

Presidency of the EU Council
Prime Minister Mark Rutte
President of the European Council
Mr Donald Tusk
Heads of EU governments
President of the European Parliament
Mr Martin Schulz
President of the European Commission
Mr Jean Claude Juncker

16 March 2016

European Responses to Refugees and Migrants European Council 17-18 March 2016

Dear Presidents, Prime Ministers, Chancellors, Your Excellencies,

Our organisations bring together the greatest number of Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant Churches and Christian service, relief and development organizations active in Europe today. Based on our Christian faith and extensive experience of working with people in situations of extreme precariousness and vulnerability and with refugees inside and outside the European Union, we wish to call on you to develop more humane responses for refugee protection in full compliance with European obligations under international law and human rights so that the dignity of every person is respected and ensured.

Ensure safe passage

In April 2015, when a shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa led to hundreds of people losing their lives, promises were made to address the situation. And indeed, thanks to the insistence of the Italian government, a wider search and rescue mandate was included also in the Frontex operation with Italy. However, in the first months of this year more than 400 persons have lost their lives in the Aegean Sea, among them many women and children.

While we call on the European Union to increase efforts for, preferably civilian, search and rescue operations, we also believe that the creation of safe passages is the only way to prevent refugees from risking their lives in dangerous journeys. To this end, - together with many other civil society and international organisations - we call on you to open up more safe and legal ways for refugees to travel to Europe – for example through refugee resettlement and humanitarian admission programmes, private sponsorships, family reunion, student scholarships and labour mobility schemes – so that refugees do not resort to smugglers to find safety.

Make relocation and resettlement work

Efforts to share the responsibility for refugee protection more evenly among EU member states remain still limited. Last year, European Union Member States agreed to relocate 160.000 refugees from Greece and in

Italy. Until beginning of this week, less than 1000 persons have actually been relocated from Greece and Italy. Despite terrible weather conditions, refugees continue to arrive in Greece and seek to move on; the tragedy yesterday at the border to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is yet another wake-up call. Therefore we call on all European governments to fulfill their promises and swiftly relocate refugees to make this a viable and credible alternative. We wish to encourage you, too, to agree on further, more ambitious targets for relocation inside the European Union.

When it comes to resettlement, only 3.358 refugees have been resettled by the end of 2015 –out of the 22.504 refugees pledged to be resettled over the next two years. We are convinced that Europe can and must do more in this global refugee crisis. The UNHCR conference at the end of March 2016 provides an opportunity for European states to commit to resettling a meaningful number of refugees, and to open additional admission programmes. But only if pledges are turned into practice, they become a credible alternative for refugees.

Family Life

Among the persons who have entered EU territory through Greece and Italy are some who have family members in EU countries. Family life is very important particularly for refugees, family life can stabilize the persons who have undergone so much pain, and often loss of lives of loved ones already. We wish to urge that family reunification for refugees is not curbed but facilitated as a priority in meaningful ways. EU embassies and consulates could assist each other in the necessary paper work, if capacity of some is overstretched; consular delegations could undertake missions into the refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey to facilitate family reunification applications speedily. Waiting periods of more than a year are detrimental and can create serious psychological problems. This should be avoided by all possible means.

Family unity is also important for the integration of refugees in European societies. We believe we can and ought to afford a human approach to refugees and therefore lower some of the current barriers to family unity.

Social Measures

Persons who have entered the EU territory must also have their social needs met as soon as possible after entry, regardless as to which stage in the asylum process they have reached. The reception conditions for persons seeking protection need to be at least in line with agreed EU minimum standards, and access to asylum procedures has to be guaranteed. Barriers to adequate and quality health care services, education and training, social inclusion initiatives and the labour market should be removed where possible. Relevant and up to date information on how European funds such as the ESF, EFSI, FEAD and the new EU emergency support facility may be used by organisations such as ours to support social measures should be made available as widely as possible.

Cooperation with third countries

We are aware of, and appreciate, many initiatives over the last year to develop more solidarity, such as pledging more support for the countries most affected by the refugee crisis in the Middle East. Yet, the number of displaced persons, internally and externally, will require sustained and sufficient support, and we wish to urge that the necessary funding for refugees hosted by Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria, Iran and Iraq is not forgotten when support for Turkey is pledged. As around half of the refugee population is under age, education and specific programmes are urgently needed.

We are particularly concerned by the proposals formulated by Turkey at the 7 March summit which will be discussed at the European Council on 17-18 March 2016. Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for

Refugees already [expressed deep concerns](#) “about any arrangement that would involve the blanket return of anyone from one country to another without spelling out the refugee protection safeguards under international law”. Indeed, the legality of the proposals is very doubtful –especially the deal “one in-one out”. Collective expulsions are contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights and according to the case-law of the European Union Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights, anyone is entitled to seek asylum in the country of arrival or any other country if his or her demand cannot be treated in decent conditions in the latter country. While Turkey has agreed and is providing assistance to Syrian refugees, refugees from other countries, e.g. Afghanistan or Eritrea, would not find protection and support.

We hope that any future agreement with Turkey will comply with the EU Member States’ obligations under European and international law, and particularly the principles enshrined in the Geneva Refugee Convention.

Towards conflict resolution

We welcome the role the European Union has played and continues to play in the establishment of the International Support Group for Syria including the efforts that lead to the UN Security Council Resolution setting the roadmap for the intra-Syrian talks and the political process.

The fragile ceasefire gives a glimpse of hope that the brutality against the people in Syria may come to an end and that negotiations for a peaceful solution to end the conflict may come into sight. Our sister churches in the region strive for maintaining the Christian presence in the region, and therefore, peace, justice and respect for religious and ethnic minorities will have to be priorities in any agreement for the future of Syria and the region as a whole. After five years of violent conflict, this will not be an easy path; yet, we hope the international community, the EU included, will maintain and enhance the efforts to end this conflict.

We are aware of the pressures and controversies in European societies about receiving refugees, and we share some of your concerns regarding the need to develop a more orderly reception of refugees. However, in many European countries, people in churches and non-governmental organisations are providing accommodation, food, counselling, and in our view most important, give signs of hope, friendship and humanity. We are aware of the opposition against refugees in European societies and observe the controversies in public debate with considerable concern. Yet, based on Christian and European values, we wish to encourage you to also consider the views of the many people across Europe who are tirelessly extending their hands and sharing their property and talents with refugees. They also deserve to be listened to, and their needs ought to be met. They are living the Europe of solidarity, and the policies could and should build on these examples more courageously.

Yours sincerely



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