



Restoring Dignity, Inspiring Change.

ICMC Secretariat
1, rue de Varembe
P.O. Box 96
CH-1211 Geneva 20
Switzerland

Tel: +41 22 919 10 20
Fax: +41 22 919 10 48
Email: info@icmc.net
www.icmc.net

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Refugee crisis in Europe: at the borders of humanity

Last Monday's summit meeting on refugees in Brussels confirmed once more the priority given to the protection of borders over the protection of people. With millions of refugees in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon and tens of thousands trapped in Greece, Macedonia or in-between borders, their lives and future have now been made the object of a mercantile process led by Europe, cradle of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The logics aiming at self-defense have led to the building of walls and fences. They have cost the lives of thousands, including over 400 children like little Alan Kurdi; they have made women and elderly walk for hundreds of kilometers along national borders behind which there were buses and trains that could have been made available; they have broken up the unity in solidarity between EU states and profoundly questioned human compassion with those who suffer. In acting as reinforced barriers, borders have become bottlenecks of selection: a major cause for continued and new suffering.

Refugees are today increasingly subject to selection procedures no longer solely based on the 1951 Convention, but also on their nationality and even their city of departure. Refugees coming from Afghanistan and Pakistan are routinely stopped to prioritize refugees from Syria; and Syrian refugees from Damascus are said to be in lesser need of protection than those coming from Aleppo.

It is equally obvious that the majority of people who arrived in Greece cannot simply be considered as irregular migrants not in need of international protection. Correct processes will have to be installed to guarantee this international right and safeguard the 1951 Convention. The international law on *non-refoulement* has never been so openly disregarded. Protection levels which were so constructively and understandingly agreed upon by nearly all nations 64 years ago are today questioned or simply considered inapplicable.

Refugees are close to become of mercantile value: their right to seek refuge in a safer country is being negotiated against money and visas. The EU is planning to pay 6 billion Euros to return those stranded in Greece to Turkey and to stop the new arrivals. While this may contribute to organize relief and stop the flows in the short term, the longer term picture remains hazardous without political solutions that enable return and reconstruction in the countries of origin. Furthermore, it seems unavoidable that more financial means will be needed over time to make this solution sustainable while the system will also prove to become less effective in preventing refugees from seeking any route to security for themselves and their families. The irregular flows of migrants along the Western Balkans are said to have been halted but precisely this amplified the dramatic situation of those trapped at the border.

Relocation agreements and member state commitments remain essential in the implementation of any of the EU pledges and especially in the plan to resettle one Syrian from Turkey for every Syrian readmitted by Turkey from the Greek islands. Instead of organizing this double movement, it may be more effective, less costly, and reducing feelings of despair to exploit and expand the mechanism of "hotspots".

Over one million migrants applied for asylum in the EU countries in 2015. Only 292,000 were granted asylum that year. The intra-European relocation measures decided upon in September last year have been opposed, and only 273 people were relocated through mid-January. Resettlement figures in Europe are on the whole far too low. Without significant and measurable attempts to respond adequately to the call for the protection of migrants and their search for better perspectives, humanity will further divide. There is a strong need to oppose this trend, which confuses and compromises away too much of existing values and which in the past has so often led to conflict and war.

In addition to the means needed to shelter refugees in the host countries there is a clear need for more solution-oriented investment to:

- serve effective and well-monitored protection, immigration and integration policies;
- promote initiatives that build bridges in a diversity of cultures and contribute to societal and global cohesion;
- reinforce the 1951 Convention on the protection of refugees and develop additional protection mechanisms for migrants whose inability to return home fall outside that convention;
- promote access to labor markets in ways that reasonably match the needs of societies;
- multiply multilateral efforts to reduce the causes of conflict and displacement;
- integrate economists and civil society in the solution building efforts.

The Church, civil society and local communities have responded in a broad spectrum of ways to organize, welcome and facilitate arrivals and build relations but the effectiveness of such action largely depends on the status and permits that national authorities grant to the refugees. Building bridges includes all actors in society.

Johan Ketelers
Secretary General