

Speech by the Minister of Interior of the Republic of Cyprus

Mr. Neoklis Sylikiotis

at the Ministerial – Level Meeting on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the 1951 Convention (and of the Protocol of 1967) and of the 50th Anniversary of the 1961 Convention,

Geneva, 7 December 2011 PM

Honourable High Commissioner, Mr. António Guterres,

Honourable colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor for my country and myself to address this Ministerial Meeting which marks the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Convention and the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention and express our support to the relevant Statement of the EU.

This meeting takes place at a time when the forced displacement of persons becomes an even more complex phenomenon with rapid rising trends, whilst the unfortunate impact of the global economic crises makes the management of refugees an even greater challenge.

This year anniversaries offer us the opportunity to assess what we have done or have neglected to do as an international community. They are also a starting point for a corrective course, where through a collective and honest effort, we will redefine our responsibilities. Only then we could claim that half a century after the Conventions we reaffirm their values and goals.

At the same time, we must remind ourselves that as long as conflicts are multiplied, refugees will be multiplied as well. It is for this reason that the international community must intensify its efforts for the prevention and the timely resolution of conflicts.

The refugee issue is not, nor can it be treated as a national problem. It is a global issue, which calls for international coordination and dedication for supranational solutions.

It is an indisputable fact that, during the decades passed since the Conventions, the international community, with the contribution of international organizations and especially the UN High Commission for Refugees, provided protection and decent living conditions to millions of people who were being persecuted. However, despite the progress achieved, the refugee issue requires greater efforts, more loyalty and more effective and efficient solutions.

Cyprus, through its own history, is well aware of what the forced displacement of people means. Cypriots are still experiencing the consequences of forced displacement within their own country. This is why we are particularly sensitive to universal principles and values and to the necessity to demonstrate solidarity and full respect of the human rights of refugees.

In this context, Cyprus has performed and will continue to perform its duty and obligations towards people in need of international protection. Located

in the eastern Mediterranean, at the crossroads of Europe, Africa and Asia, and next to a politically unstable region, that of the Middle East, Cyprus experiences influxes of mixed immigration flows. Since 2005 our Asylum Service has examined more than 40 thousands asylum applications and has granted protection to more than 2700 people, coming mainly from Palestine, Iraq, African countries, Iran, Syria and Turkey. Despite the pressures on our national asylum system, our main priority remains the identification of those people who are in need of international protection. Our priority is also to integrate beneficiaries of protection into the Cypriot society, in order to avoid marginalization and discrimination, and to provide these people the opportunity to participate positively in the economic and social life.

Ladies, Gentlemen,

Europe has been traditionally a place where protection and solidarity was offered to those in need of international protection. The European Union, founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality, solidarity and fundamental rights reaffirms its commitment to the protection of refugees. As it is well known, the EU has set as a main political goal to establish a Common European Asylum System by the end of 2012. Cyprus reiterates its commitment to work towards the completion of the Common European Asylum System based on high protection standards combined with fair and effective procedures, a goal which is high on the agenda of the forthcoming Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the EU during the second half of 2012.

It the firm position of my country that this European effort must have as its main objective the creation of a common European area of protection and solidarity, which will provide high standards of safety, fair and effective practices, which will prevent abuses, and also, uniform procedures, both for the assessment of asylum applications and for the reception of asylum seekers as well as for the determination of the status provided.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, I would like to assure that the full respect of human life and dignity is the philosophy behind our policy. As the slogan of the UNHCR and IOM says, refugees ARE NOT JUST NUMBERS. There are people and personal stories behind statistics and numbers.

We remain committed to the granting of international protection to persons in accordance with the fundamental principles and values that govern this protection. We reaffirm our commitment to continue improving the quality of asylum procedures, reception conditions and to enhance integration of beneficiaries of international protection in the Cypriot society. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees remains a fundamental pillar for the protection and promotion of the fundamental principles and values for international protection, and for this reason why we look forward to continuing and strengthening our cooperation.

Thank you very much for your attention.