Dear High Commissioner Guterres,

Inclusion International (II) is contacting you today to urgently highlight the plight of refugees with intellectual disabilities and their families. There is growing concern about the current refugee and humanitarian crisis in the Middle East and the impact and implications for persons with intellectual disabilities and their families. II’s members in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and Europe are confronting this crisis on a daily basis.

UNCHR is well aware that persons with disabilities are disproportionately vulnerable in situations of humanitarian crisis. While comprehensive research in this area remains limited, anecdotal evidence would suggest that persons with intellectual disabilities and their families are among the most vulnerable in these situations.

Families and persons with intellectual disabilities tell us that public responses in times of crisis are at best inadequate and often ignore persons with intellectual disabilities and their families entirely. We are working closely with our member in Lebanon, the Lebanese Association for Self-Advocacy (LASA), on this issue. LASA is working directly with refugee families and persons with intellectual disabilities in Lebanon. They have conveyed to us the difficult conditions families are experiencing and the urgency for action.

We are writing to urge you to take action on behalf of persons with intellectual disabilities and their families. UNHCR must go beyond typical access measures to ensure they are reaching persons with intellectual disabilities and their families. Access for persons with intellectual disabilities is more than about physical access.

II is working with its members to collect and share resources for families and persons with intellectual disabilities and to develop more resources for support agencies. Initial discussions indicate that accessibility efforts should include:

- Accessible Information. Information must be provided in plain language and individuals and families may need support to understand the information.
- Partnership Building. The best source for information on how to support persons with intellectual disabilities and their families is through their representative organizations. UNHCR should be making every effort to ensure its partnering with DPOs – in particular family-based organizations that may not be represented in cross-disability efforts.
- Inclusive Outreach and Programming.
  - Persons with intellectual disabilities and their families experience high levels of marginalization and isolation. They would be easily missed in typical outreach efforts. Staff should be made aware of this isolation and ensure that persons with
intellectual disabilities and their families are explicitly identified in outreach efforts.

- Similarly, in programming efforts in camps and centres, a particular focus on intellectual disabilities and families should be required. In many cases, persons with intellectual disabilities may have been excluding from services in their country-of-origin (ie health, education). Programming efforts in camps and centres should be consistent with the UNCRPD and inclusive of persons with intellectual disabilities.

- Non-Discrimination measures. As a result of their marginalization and assumptions about disability, persons with intellectual disabilities and their families experience high levels of discrimination. UNHCR and partners should be promoting inclusive practices and approaches. Staff should be made aware of the particular vulnerabilities of persons with intellectual disabilities and their families and supported to take steps to remedy these vulnerabilities.

- Interventions focused on the family. For most refugees with intellectual disabilities, the unit of intervention must include the family. Families provide the vast majority of support for persons with intellectual disabilities and act as a bridge to community. If the needs of families aren’t being taken into consideration UNHCR efforts risk missing persons with intellectual disabilities.

- Appropriate documentation. A common challenge for persons with intellectual disabilities is that they are not registered at birth or are not provided with national identification cards as they are not seen as full citizens. The lack of these documents can have critical impact on many issues – including family reunification efforts.

II implores you to make a statement about refugees with disabilities on 3 December, International Day of Persons with Disabilities, which includes specific references to persons with intellectual disabilities and their families.

Additionally, II requests that UNHCR raise the issue of those too vulnerable to flee and who are left behind with no one and nothing to protect them. We have heard heartbreaking stories of families being forced to leave their loved ones with intellectual disabilities behind as the journey is too perilous and physical to manage. For those living in poverty, escape is not an option. Ongoing efforts to reach vulnerable people in their country-of-origin are essential.

We thank you for your consideration of these requests. If there is anything we can do to support you, please contact us. We look forward to action by UNHCR to support persons with intellectual disabilities and their families.

Sincerely,

Klaus Lachwitz
President, Inclusion International