



Restoring Dignity, Inspiring Change.

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UNHCR High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection at Sea
10-11 December 2014, Geneva

No retreat:

Urgence, convergence and Cooperation in Protection at Sea

*Statement of the International Catholic Migration Commission,
John K. Bingham, ICMC Head of Policy*

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Mr. High Commissioner, please permit me to speak on behalf of the one « boat person » who was with our delegation here in this important Dialogue of Protection at Sea. He was sitting at the back of the room during the morning plenary yesterday and we were sorry he was unable to speak before flying back to the Netherlands.

His name is Abu Kurke KABETO from Ethiopia.

2 ½ years ago, Mr. Kabeto was on a boat between Libya and Europe for 16 days. When he started out, he and the other 71 people with him understood that they would make the crossing in a day. But on the first day, their engine broke down, and they floated for 16 days. They called a Catholic priest on the cell phone, but could not tell him where they were because they simply didn't know. Eventually a border enforcement helicopter and a patrol boat each came. But: they only took pictures, and left.

This has been called the "left to die" boat. 16 days lost at sea. 16 days without food and water. Mr. Kabeto thinks he survived because he had a small tube of toothpaste to eat. But 63 of the people with him died in front of him—women, children, men. When their boat finally drifted back to Libyan shore, only 4 of the 9 survivors were able to walk. Mr. Kabeto could not see. Two more died soon after, with the others taken immediately to prison.

Mr. Kabeto was put on a boat a while later and this time made it across to Italy. Italy recognized Mr. Kabeto as a refugee—one more thing that Italy has done so right for people in these stories. Mr. Kabeto has since been given humanitarian status by the Netherlands, where he lives with his wife—who crossed on another boat, and a son born since.

Abu Kurke Kabeto was with us for a special pre-event to this Dialogue Tuesday night, which ICMC organized with the Permanent Missions of Italy and the Holy See. Called "*Sea Change; boat people testimonials and reflection*", it was a moment not for discussion but for listening; for reflection first: to start where we need to start, with the story and the suffering of the people on the boats. Mr. High Commissioner, we are grateful to you and your organizing of this Dialogue around that human and moral, life-and-death starting point.

After telling his story to us—cleanly, with dignity and with great hope that his experience might help others, Mr. Kabeto closed by saying: I came to Geneva to ask the international community to continue saving people in the water. To ask the international community to not leave boats to die, to thank Italy for what it does to

search for and rescue so many desperate people in the Mediterranean. Please keep doing that. Please do whatever you can. Otherwise we die.

This survivor—one of the refugee boat people at Europe’s door-- begged the international community not to retreat.

- No retreat from life; from saving lives first.
- No retreat from good responses we already have. No retreat from the Godsend Italian navy *Operation Mare Nostrum*. Who else on the planet *anywhere* saves 160,000 lives in 12 months?? Like Mr. Kabeto, ICMC is honoured to join the crowd expressing appreciation here to Italy for this noble work. *Thank you, Italy.*

And what we heard from Mr. Abu Kurke, and from others including the rescue priest Rev. Mussie Zerai, was also:

- No retreat from the 1951 Refugee Convention, which is a set of legal obligations, not just standards. No retreat to strictly temporary measures from UNHCR’s priority on finding *durable* solutions.
- No retreat from ‘responsibility-sharing’ to responsibility-*shaving*: we need to share responsibilities in ways that are competence-based, across regions and among all actors, including civil society.
- No retreat from good habits of cooperation that we already have:
 - - beginning with your “10-point Plan of Action for Refugee Protection and Mixed Migration”. Mr. High Commissioner, the very first point of that Plan recognizes the *sine qua non* of international, multi-actor cooperation.
 - No retreat from the practical mechanisms of the *Praesidium model* that brought the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Red Cross, and Save the Children together with you and—once again—the government of Italy together on Lampedusa in particular, to respond not only to refugees crossing on the boats, but with specific protection and assistance also to the children, vulnerable women and the victims of torture, trafficking, trauma and violence on these crossings. These specific protections and assistance too are legal obligations, not standards, under a set of Conventions and protocols that are almost universally ratified—from which there can also be no retreat.
 - No retreat from the practical flexibility of mobile protection units, which can be deployed rapidly to points of rescue or arrival as needed. As you know, ICMC has long done this kind of work in cooperation with UNHCR in Greece and elsewhere.

No retreat from cooperation.

Mr. High Commissioner, in these rooms and discussions everywhere before, during and after this Dialogue, the particular challenges of refugee movement and displacement from Syria is evoked quite distinctly. Of course Syrians are a growing number of the boat people crossing the Mediterranean, but even larger numbers have crossed land borders into countries neighboring Syria. So many speakers in so many of the sessions this week called to for putting together a mix of practical protection and prevention solutions that include: increased resettlement and humanitarian admissions, expanded channels for labour migration and family reunification, temporary protection statuses, and development and decent work solutions at home for those who don’t leave or actually can return. In fact, much of this is a straightforward echo of the *Comprehensive Plan of Action* that your agency, states and others put together upstairs in two historic conferences on the *Vietnamese* boat people a generation ago. It is time to step into that again! There is so much convergence here, so much urgency and convergence here!

Finally, Mr. High Commissioner, a few moments ago there was a suggestion to convene a panel of “eminent persons” to take this work forward on improving responses and developing real solutions with your agencies, states and civil society. We suggest that Mr. Abu Kurke Kabeto is precisely the kind of eminent person that can point to responses and solutions. With clarity and with urgency.

Thank you.