**Monday, 3 October 2015**

**Greek heroes honoured at 2016 UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award ceremony**

GENEVA, Oct 3 – The UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, today honoured the heroic efforts of Greek volunteers during the 2015 refugee crisis by giving its Nansen Refugee Award to the Hellenic Rescue Team (HRT) and Efi Latsoudi of PIKPA village on the island of Lesvos..

The HRT and Efi Latsoudi received the Award at a ceremony in Geneva, for their outstanding work during 2015, when they helped thousands of refugees and migrants arriving in Greece: saving lives during treacherous sea crossings and providing a safe haven for the most vulnerable once they reached land. Each winner receives the Nansen medal and $75,000 to fund a project, which complements their existing work.

**UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi** presented the Nansen medal to the winners and paid tribute to them in an address:

“Each time I witness simple and spontaneous acts of humanity and compassion carried out by everyday people to help refugees, it renews my faith that the people of the world will not turn their backs on these women, men and children who have lost everything.

“The heroic humanitarian efforts of Efi and Konstantinos, and the people working with them, reflect the spirit of solidarity which transcends intolerance and focusses on saving lives, healing hearts and calming souls.

“This is home-grown generosity: the accumulation of simple acts and it can be so powerful. And this is what motivates our two winners, who know first-hand that simple acts of humanity can add up to something miraculous.”

**Efi Latsoudi** is one of the founders of PIKPA village, formerly a children’s summer camp that was transformed in 2012 with the help of local authorities into a safe haven for vulnerable refugees. During the peak of the 2015 crisis, PIKPA was hosting around 600 refugees a day, despite a capacity of just 150. Since 2012, PIKPA village has helped over 30,000 refugees.

“This award is a recognition of a conscious decision not to deny vulnerable human beings who arrived in Lesvos, and those who did not make it, their dignity”, said Latsoudi on receiving the award.

“We grieved with so many mothers who lost children. 2015’s dramatic increase of deaths was a nightmare but we didn’t give up.

“All that we have achieved with solidarity, we need to defend now. Together we persevere and move on”, she continued.

**Konstantinos Mitragas** accepted the award on behalf of the Hellenic Rescue Team (HRT): “War, poverty and persecution are the factors which make people flee their countries. Unfortunately, the magnificent Aegean Sea became one of the world’s deadliest migration routes. From the first time we saw human beings in extreme danger, for us there was no second thought, just to save them. We never sought recognition. We are truly satisfied just with the smile of the rescued person, this is our reward.

“This award belongs to all the two thousand volunteer rescuers of the Hellenic Rescue Team who, allow me to say, are heroes because we consider it our duty to risk our lives to save others.”

As secretary-general, Mitragas leads a team of more than 2,000 HRT volunteers, who have been rescuing people from the Aegean Sea and Greek mountains since 1978. In 2015, the volunteers worked 24 hours a day, responding to endless rescue calls in the middle of the night. During this time they undertook 1,035 rescue operations, saving 2,500 lives, and assisted more than 7,000 people to safety.

Over 850,000 people arrived in Greece by sea in 2015 with more than 500,000 of these arriving on the island of Lesvos. In October 2015, arrivals peaked at more than 10,000 per day, as conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq continued to uproot people from their homes. Sadly, it’s estimated that more than 270 people died in Greek waters over the year.

For more than 60 years, UNHCR’s Nansen Refugee Award has recognised those who have shown outstanding dedication to the refugee cause. The 2016 winners were honoured with a ceremony that featured speeches, poetry, dance and musical performances from Senegalese singer, Baaba Maal; World Poetry Slam Champion of 2015, Emi Mahmoud; professional dance collaboration, the Grey People, and Lyse Doucet, the BBC’s Chief International Correspondent.

The Nansen Refugee Award alumnae include the famous as well as unsung heroes; Eleanor Roosevelt, Graça Machel and Luciano Pavarotti among its laureates, but a number of remarkable unsung heroes, such as the Hellenic Rescue Team and Efi Latsoudi, who have dedicated themselves to fighting the injustices suffered by the forcibly displaced: [unhcr.org/Nansen](http://www.unhcr.org/Nansen).

**ENDS**

**Notes to Editors**

**Media contacts**

For media inquiries and to arrange interviews with the 2016 Nansen Award Winners please contact:

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**For a short set of photos immediately after the ceremony, please go to:** <http://media.unhcr.org/Share/2ck7klx804qcr5x30j78266hxos112mm>

**For further photos and video of the Nansen 2016 award winners and ceremony, please register at:** media.unhcr.org

*NOTE: Video will be available from 23:00 hours CET Monday 3 October.*

**About UNHCR’s Nansen Refugee Award:**

Few humanitarian honours possess the rich legacy of UNHCR’s Nansen Refugee Award. Established in 1954, the award recognizes extraordinary humanitarian work on behalf of refugees, displaced or stateless peoples. The award is named after Fridtjof Nansen, the Norwegian polar explorer and humanitarian who went on to serve in the 1920s as the first High Commissioner for Refugees for the League of Nations. Nansen was awarded the 1922 Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his courageous and unfaltering work on behalf of World War I refugees. The Nansen Refugee Award, through its laureates, aims to showcase his values of perseverance and conviction in the face of adversity. The 2016 winners are a remarkable example of these attributes.

**About UNHCR:**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), was established on December 14, 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly. UNHCR safeguards the rights and well-being of refugees and stateless people. In more than six decades, the agency has helped tens of millions of people restart their lives. UNHCR is on the front lines of the world’s major humanitarian crises, including Syria, Iraq, Central African Republic, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and countless other emergencies.