

NATIONAL STATEMENT OF GREECE AT THE 67TH EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE UNHCR-ITEM 3

Mr Chairman,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since this is the first Executive Committee of the UNHCR under the helm of High Commissioner Grandi, please allow me to reiterate my country's full support to his important mandate. It is obvious that this mandate is further strengthened following the adoption of the New York Declaration, whereby world leaders reaffirmed their confidence in the UNHCR by entrusting the organization with the development and the initiation of the comprehensive refugee response framework. A framework which should be based on the principle of international cooperation and on burden and responsibility sharing. This decision institutes the UNHCR as the custodian of these important principles.

Now more than ever before after the end of Second World War, humanity faces an unprecedented humanitarian and refugee crisis that has burst end in many regions of our planet. We need to face this constantly aggravating situation by addressing the root causes of the problem, and trying to settle the various complex problems linked with the major refugee crises across the world, in a spirit of cooperation and solidarity.

Let me remind you that yesterday the UN Secretary General referred precisely to "this crisis of solidarity". Hence, the responsibility for people fleeing war and persecution cannot be born only by the front-line states. In the same vein, the challenges my own country faces cannot not be addressed if the principles of shared responsibility and solidarity were to be rejected.

In this respect, we also welcome the relevant pledges made at the recent commendable initiative of the US President, the Leaders' Summit on Refugees, in which we had the honor to participate. We have also expressed our readiness to contribute to the UNHCR-led consultations' process on the comprehensive refugee framework, leading to the Global Compact on Refugees. We hope that these consultations will lead to effective solutions.

Mr Chairman,

In the preamble of the New York Declaration, the world leaders expressed their determination to save lives. As we all know, in 2015 1,000,000 migrants and refugees crossed the Aegean Sea.

Regrettably, a large number of them perished.

At the same time, hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants were saved by the Hellenic Coast Guard, FRONTEX as well as by many volunteers. These efforts have been recognized by the international community. In this regard, I would like to express our deep appreciation for the awarding of the 2016 Nansen Refugee Prize to two Greek volunteers who were involved, inter alia, in saving thousands of lives in the Aegean waters and thank the organizers for yesterday's moving ceremony.

To use the High Commissioner's own words, "these people refused to stand by as they witnessed a dramatic situation. Their efforts characterize the massive public response to the refugee and migrant emergency in Greece and across Europe, in which thousands of people stood in solidarity with those forced to flee" .

In our view indeed, the migrant and refugee crisis has proved that no one can handle such large influxes alone and that state authorities, international organizations, NGOs and volunteers must work side by side in order to achieve the best possible result.

In 2016, the implementation of the EU-Turkey Agreement has led to the radical decrease of the deaths in the Aegean Sea. It allows to tackle trafficking and smuggling networks more effectively. Greece will keep doing her part as far as the continued sustainable implementation of the EU-Turkey Agreement is concerned.

Another major development in 2016 was the closure of the Western Balkans Route following unilateral measures. This resulted in around 60.000 people being suddenly stranded in Greece. This number is not negligible, if one takes into account the challenging economic and social context in my country. Several thousands of these people remained in despair for two months at the make-shift camp of Idomeni in our northern borders, hoping for the opening of the borders. Despite difficulties, an enormous effort was made in order to evacuate a large number of them peacefully from the Idomeni camp and to provide them with basic living conditions and services. As part of the emergency response, our military created 30.000 accommodation places in three months' time. Now our overall reception capacity has increased to around 64.000 places. These include a significant number of places offered in apartments as part of a rent subsidies' scheme implemented by the UNHCR and funded by the EU. We believe in the success of such programs as they effectively facilitate the integration of these people and strengthen the social cohesion by keeping them within the host country's social fibre.

In the islands, the situation remains challenging and sometimes tense as some Registration and Identification centres are overcrowded.

As the High Commissioner has pointed out during his second visit to Greece, "these challenges will remain if relocation and family reunion programmes are not stepped up." Indeed, so far, only 3.677 persons have been relocated from Greece, while several thousands have been identified for relocation.

Among them, there are many unaccompanied minors for whom the Dublin criteria for family reunification apply.

We welcome the call by the European Council for accelerated relocation of refugees from Greece. On our part, we have set as priorities the decongestion of reception sites on the islands by transferring peacefully to the mainland those categories which do not come under the framework of the EU-Turkey Agreement. Another priority is the improvement of security conditions in the reception sites.

I would also like to thank the UNHCR for its contribution to the successful pre-registration of 27.000 asylum seekers in just two months, together with our Asylum Service and EASO. This is a commendable example of international cooperation. Our Asylum Service's processing capacity of asylum

claims has increased in the last years. But currently 98% of those arriving in Greece are now lodging an asylum claim, compared to just 2% before the EU-Turkey Agreement. This constitutes a huge and disproportionate increase in caseload that our asylum service faces. We thank the UNHCR for the recent secondments of their staff to our Asylum Service. We soon hope to have further reinforcements from EASO especially in the islands.

Refugee children are also a priority for us. The child-friendly accommodation places have increased to 850 this year and there is an ongoing effort for a further increase. Our Ministry for Education developed a special curriculum that will allow around 18,000 asylum seekers' children to access education for 2016-2017. These programs involve, inter alia, preschool and compulsory education within or close to the hosting facilities, and special reception classes that will allow for a smooth and gradual integration of the children to our educational system. We thank our humanitarian partners for contributing to the refugee children's education, and the EU for providing the funding for the relevant programs. In view of the above, we welcome the theme of "Children on the Move" for this year's High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection. We are looking forward to contributing to the exchange of views that will take place this December.

We also welcome this year's consensus on the adoption of Excom conclusions on International Protection after two years. This is an optimistic sign that the things that keep us together on refugee issues are far more than those that keep us apart. We welcome especially the conclusions' references to the use of resettlement and other humanitarian pathways.

We would like to acknowledge, with this opportunity, that the Excom conclusions as well as the UNHCR "Omnibus" Resolution negotiations taking place in Geneva have an important contribution to the development of international standards on issues of international protection, and we will keep supporting them.

Mr High Commissioner, just before concluding, I would only like to state once again that we appreciate UNHCR's role in highlighting the global character of forced displacement and the need to provide solutions in a collective, comprehensive manner based on the principles of solidarity and shared responsibility and reaffirm our commitment in further enhancing our cooperation with the UNHCR.

thank you Mr Chairman,