Do not conflate refugees with terrorists

Joint statement of UNHCR Representative in Cyprus, Mr. Damtew Dessalegne, and the Commissioner for Administration and Human Rights, Ms. Eliza Savvidou

Since news came out that at least one of the Paris terrorist attackers travelled to Europe embedded in a group of Syrian and Iraqi refugees trekking from Turkey through Greece, the Western Balkans and further northwards, there has been a steady drumbeat by many right-wing political parties across Europe that the overcrowded, unseaworthy refugee boats sailing across the Mediterranean are filled with terrorists and jihadists. The fear is probably understandable. But is the risk of refugees from Syria or Iraq carrying out acts of terrorism in Europe high enough to justify closing the borders to the people who are actually escaping the same sort of violence Europeans fear most? *Our view is that to deny refugees a safe haven would undermine universal values without making Europeans any safer*.

Well before the horrors of Paris, the politics of fear have replaced reason. Anti-refugee backlash has turned ugly in a number of places.   Country after country has embarked on wall-building projects to stem the flow of refugees fleeing for their life and migrants.

We would like to underscore that the overwhelming majority of people coming to Europe, including Cyprus, are refugees fleeing civil wars, persecution, and human rights abuses.   Many are escaping from extremism and terrorism.   Loss of hope that the war in their home countries will end, combined with their precarious situation in the first asylum countries and the lack of alternative legal avenues to reach safety in Europe, is forcing many refugees to risk their lives by resorting to the dangerous Mediterranean and Aegean crossing. Conflating refugees with terrorists is irrational. It is not logical. Worse still, it is dangerous.

So far no refugee has been held responsible for any terrorist attack in Europe. This is not to deny that there are security challenges for host societies when faced with such large-scale arrivals of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. There is a need to always be alert. However, treating refugees as a potential terrorist threat rather than people in need of protection from violence and persecution is inhumane, ineffective and counterproductive. We must therefore unravel the myths, and separate facts from fiction. We must combat polarization and stereotypes.

We strongly believe in the importance of preserving the integrity of the asylum system. Refugees have, as a matter of international law, the right to seek asylum and not to be forced to return to a country or territory where their lives are in danger. They need our understanding and support to rebuild their lives in peace and safety, and to effectively integrate into the social, economic, cultural and political fabric of the host society.

It should also be stressed that asylum and terrorism are not compatible with each other. In fact, the 1951 Refugee Convention excludes from its scope people who have committed serious crimes such as terrorist attacks. By putting in place adequate reception and screening procedures, it is possible for States both to protect refugees and to address security concerns in line with legal principles and standards.

Clearly, States have legitimate interests to ensure the safety and security of their citizens. Yet at the same time protection of those in need, not only as a value intrinsic to democratic societies but also as a principle rooted in international law, must be upheld.

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