



HUMANITARIAN NGO RECOMMENDATIONS

HIGH LEVEL CONFERENCE ON THE 'WESTERN BALKANS ROUTE', LUXEMBOURG, 8 OCTOBER 2015

The conflict in Syria has caused massive suffering. 12.2 million Syrians need humanitarian assistance, 7.6 million are internally displaced and 4.1 million became refugees.

As organisations working on the displacement crisis in the Middle East and in Europe, we welcome this high level discussion on both **the root causes of the crisis**, and **the reception and management of the consequent refugee flows to Europe**. In advance of this Ministerial debate, we would like to share the following **recommendations**:

Tackling the root causes of forced displacement

1. Humanitarian aid cannot solve the root causes of this crisis. The massive suffering and exodus of the Syrian population is the result of a failure of diplomacy and a lack of international will, which has been acknowledged as such by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon. The **existing UN Security Council Resolutions should be implemented and the situation requires a new round of political action to end the violence** and promote and facilitate a process to achieve lasting peace. The EU should push for this in all relevant fora.
2. **Increase and improve the aid response to the region.** More funds are desperately needed for humanitarian aid and development assistance in Syria and neighboring countries, from where most of the people reaching Europe have fled, particularly now that winter is approaching. The UN appeals for Syria and neighboring countries are only 41 percent met. One of the reasons that people are moving now is because of increasing legal restrictions and cuts in international assistance. Funding cuts to the World Food Programme, for example, have resulted in 229,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan and more than 131,000 in Lebanon having their food assistance drastically cut in September.

3. Strengthen international protection to ensure that refugees' rights are respected and that their needs are met. The EU and its neighboring countries should develop binding agreements to ensure that specific policies or measures are adopted and implemented to achieve tangible progress in this regard. This could be done in the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy and in particular, in Mobility Partnership Agreements.

Sharing responsibility: asylum and resettlement

1. Syrian refugees now make up 25% of the population in Lebanon and 10% of the population in Jordan. Turkey is hosting 1.9 million refugees, more than any other country in the world. These figures make it crystal clear: there is an urgent **need for more substantial responsibility-sharing** by the rest of the world, including Europe, as the neighbouring countries have shown an extraordinary level of generosity and solidarity, but are reaching their breaking point. This can be done via:

- **Increasing the number of refugees resettled to Europe**, after identification by UNHCR. As many of us already called for at the resettlement conference in Geneva a year ago, European states should aim to resettle at least 5% of the most vulnerable refugees displaced from Syria by the end of 2015, which amounts to 200,000 refugees. Resettlement is complementary to offering asylum to those refugees who do have the physical condition and means to travel to Europe.
- **Increasing the number of humanitarian visas, sponsorship programmes and educational scholarships** for people at risk
- **Enabling extended family reunification programmes**
- Selection of refugees for these programmes should be based on vulnerability and protection urgency, and the imperative of protecting children on the move should be an important and fundamental principle.

2. Keep land borders open so that those fleeing war may seek safety. Refugees have the right to asylum under article 14 (1) of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and thus all states must ensure access for people in need of protection. Refugees or asylum seekers should not to be returned to circumstances where their lives would be at risk.

3. Europe needs to ensure predictable, safe and legal routes for asylum seekers to and through Europe, so that the most vulnerable people, including women and children, are able to seek the protection and basic services unavailable to them elsewhere. Travelling through a 'safe third country' (outside the EU) does not suddenly turn a refugee into an economic migrant. Moreover, according to UNHCR, primary state responsibility to persons seeking protection remains with the state where the claim is lodged. An asylum seeker cannot be returned to a safe third country unless they have a meaningful link with that country (transit is not enough).

All of our agencies usually work in the most deprived and conflict-affected areas around the globe. The fact that most of us are now starting a humanitarian response inside Europe is a sad commentary on Europe's inability to prevent a humanitarian crisis on its own territory. Europe has the means and capacity to deal with this refugee influx, which still only represents 0.11% of the EU's population as European Commission President Juncker pointed out. What is needed is political will.

1. The EU must urgently develop a unified and holistic response with an action plan, pooling together EU Member States' capacity and resources to ensure adequate reception, assistance and registration across Europe.

2. The EU should continue to relocate refugees from overwhelmed EU Member States and distribute them equitably among other Member States.

3. There is an urgent need to **swiftly scale up emergency reception and provide winterisation assistance to transit countries.** Minimum standards in shelter, WASH, access to health and education as well as legal advice and protection need to be ensured. Special attention should be paid to children, either with their families or unaccompanied, and the setting up of child-friendly spaces where children can play and have structured activities to help them process past experiences.

4. There is a clear need to **put in place national level mechanisms in EU Member States to organise and effectively design an appropriate and fast moving response.** Partnerships between governments, the EU and civil society organisations should be a priority.

5. It is recommended that a **real time information displacement monitoring mechanism** is set up to provide European governments and aid actors with additional predictive capacity to guide the future response.

6. Several EU Member States are looking at **recovering costs to host refugees from their overseas aid budgets.** This is **not acceptable** as it diverts crucial funding away from the intended purpose. This is an extraordinary situation, which requires extraordinary means. Moreover, it is self-defeating as a policy as it will reduce much needed assistance to refugees in the region, and thus make more of them conclude that they have to move to Europe to have any chance of a decent life.

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