

People seeking international protection in Europe continue their long journey on foot after crossing the border between Serbia and Hungary (September 2015).



Risking all...

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Global forced displacement has reached proportions very few of us have seen in our lifetimes – more than 60 million people worldwide – and unlike previous years, refugees are now squarely in the centre of international media attention and political agendas. The dramatic events on the beaches and borders of Europe, where hundreds of thousands have arrived to seek safety over the last few months, have ensured that no one can go on ignoring a displacement crisis that has long been in the making. With 15 new or reignited conflicts in the past five years alone, the international community has struggled to respond to the sharp growth in forced displacement and the resulting humanitarian needs.



UNHCR/M. HENLEY

Anyone who has stood on these beaches and seen entire families arriving in flimsy boats with small children, pregnant women, elderly and sick relatives; anyone who has experienced the horror of people being pulled from the water by the rescuers, close to death or worse, understands the hopelessness and despair that drive people to take these dangerous journeys. The vast majority of the new arrivals fleeing war and persecution simply see no other way than to risk their lives at sea in order to escape the terror on land.

And those who are arriving in Europe are far from being the only ones. The year that is drawing to a close has seen, once again, far too many people forced to flee their homes as a result of violence and conflict – over 2 million in Yemen, half a million in South Sudan and

hundreds of thousands more in Burundi, Libya and elsewhere.

Refugees have no other option but to run for their lives. And we, the international community, have no option other than to provide them with protection and assistance, and help them rebuild their futures. The current crisis has shown how crucial it is to preserve the sanctity of asylum and the respect for the principles of compassion and hospitality that are at the heart of refugee protection, rooted deeply in all of the world's major religions and cultures. In keeping with its mandate, UNHCR remains totally committed to working closely with States to ensure that all people in need of international protection can have access to it.

EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

The unprecedented levels of forced displacement around the globe today have also highlighted the need to strengthen the world's capacity to respond effectively. First of all, governments, civil society leaders and media alike should reaffirm the importance of values such as tolerance, respect for diversity and solidarity with people in need as they strive to build open and vibrant modern societies.

Secondly, we must engage in a thorough review of the way we finance humanitarian responses today. It is clear that humanitarian resources alone are vastly insufficient to keep abreast of the enormous increase in needs which we have seen in recent years in Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere. Development actors – supported by development budgets – have to work side by side with humanitarians from the very beginning of a crisis, to help us prevent further conflict, support host communities and pave the way for durable solutions.

But for this to be possible, governments must fundamentally rethink their bilateral and multilateral development cooperation, policies, to ensure that development actors are given the necessary flexibility, funding and tools to start working with us early on, in support of countries receiving large refugee influxes. This is particularly true for many of the middle-income countries that today are among the world's biggest refugee hosting States, but whose challenges are not prioritized in development cooperation, despite the often overwhelming impact of displacement on their economies and societies. Only with more outside support for host countries and communities can refugees be given more options for attaining self-reliance and leading dignified lives while in exile. The recent adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its commitment to inclusiveness that extends to refugees and other displaced populations, provides some important opportunities in this regard.

A third aspect of the international response that must be enhanced is burden sharing as it relates to the actual hosting of refugees –

including by providing them with safe ways to find protection and solutions in third countries. One of the key problems of today's refugee crisis is the scarcity of such options, which pushes thousands of desperate people into the hands of unscrupulous smugglers. States should therefore consider making more resettlement and humanitarian admission places available for refugees, loosening visa regimes and family reunification criteria, or establishing private sponsorship programmes for refugees to find protection on their territory.

A fourth priority will be reform. This will remain a major commitment for UNHCR, with continued focus being given to transparency, accountability, oversight, efficiency and innovation. But reform is a question for the entire international humanitarian system, and the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul next year will be an opportunity that must not be missed. In addition to a closer link between humanitarian and development interventions, another aim of the summit must be to build a more universal humanitarian system that better shows the shared values guiding the work of organizations of many different religious and cultural backgrounds, allowing us to bring together their capacities in a more inclusive and joined-up response guided by humanitarian principles. This also reflects the fifth element of a stronger international response to displacement – stronger partnerships, including with the private sector and civil society institutions.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

It is a well-known fact that, despite all the challenges, most crises also open doors for change and create new opportunities. This is undoubtedly the case for today's refugee crisis, most notably because of the significant increase in both political attention and civil society engagement on issues of forced displacement. It is my hope that the international community will seize these opportunities to advance refugee protection and durable solutions, as well as solidarity and burden sharing with the host countries. ■



UNHCR/A. MCCONNELL

Special Envoy Angelina Jolie Pitt meets members of the Yazidi minority in Khanke IDP Camp, Iraq, in January 2015.

Special Envoy

With 15 years of service with UNHCR, Special Envoy Angelina Jolie Pitt continues to add her voice to the High Commissioner's advocacy for better protection assistance and solutions for refugees, focusing in particular on the ongoing Syria emergency.

In April she spoke at the UN Security Council, together with the High Commissioner, where she told Council members that the United Nations was failing the people of Syria.

The Special Envoy again joined the High Commissioner in June to celebrate World Refugee Day in Turkey, which is now the world's largest refugee-hosting nation.

The Special Envoy has made 12 visits to meet Syrian refugees in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Malta since the crisis erupted in March 2011. ■

“ We are here for a simple reason: this region is at the epicentre of a global crisis. Nearly 60 million people are displaced from their homes. That is one in every 122 people on our planet. Our world has never been richer or healthier or more advanced. Yet never before have so many people been dispossessed and stripped of their basic human rights. We should call this what it is: not just a “refugee crisis,” but a crisis of global security and governance, that is manifesting itself in the worst refugee crisis ever recorded – and a time of mass displacement.

– Special Envoy Angelina Jolie Pitt

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