

The 2nd Special Meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean

**Bangkok, Thailand
3-4 December 2015**

Statement by Volker Türk Assistant High Commissioner for Protection

Thank you for convening this important discussion in follow-up to the 29 May Special Meeting on Irregular Migration in the Indian Ocean. UNHCR welcomes the opportunity to participate.

With an unprecedented 60 million persons displaced today, it has become clear that displacement issues are a global phenomenon that no country can address or resolve on its own. We are at a point in history where refugee and displacement issues are high on the international agenda, demanding the attention of Heads of Government, the top levels of the UN and regional organisations, and civil society leaders. This will culminate next year in a number of high-level events dedicated to addressing the growing numbers of refugees and migrants on the move. These meetings will focus for example on expanding legal pathways for the admission of Syrian refugees, as well as migration more globally. Importantly, the outcome our discussion today will feed into this global debate over the coming year.

Compared to other parts of the world, it is important to keep things in perspective. By way of example, the total number of migrants and refugees in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea in May and June 2015 is matched or even doubled in many parts of the Middle East and Europe every day. This suggests that the numbers we are seeing in this region can be managed. Only about 1,000 people have made the sea journey in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea since September 2015. The absence of an acute crisis gives us a chance to take stock of the progress on the recommendations of the 29 May Special Meeting and to prepare for whatever may come in the event that the numbers rise.

There have been important developments in the region since May 2015, not least the creation of the ASEAN Economic Community and an ASEAN Trust Fund, the adoption of a regional anti-trafficking Convention, and various regional meetings advancing the discussion. Bangladesh's agreement of a Government-to-Government Plus labour migration agreement holds out the possibility of safe, lawful movement for as many as 500,000 Bangladeshis annually for three years. Similarly, Bangladesh has taken significant action to take back its nationals.

In Myanmar, which I had the honour to visit in July, some progress has been made in finding solutions to the internally displaced in Rakhine State. Yet, the underlying reasons for legitimate grievances that many people have shared with us remain to be

addressed in a meaningful manner. The heart of the matter lies in ensuring a legal identity for all people on its territory and the ensuing fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of movement, non-discrimination, and access to services. We hope very much that the new Government will give this particular issue the attention it deserves, not least in light of the fact that the situation triggers displacement and has, as a result, international repercussions.

The forthcoming High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges in Geneva on 16 and 17 December will focus on root causes of displacement. In a promising development last week, there was recognition at the Jakarta Roundtable on Addressing Root Causes that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are important references and guidelines for these efforts. In the current context, it seems to me that the goals relating to ensuring healthy lives for all, inclusive and equitable education for all, decent work for all, reduced inequality within and between countries, legal identity, as well as peaceful, inclusive societies, are particularly relevant. No one should be left behind.

The Draft Regional Plan of Action put forward today recognises the importance of respect for human rights, access to livelihoods opportunities and services such as health and education, and a sense of security and belonging. It urges the creation of labour migration schemes with transparent and efficient recruiting procedures. It characterises these matters as "prevention" measures, and so they are, but they are also more. They go to the fundamental dignity and rights of all human beings. They are accordingly not confined to the source countries of the mixed migratory movements.

Transit and destination countries also have a role to play. As the 29 May Special Meeting summary outcome recommended, there is a need to prepare for coordinated and enhanced search and rescue efforts. A framework is needed for predictable disembarkation and harmonised reception and stay. UNHCR and IOM need access to people seeking international protection and migrants. Effective screening procedures are critical, paying particular attention to vulnerable groups and individuals, notably women, children, people seeking international refugee protection, and victims of trafficking.

The aforementioned elements of the "immediate response" to mixed movements need to find their proper place. To this end, UNHCR, along with IOM and UNODC, is pleased to offer a more detailed nuts-and-bolts paper setting out the various aspects of such a response, as we see them from our vantage point.

Allow me to take our deliberations a step further. Pending the possibility of safe, dignified, and voluntary return home, the best way to stabilise a large-scale movement is to offer those found to be in need of international protection a creative form of temporary refuge or alternative humanitarian stay arrangement, ensuring access to health, education, and work. Allowing asylum-seekers to work and contribute to the economy of their host countries not only preserves their dignity, but also requires fewer resources from the States to support them. At a time when we are confronted with

labour shortages in a number of countries in the region, a win-win situation would integrate humanitarian, labour, human rights, and security interests.

When asylum-seekers and refugees are promptly registered and have their statuses determined in a fair and efficient manner, States, in cooperation with UNHCR, can be more confident of who is on their territory. As a part of this system, States are also encouraged to embrace the principle of non-detention of asylum-seekers except under exceptional circumstances, and to explore actively alternatives to detention.

In conclusion, let me reiterate the importance of this ongoing regional dialogue, as it is both solutions- and results-oriented, recognising that this is a problem that we all share, and that together we can all solve. Please rest assured of our continued active support and partnership in these testing times.

Thank you.