**** WORLD REFUGEE DAY 2022**

**Tel Aviv, 20 June 2022**

On 20 June every year, we celebrate World Refugee Day to honour the resilience and courage of millions of refugees around the world who have been forced to flee persecution and violence. These are people who have endured enormous suffering without losing hope, and often find the strength to overcome despair and forge new lives in strange lands against seemingly overwhelming odds. Refugees are the great survivors of our time. They deserve our encouragement, understanding, support and respect.

Two decades ago, the numbers of refugees and internally displaced people seemed to be declining. Today the inverse is true. The number of people forced to flee conflict, violence, disasters, human rights violations and persecution has now crossed the staggering milestone of 100 million for the first time on record. *That’s 1 in 78 people on our planet.*

In just over three months this year, 14 million Ukrainians have been forced to flee their homes – half to neighbouring countries and beyond, the other half displaced within Ukraine itself. A third of those who fled the country (2.4 million) has now returned back, though sadly to an uncertain future.

The international response to people fleeing the war in Ukraine has been exceptionally remarkable. The response has demonstrated indeed that countries in Europe and elsewhere, including Israel, can take in refugees with compassion, generosity and solidarity. This should be the norm to be followed in all refugee situations regardless of the person’s race or religion.

We cannot forget that at the same time as the unfolding of the Ukraine refugee influxes, increasingly more people in other regions of the world were fleeing from war and persecution and that was very worrying in itself, but the factors that endanger refugees’ lives as they search for safety and protection were multiplying too. At sea, far too many were dying; on land, many were finding their way blocked by closed borders, often resulting in tragic loss of more life.

Our message is simple: Europe and other countries further afield have proven their willingness and ability to receive and host generously and effectively over 4 million refugees from Ukraine. There is every reason for us to expect these nations to extend the same level of compassion to other refugees knocking, in distress, at their doors.

For Israel too, the solidarity shown to Ukraine refugees is a landmark moment and an opportunity to revisit the policies that have been pursued for over a decade with respect to African asylum-seekers, and remedy their shortcomings.

Let me repeat here what I have been saying for the past four years: There should be no illusion that the Eritreans and Darfuris who fled to the State of Israel over the years were moving voluntarily, in search of a better life. They ran away from their communities and countries because they had no choice. They ran away because they wanted to live a life of dignity, freedom and security, just like the rest of us.

It is therefore not right, legally and morally, to label these people as ‘illegal migrants’ – or worse as “infiltrators” – and avoid the ‘refugee’ terminology altogether, and the rights and obligations that it implies.

The flow of refugees, alas, is never ‘orderly’. Fleeing for their lives, their movement is often chaotic and improvised, their assets left behind, and they are rarely able to cross borders through regular immigration procedures. International law says refugees are not acting unlawfully by arriving to seek protection in a State which has not pre-authorised their entry.

We very much hope that sooner or later the Israeli authorities will recognize that the Eritrean and Sudanese refugees are not the problem, but rather the causes that forced them out of their homes and communities and the unrealistic policies that have been pursued.

It should be recognized that the *status quo* is simply not sustainable. Whether it is reviving the cancelled UN agreement or something else, a viable and humane solution must be found that offers protection to the refugees in accordance with international standards and also takes into account Israel’s demographic and other interests.

After all, welcoming and protecting refugees is not just about numbers. It is about the societies we want to live in. It is about our belief in values, including those enshrined in international treaties protecting refugees and which place primacy on human dignity and security. And it lies at the heart of our very humanity: to embrace, respect and care for others, especially those in danger, irrespective of their national identity. *The mitzvah of welcoming the stranger.*

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