

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

Remarks of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General
for International Migration and Development
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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)*

30 March 2016

Thank you very much, indeed, and thank you for the opportunity of addressing this gathering.

Let me start by making one observation, which has already been made in different ways. In a sense, it is easy for international civil servants to hold forth on the moral responsibilities of political leaders, but that is exactly what international, multilateral organizations should do, and it is exactly the challenge which we now face.

We face a rising tide of nationalism, which is based on false concepts of identity, which has no moral core, and which rejects multiculturalism as an essential part of modern society that is globalizing. It is essentially a moral issue, and there is not enough moral leadership, politically, to deal with the crisis which we now face.

It is all very well for us here to talk of what should be done. I have been listening to it for 10 years. As I have watched, what seems to me, to be a steady deterioration in what actually is happening on the ground. Obviously, this has been exacerbated by the appalling consequences of a dreadful war in Syria. Obviously too, there have been major exceptions.

Just to pluck one out of the rich debate which we heard earlier today, Sweden made the point that it took in last year 1.6 per cent of its total population of asylum-seekers, and that is not its record, I should tell you, in terms of percentages over the last 10 years. But how many countries could put up their hands to say that they have done anything similar? How many political leaders can answer the question, with regard to Syrian refugees: Well, what do you suggest should be done?

If you give the alternatives, send the Syrian refugees back. Clearly inconceivable. Maintain the Syrian refugees in ever enlarging camps, in the front line States in deteriorating conditions, with lesser sums of money each year to support them, where global UN funds have not got the resources, in some instances, to provide the necessities of life to them.

Is that the alternative? Is the alternative to point the finger up to the Balkans to walk and try to cross razor wire fences, to freeze in rivers, to be blocked at every frontier, to arrive in a Europe whose proudest boast was the destruction of its borders and the collapse of the iron curtain, to find those borders have been put up again, at a cost, an economic cost, which some foundations have argued, and the European Commission has confirmed, will be more than 18 billion dollars, or Euros I should say, on an annual basis for the first period of years?

This is a political response, which is utterly inadequate. There is only one answer to the question that I pose, and that is to welcome them. It is the only moral answer, and it can be done. With the Vietnamese refugees, 2 million – 2 million – were harboured and provided sanctuary. Now we mutter about increasing an extra 5 thousand to a country or 10 thousand. Now we have a situation where, as we have heard, the vast bulk of refugees are in fact in developing countries, who are not in the headlines, but those who watch their televisions each evening – and watch dead children on beaches, watch cities being destroyed, who understand the desperation of those who are leaving from Syria – still do not provide the answers that we need.

So this year, under the United Nations, [we] set up a series of conferences with a view to delivering the goods, not the words, which are cheap: the first of those in London; the second here; we could say the Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul is part of the mix; and the 19th of September. Now I know that I should be talking about the 19th of September, but the 19th of September is informed by the past, and the past is something which, collectively, we should be ashamed of.

We have divided ourselves, within the European Union, one of the proudest political movements in history. We have divided, with some refusing to take any refugees and particularly saying that they won't accept any Muslim refugees, as if we were living in the times of the Crusades.

This is unacceptable. At this conference, many of the attendees representing Governments but not being in the Governments have an obligation to pass the message to Government that their responsibility is real delivery, and that means real delivery in financial terms but also in resettlement terms. And resettlement has not been taking place; relocation, as they call it in the European Union, equally.

Proximity apparently defines responsibility. If you are unlucky enough to have a county which is on the Mediterranean, be it Italy or Greece, and the refugees arrive on your shores, you keep them. In fact, if you send a navy vessel down to save lives, they save the lives, and then they dump the refugees in the frontline States. They do not take them home. That is why moral and political leadership is necessary.

I should be talking, as I now know that I may trespass on the limits of my time, so I better get to where we are at within the multilateral system. If this is the year to demonstrate multilateral response, then the 19th of September is a crucial component in it, because it is to look to the future, and to look to a future with specific – and the word has been used earlier – deliverables.

If we don't get specific deliverables, and we get another series of well-meaning speeches, without being able to concretely point, the following year, to what has happened, we will have failed. And that 19th of September meeting, contrived now in a way which I think is useful and helpful as it transpires with the conference called by the United States, which also demands specific response, has to set out a future governance system, which is based on principle and morality.

What do I mean by that? I mean that we have to have, into the future, agreements in terms of support mechanisms, which are not simply ad hoc responses year by year to developing crises. We have to recognize that there are those who are not refugees who also deserve support: those who are escaping from natural disaster, their lives may be threatened equally, with the appalling faith of those who are escaping from dreadful wars.

We have to accept collectively, as a global community, the need for a humanitarian visa system to supplement the unquestioned obligation to provide asylum to those who are refugees. We have to look at these in terms of not having to come year after year begging for pledges, pledges that are sometimes given and then, as the Secretary-General said at the outset today, have not been always honoured in performance.

We have to have and define what it costs to support a migrant and the countries that host them, and in the context of that definition, we have to look at it as a budgetary problem, which we all have a responsibility to help. We have to expand our capacity to host refugees through resettlement. And I don't think this is something you can buy your way out of.

It is part of it. It is part of the overall humanitarian deal: provide the finance and provide the resettlement, and that applies both inside and outside Europe. We have to help the world to rethink the very idea of what our duty to refugees and vulnerable migrants actually is.

They can't be left as dead weight permanently in larger and larger camps. We need to agree on a set of commitments to reduce the risks that all migrants face: ensuring rescue at sea, offering legal pathways as a balance to our absolute unconditional objection to irregular and illegal movements of migrants. We have to decide never to hold children in detention. We have to set out this as a compact for the future, a compact which the world will be bound by.

And my final word: we have to be transparent in the results so that we can't all come here, the next year and the year after, to proclaim what we are doing without an objective analysis as to whether we have done it or not.

Thank you very much.