

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

High Commissioner's Speech

30 March 2016

Secretary-General,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Earlier this month, I met with refugees who had been resettled to the US and Canada – most of them from countries in conflict in Africa, Asia, Central America and the Middle East. Many had arrived several years ago and were now active, contributing members of their communities. I also spoke with several recently arrived Syrian refugees, who shared their hopes and concerns with me.

For many of them, learning a new language, getting to know their neighbours, finding work were serious challenges, although I was very impressed by the support they were receiving from the communities hosting them. I felt some apprehension, but also much determination. They were certainly happy to be safe and grateful for the chance for a better future, in particular for their children. They were tired, but hopeful.

Resettlement to a third country has traditionally been one of the solutions for refugees, but it is usually only an option limited to relatively few of them.

The crisis in Syria is an example. There are more than six million Syrian internally displaced people and nearly five million Syrian refugees in the region. After five years of conflict, the obstacles that they are facing have increased. The long exile has taken a toll. Meanwhile, their presence has placed an undeniable strain on host communities and countries and on their services and facilities.

In neighbouring countries, hosting the majority of Syrian refugees, living conditions have become more and more difficult. A recent study that we conducted with the World Bank found that 90 per cent of the Syrian refugees live under national poverty lines in Lebanon and Jordan. At least 10 per cent of the refugee population is considered to be extremely vulnerable. More than half of the children are out of school, working often in the informal sector. Many young girls are forced into early marriage by desperate parents who can no longer afford to send them to school. Assistance to refugees has been inadequate, especially in the crucial sectors of education and income generation. And refugees have observed with growing pessimism the slow and frequently interrupted progress of peace negotiations.

Desperation and lack of hope have thus driven large numbers of Syrians to undertake the dangerous journey to Europe, in the expectation to find safety, dignity and a future.

The pledges made at the International Conference on Supporting Syria and Region in London almost two months ago – as recalled by the Secretary-General - are an important contribution to improving the lives of internally displaced people, refugees and host communities. USD 12 billion were pledged for humanitarian aid inside Syria and in neighbouring countries, but also to improve education and socio-economic opportunities for refugees and to support their hosts.

I am also concerned about the pace of disbursement of the pledges made in London. More than half of the promised funds have not yet been allocated. Rapid disbursement and early allocation are essential to allow humanitarian organizations to scale up operations in Syria and the region, and to stabilize displaced populations.

And while honouring the London promises is crucial, much more is needed.

And that is why we are here today. This meeting complements the London Conference. More solutions for Syrian refugees are urgently required to alleviate the strain on host countries and to provide an alternative to smuggling networks that have made a business of the despair of refugees. We are here today to appeal for additional and more diverse safe avenues for admission of Syrian refugees into different countries and communities in the coming three years.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

During the discussions surrounding the European Union's recent agreement with Turkey, I often thought of the conversations I had in January with a group of Syrian refugee women who live in Istanbul with their small children. One of them, a mother of five, told me that she was hoping for a safe way to join her husband in Europe, but that official family reunification or resettlement programmes took so long and have so many requirements, that she had become desperate. She did not see a future for her children, with her husband abroad. And so, she felt compelled to risk her life and that of her children by taking a boat.

Last year, the European Union made sound decisions in trying to manage the refugee and migration flows in a manner that was both orderly and principled. But some European Union member States did not show the required solidarity to share this responsibility, and to distribute refugees and asylum-seekers evenly. The movement was left unchecked, and we witnessed major flows to only a few countries, namely Austria, Germany and Sweden.

With public opinion becoming increasingly worried, and in some instances deftly manipulated by irresponsible politicians, the focus shifted: from welcoming refugees to

tightening restrictions and closing borders, with the result that some 50,000 refugees and migrants are now stranded in Greece, living in extremely dire conditions.

We have made our views about the recent agreement clear and, as we have said repeatedly, any arrangements must include clearly spelt out protection safeguards for all individuals under international and European Union law.

However, we cannot respond to refugee crises by closing doors and building fences. The magnitude of this particular crisis shows us unmistakably that it cannot be business as usual, leaving the greatest burden to be carried by the countries closest to the conflict.

What can we do to help the Syrian refugee women I met in Turkey, a country that is already hosting nearly three million refugees? Women who are desperate enough to risk the lives of their children?

Our proposal today is that offering alternative avenues for the admission of Syrian refugees must become part of the solution, together with investing in helping the countries in the region. These pathways can take many forms: not only resettlement, but also more flexible mechanisms for family reunification, including extended family members, labour mobility schemes, student visa and scholarships, as well as visa for medical reasons.

Resettlement needs vastly outstrip the places that have been made available so far. Last year, only 12 per cent of the refugees in need of resettlement, who are usually the most vulnerable, were resettled. But humanitarian and student visa, job permits and family reunification would represent safe avenues of admission for many other refugees as well, including those who are more prone to falling in the hands of smugglers and those with the skills and talents that will be needed one day to rebuild Syria.

There are two issues, however, on which we need to be very clear. First, opening safe and regular pathways for admission can never be a substitute for countries' fundamental responsibilities under international law towards people directly seeking asylum on their territory. These pathways are additional measures that are needed as part of a global response. Second, while today's meeting focuses on Syrian refugees, it is clear that pledges to offer safe avenues for the admission of Syrian refugees must not come at the expense of other refugee populations.

UNHCR is ready to support States in practical and operational ways to help process larger number of refugees for resettlement or other pathways from the region, quickly and efficiently. This is feasible if resources are made available.

When Canada announced it was going to take in 25,000 Syrian refugees from the region, UNHCR worked closely with the Canadian authorities to develop special modalities to do this expeditiously. Within less than four months, more than 26,000 Syrian refugees had been screened, selected and prepared to start a new life in Canada: an extremely short time span, if one considers that in regular resettlement programmes the procedure can take months, if not years. So, yes, such programmes can be implemented quickly, safely and rigorously, provided the political will and resources are there to do so.

And while we debate here today on how to address the plight of Syrians fleeing war and violence in their country, we should not - as the Secretary-General reminded us this morning - forget that the most important discussions started a few weeks ago in this same venue. The parties to the Syrian conflict, with the mediation of the United Nations and the support of the international community, have embarked upon a fresh and hopefully decisive attempt to bring peace to Syria.

We must encourage this, but in the meantime we must act. We cannot leave the neighbouring countries continue to bear the brunt of this refugee crisis. The world must show solidarity and share this responsibility. Our aim is to find admission for at least 10 per cent of the Syrian refugee population, or 480,000 people, over three years. This may seem a large number, but it is not if compared to the number of refugees the neighbouring countries have been hosting. If Europe were to welcome the same percentage of refugees as Lebanon in comparison to its population, it would have to take in 100 million refugees! We are already well on our way to meeting our goal, with some 179,000 places pledged to date. This conference today is yet another important milestone in helping to ensure that we maintain this momentum over the coming months and years.

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Allow me to conclude by quoting the fundamental principle of global solidarity and responsibility sharing, as formulated in the preamble of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which recognizes: *“that the grant of asylum may place unduly heavy burdens on certain countries, and that a satisfactory solution of a problem of which the United Nations has recognized the international scope and nature cannot therefore be achieved without international co-operation”*.

Today’s meeting offers an opportunity to look at new and innovative ways to help refugees find the protection and dignity they need, and to reaffirm that refugees are a shared responsibility. It is an opportunity to build upon existing partnerships and forge new ones and to move forward in a spirit of solidarity and as new sense of purpose.

Thank you.