

High-level meeting on global responsibility sharing through pathway for admission of Syrian refugees

Remarks of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
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Panel discussion on the high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly on addressing large movements of refugees and migrants (19 September 2016)

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My first and most fundamental point is that regardless of the motives people have for crossing international borders, every person is entitled to individual consideration of her or his circumstances. Simply put, all human beings have all human rights.

Whether or not they fit the 1951 definition of refugee status, I don't think we can describe many of the people caught up in today's large-scale movements of people as "voluntary". When hundreds of thousands of people are making long journeys across deserts and on the high seas - knowing that they are putting their lives, and the lives of their children, at risk - I think it's safe to assume that they feel they have no other choice. They are fleeing conditions that are not fit for human life – whether they involve conflict, persecution or what the Secretary-General has called the "silent human rights crises" of biting poverty, discrimination and deprivation.

These are people with death at their back and a wall in their face. They are poor, powerless and extremely vulnerable. Virtually all of them are at risk of serious human rights violations, and I think all of us can agree that a very sizeable number of them are in need of protection. I want to emphasize this point: 'non-refugee migrants' are also entitled to protection of their rights, and States are obliged to protect them.

My Office has built up a framework of guidance regarding protection in large-scale migratory movements, with a particular emphasis on the rights of migrants who are not refugees under the terms of the 1951 Convention. This guidance is derived from international human rights law, international labour law, refugee law, criminal law, humanitarian law, and law of the sea, and I'll be happy to discuss it further and at length.

But I also want to touch on the broader subject of integration and hostility. Demagogues are exploiting the current migrant crises to foster bigotry for their personal and political benefit - and even centrist political parties are hardening their positions. In this context of escalating divisiveness and xenophobia, it is absolutely vital that we voice a much more positive narrative about the benefits of migration.

Well-managed migration movements contribute enormously to all societies. They strengthen economies and tax systems, bring in labour resources that may be acutely needed within ageing or shrinking societies, and they also provide fresh inputs of diversity, energy and

hope. Without migrants, the population of Europe would have actually decreased in the past 15 years, and European economies would be weaker. I am greatly inspired by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's statement that Canada will "embrace diversity and the new ideas that spring from it - while simultaneously fostering a shared identity, and shared values, in safe, stable communities that work."

Finally, a word about compassion and realism. Today, in makeshift campsites across Europe and the doors to Europe, we're seeing families suffering in shocking circumstances – people who for no fault of their own, have lost their homes and everything they ever had, and who are being met with a cold and inhuman rejection. This violates every principle of our shared humanity. It corrodes belief in our societies and decision-makers as benevolent, honourable, and lucid. The only effective way to manage migration crises is to deploy the proven principles of human rights, and to maintain societies that are grounded in inclusiveness and respect for dignity.