

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, Innovation Service, [Connectivity for Refugees](#) (2020); See also [Mobile connectivity a lifeline for refugees, report finds](#) (15 September 2016), Kristy Siegfried, [The Refugee Brief - 19 February 2020](#) UNHCR (19 February 2020) and Kristy Siegfried, [The Refugee Brief - 11 March 2020](#), UNHCR (11 March 2020).

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, Innovation Service, [Connectivity for Refugees](#), (2020).

<sup>4</sup> Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, [Internet and Mobile Connectivity for Refugees - Leaving No One Behind](#) UNHCR, Innovation Service.

The #KeepItOn Coalition, more than 200 civil society groups fighting internet shutdowns globally, has noted with alarm the rise in legal and technical barriers, including the intentional disruptions of internet access, often targeting those most vulnerable like refugees and displaced communities.

According to data from our #KeepItOn Coalition and the [Shutdown Tracker Optimization Project](#), between 2016 and 2019 the world witnessed 590 documented internet shutdowns. Internet shutdowns significantly increased within this time period. In 2016, there were a total of 75 documented internet shutdowns. In a mere three years later, there were a total of 213 internet shutdowns.<sup>5</sup> We largely depend on circumstantial evidence to understand the reason behind intentional disruptions, their scope and scale, their duration, and their broad impacts. Yet evidence is clear that the economic, social, and political costs of these shutdowns extend far beyond what most observers expect.

Far from random, these disruptions often target minority groups and communities at risk of marginalization, including displaced populations and those living in humanitarian relief camps. In Bangladesh, for example, the Rohingyas who fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar to avoid persecution have suffered under restrictions on mobile phone internet access, including a ban on SIM card sales. Bangladesh's telecom regulator instructed phone operators to restrict 3G and 4G services in refugee camps and surrounding areas. Restricting mobile communication in refugee camps has caused panic in the area while negatively affecting humanitarian efforts.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in the 2017 Cameroon shutdown, “flows of Internet refugees from the disconnected Anglophone regions in the country poured into neighboring Francophone regions, Nigeria, and broader areas in an effort to obtain internet access.”<sup>7</sup> As a result, “residents, migrant workers (mainly from Nigeria), NGO affiliates and individuals working in the tech sector regularly undertook perilous journeys through highly militarized areas and set up makeshift camps where at least intermittent access was possible.”<sup>8</sup> According to Jan Ryzdak, for the Global Network Initiative, “these new spontaneous population flows, whose full scale is yet to be determined, create additional risk and windows for abuse.”<sup>9</sup>

On the ground, a charity worker working in a refugee camp captures her experience trying to look after 5,000 children during a total network blackout. She calls on us all to “imagine being in that position when you have to take care of all those people, but you cannot connect with anyone else and you don’t know where’s a safe area to take them.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Access Now, [#KeepItOn](#), (2020).

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Faheem Hussain, [Network shutdowns in Rohingya camps: how they're damaging the fragile information ecosystem of refugees from Myanmar](#), Access Now, (2 October 2019) See also Human Rights Watch, [Bangladesh: Internet Blackout on Rohingya Refugees](#), (13 September 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Jan Ryzdak, [Disconnected: A Human Rights-Based Approach to Network Disruptions](#), Global Network Initiative, at page 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> Access Now, [If an internet shutdown changed your life, you may be able to help stop them](#), (11 September 2017); See also Katie Dancey, [What happens when there's no connection?](#), Lush.

This, and other stories, are closer to the norm than the exception. In fact, Ryzdak has described the emergence of “internet refugees” or “digital refugees” in affected areas.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, the “proliferation of prolonged, large-scale shutdowns” has given rise to this new phenomena. In 2019 alone we documented 213 internet shutdowns, with a trend toward longer disruptions.<sup>12</sup>

Seeking accountability for the provision of internet access, as well as remedy for its deprivation, proves challenging in many cases. Despite unanimous Human Rights Council resolutions declaring that human rights apply online as offline, and SDG 9(c) demanding universal access by 2020, around half the world remains offline.<sup>13</sup> To get online, people must overcome increasingly strict identification requirements, as telecommunications authorities seem to act more on security concerns than enthusiasm to extend the free flow of information. Once online, people labor to afford expensive and restrictive plans, overcome electricity outages, avoid surveillance, and – as noted – navigate intentional disruptions.

For the above reasons, we turn to you and your organization for support in extending more universal, resilient, open, secure, and affordable access to the internet, especially to those vulnerable and marginalized communities you serve, and in light of the severity of the global pandemic.

**We ask:**

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- 1. Which authorities at your organization ensure implementation of this priority, and under what policies and initiatives?**

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  - 2. As you recognize partnerships to be key, how do you approach and negotiate with third parties, whether host governments or otherwise, to ensure access to ICTs, and prevent and mitigate obstacles and disruptions, particularly now, where access to information is paramount in light of COVID-19? Whose remit is this mandate?**

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  - 3. With respect to the situation in Bangladesh, what measures have you taken to increase access to the internet and ICTs among the Rohingya?**
    - a. For example, have you worked with the host government, peer agencies, telecommunications companies, and other relevant public or private sector actors to reduce legal, technical, and other barriers to access?**
    - b. What obstacles do you see and have you faced?**

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  - 4. How might civil society best engage with your agency on the topic of internet access and preventing shutdowns of communications channels?**
    - a. What points of contact and channels of communication, resources and evidence, and other people and inputs might be most useful, both during times of crisis and beyond?**

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<sup>11</sup> Jan Ryzdak, [Disconnected: A Human Rights-Based Approach to Network Disruptions](#), Global Network Initiative, at page 14.

<sup>12</sup> Access Now, [#KeepItOn](#), (2020).

<sup>13</sup> See for e.g. UN Human Rights Council, [The promotion, protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of association](#), UN Doc. A/RES/73/173.

We recognize that this difficult time poses many unique challenges for your agency. To mitigate the impacts of this crisis in a manner that respects human rights, we would welcome the opportunity to engage in a dialogue to encourage your support in extending more universal, resilient, open, secure, and affordable access to the internet, especially to those vulnerable and marginalized communities you serve.

Sincerely,



**Brett Solomon** | Executive Director

cc

High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres

Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide Mr. Adama Dieng

Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on the Responsibility to Protect Ms. Karen Smith

ICRC President Peter Maurer

United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression Mr. David Kaye

United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons Ms. Cecilia Jimenez-Damary

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**Access Now (<https://www.accessnow.org>)** defends and extends the digital rights of users at risk around the world. By combining direct technical support, comprehensive policy engagement, global advocacy, grassroots grantmaking, and convenings such as RightsCon, we fight for human rights in the digital age.

*For more information, please contact:*

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