



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

**Informal Meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs Council
Dublin, 17 January 2013**

**Remarks by António Guterres
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

Mr Chairman, Honourable Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Of all the terrible conflicts facing the world in 2013, Syria is undoubtedly the most complex and dangerous. Two years into the crisis, its humanitarian impact is enormous, in particular since fighting escalated during the summer of 2012.

In early April 2012, UNHCR had registered some 33,000 Syrian refugees in neighboring countries. As of yesterday, their number across the Middle East and North Africa stood just under 630,000 – nearly twenty times as high. Since the beginning of December, refugee arrivals have been averaging about 25,000 every week. Their number will keep on growing, and the bitter winter is only adding to the suffering.

In southeastern Turkey, more than 150,000 Syrians are now hosted in 14 camps. Up to 70,000 more are living in urban areas. Pressure has been increasing, with thousands of people reportedly on the Syrian side of the border.

In Jordan, the number of Syrian refugees who have come forward for registration has passed the 180,000 mark. Most are hosted by local communities, while over 50,000 of the more recent arrivals have found shelter at the Za'atri refugee camp. A second site is expected to open within the coming weeks.

In Lebanon, over 200,000 Syrian refugees have been registered or are awaiting registration. They have largely been absorbed into local communities, and efforts are under way with the government to expand accommodation options, as hosting families are severely stretched.

In Iraq, still struggling with its own transition from conflict to stability, the number of Syrian refugees is now above 70,000.

Some 18,000 more have already been registered in Egypt and other North African countries. There has been exemplary cooperation between governments, UNHCR, other UN agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement and NGOs throughout the region.

But these numbers alone will never convey the full extent of the tragedy. On a recent visit to Lebanon, stopping in a school to talk to refugee children, we saw that all of their drawings showed weapons, fighting and people dying. They had fled with their families from bombarded cities, their schools and homes reduced to rubble. Many of them had lost siblings, parents or friends, several had been injured themselves.

This is a glimpse of the thousands of young lives that have been shattered by this conflict, leaving the future generation of an entire country marked by violence and trauma for many years to come.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The most tragic consequences of the crisis are obviously being felt inside Syria itself, where an estimated 2 million people have been displaced internally, many of them forced to flee several times as the conflict continues to spread. More than four million are affected by the crisis, with living conditions in all areas of the country deteriorating rapidly. It is not only the widespread violence that people fear, but also the combined threats of hunger, cold and illness.

Refugees in Syria, mainly Palestinians and Iraqis, are also affected by the intensifying crisis. According to UNRWA reports, nearly 20,000 Palestinian refugees have fled from Syria, most of them to Lebanon and a smaller number to Jordan. Thousands of Iraqis are also returning home from Syria as a result of the insecurity there.

Humanitarian access remains the most difficult challenge, and many of those who need help remain outside of our reach, trapped in conflict areas. UNHCR and many others have been appealing to all parties to the conflict to grant unrestricted access to affected populations. As long as this call continues to go unheeded, the suffering of Syrians will only grow and tens of thousands more will be forced to flee.

The massive refugee exodus is having a significant impact on the society, economy and security of the host countries. Iraqi, Jordanian, Lebanese and Turkish families are sharing their homes and their increasingly meager resources with strangers. The economic cost of such a large-scale influx is significant, leads to complex social consequences, and has a serious impact on local infrastructure and the environment.

By keeping their borders open to refugees in such a complex and challenging environment, the countries neighboring Syria are providing a very positive example to the world. But their capacities are being severely tested. International solidarity in support of their generosity must be urgently reinforced.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The European Union has a central role to play in response to this crisis, both through its action in the region and closer to home.

EU support to the humanitarian response to help those affected by the conflict in Syria has been strong. The European Commission and individual Member States together have so far provided more than 420 million euro to the joint humanitarian appeals for Syria and Syrian refugees. More will be needed soon, as UN agencies appealed just a few weeks ago for \$1.5 billion to cover humanitarian needs inside and outside Syria for the next six months.

While funding is essential, Europe's other – and equally important – contribution to showing solidarity with the region is through a solid response to the needs of people fleeing Syria who are seeking protection in EU Member States. So far, the number of Syrian arrivals is comparatively small, less than 30,000 since April 2011. Nonetheless, European efforts to reinforce Member States' protection of this group have a significant impact, both within the Union and for the countries neighboring Syria whose capacities are already dangerously overstretched.

Let me outline a few of the most important steps the EU should consider taking:

Firstly, ensure access to territory and fair asylum procedures for those seeking protection. Syria's neighbours, although all of them have different policies and practical arrangements, have essentially kept their borders open to Syrians fleeing the conflict throughout the crisis.

Most EU Member States are doing the same, although several cases have been reported of Syrians who were denied access to territory despite having asked for protection. It is important that those who wish to seek asylum are identified and referred swiftly to competent authorities. I encourage Member States and EU institutions to work together to ensure everything possible is done to provide Syrians arriving at EU borders with access to protection in cases where they are entitled.

Second, UNHCR welcomes the fact that our call for a suspension on removal of Syrians has largely been respected. I urge States to continue to refrain from returning Syrian citizens, not only to Syria, but also to the overburdened countries in the region, which need this sign of solidarity.

Third, a more consistent approach to protection is needed, particularly as concerns the fair processing of asylum claims and the forms of protection that are being awarded to Syrian claimants.

Germany and Sweden have received the highest number of Syrian asylum applications – close to two thirds of the claims made throughout the EU. Their response has been generous, with almost all applicants receiving protection. Another 19 European countries, including Switzerland and Norway, have protection rates of more than 70%. In contrast, five EU Member States have not granted protection to any Syrian citizens, or only in an insignificant number of cases, since the conflict began nearly two years ago. This raises concerns about the processing practices in these countries.

The forms of protection and rights granted also need to be more harmonized. UNHCR considers that many Syrians seeking international protection are likely to fulfill the requirements of the refugee definition in the 1951 Convention *and* the EU Qualification Directive.

However, we have noted significantly different rights and entitlements among those given protection in Europe. For example, only seven European countries have awarded refugee status more frequently than other forms of protection. In some countries refugee status has not been granted at all, and in others Syrians receive almost exclusively a humanitarian status. More work is needed in this area to ensure

consistency, for example through pooling Country of Origin Information and making it available to more Member States, including in translation.

Fourth, I strongly encourage Member States to explore ways to bring together family members affected by the crisis. This means seeking ways to facilitate access for displaced family members of Syrians lawfully present in the EU. This would not only help to provide protection to people who need it, but would also be seen as a tangible demonstration of solidarity with countries neighbouring Syria.

Within the EU, States should also look at bringing together Syrian asylum seekers with family members who may be in other Member States, including relatives beyond the nuclear family, which is possible under the Dublin Regulation's discretionary clauses.

Fifth, while it is premature to look at a large resettlement programme for Syrians, UNHCR has called for resettlement in a number of targeted cases. Providing places for these refugees, all of whom are vulnerable and at risk, would be a much-needed gesture and I would welcome further EU engagement in this area. UNHCR has not, as yet, launched a call for large numbers of resettlement places for Syrian refugees fleeing the conflict. However, as the crisis goes on, we will need to consider a more extensive resettlement programme, in which we would call on the EU and Member States for support.

Separately from this but no less importantly, we also urgently seek resettlement places for refugees from other countries out of the region, including many who have been staying in Syria but who are now at risk once more.

There is the possibility that the number of people leaving Syria continues to rise sharply in the future. If, at a certain point, the situation led to a 'mass influx' in one or more EU Member States, it may be necessary to consider the invocation of the Temporary Protection Directive. I am not putting this on the table today. However, if the number of those seeking protection in the EU increases dramatically, this might be a way to achieve a fairer balance between Member States than we see today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The EU has come far in recent years in its efforts to develop a Common European Asylum System. There is still much to be done to fulfill its true potential, but we cannot ignore the progress made in the last decade towards more comprehensive and effective laws and systems.

The crisis in Syria is now an opportunity to show how this common system can function as it should. I therefore encourage the Union, and all Member States, to use the tools the Common System affords to address some of the concerns with the protection practices for Syrians which I have outlined here today.

With the second-year anniversary of the Syria crisis approaching, we need to be prepared for the situation to get dramatically worse before it gets any better. If the existing worst-case scenarios materialize, the international community will need to be prepared to engage in a more significant resettlement programme. If faced with very

extreme events, it may even have to explore possible options for a humanitarian evacuation.

We count on Europe to continue doing its part to help shoulder this burden. UNHCR stands ready to work with the EU and Member States in addressing this challenge.

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