Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme

Standing Committee
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NGO Statement on Europe

Thank you, Chair.

This statement has been drafted through a wide consultation with NGOs and attempts to reflect the diversity of views within the NGO community.

Protection at Sea

In November 2014, the Italian Rescue at Sea operation *Mare Nostrum* came to an end. *Mare Nostrum* saved more than 140,000 people since October 2013. Yet, in 2014 alone, more than 3,000 died attempting to cross the Mediterranean. If the search and rescue efforts are downsized – and they are being downsized – the death toll in the Mediterranean will rise. Italy has carried a heavy share of the burden. It is now time for the EU to step up.

We, NGOs, call on the European Parliament to allocate the necessary resources to set up a European search and rescue service at sea.

Operation «Triton», run by Frontex, is not an adequate solution. Planned before the decision taken by the Italian Government to stop the "Mare Nostrum" operation, and designed first and foremost to patrol the EU borders, "Triton" was in no way designed to replace "Mare Nostrum" and "cannot be expected to handle the migrant challenge alone."

Until the EU is willing to set up a European search and rescue service, it must make a serious commitment to funding operation Triton. Triton’s budget, at 2.9m Euro a month, is one third of what Italy was spending on Operation Mare Nostrum. One third. Eight European member states are not contributing to Triton. We, NGOs, have come here today to ask you, European Member States, to make saving lives at sea a priority. The Mediterranean has been become know as the graveyard of Europe. It is within our capacity to change this. It is time that we do.

Protection on Land

Concerted European action is required to save lives in the Mediterranean. But, to quote the High Commissioner, « Protection at sea starts with protection on land. »
1) We call on EU States to keep protection channels open and to develop legal alternatives to dangerous voyages. In the words of António Guterres, «the best way to address irregular movements is to promote regular movements»: through resettlement, humanitarian admissions programs, visa policies, labour arrangements. We thank the many European governments who have offered additional places to Syrian refugees. Yet the current international resettlement commitment remains at only 2% of the 3.7 million registered Syrian refugees. We urge countries to come together and resettle 180 000 Syrians—or 5% of the refugee population—by the end of 2015. This can be achieved.

2) We call on the EU to implement common standards for the reception and hosting of asylum seekers. The Dublin III Regulation offers improved procedural safeguards, among these the right to information and to a personal interview, and access to remedies. As NGOs, we welcome these changes. We remain worried, however, about the Regulation’s directives on unaccompanied minors, and we join UNHCR in supporting the Commission’s proposal amending the Dublin regulation regarding the Member State responsible for examining the asylum application of unaccompanied minors.

3) We call on the EU to fully commit to UNHCR’s campaign to eradicate statelessness globally within a decade. Nowhere is this goal more achievable than in Europe. Yet in this region children continue to be born stateless. NGOs welcome recent statelessness law reform in Estonia. However, far more needs to be done. A more concerted regional approach is required along the lines of that concluded last December by Latin American and Caribbean States in adopting the Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action which commits to eradicate statelessness by 2024.

4) We urge European States to renew their commitment to treating all migrants with dignity and in compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights. We take this opportunity to commend UNHCR’s Vincent Cochetel for his frankness in describing gaps in protection in Europe, and we call on the High Commission to continue to press States for their lack of hospitality.

In particular,

• We call on Spain to stop the pushbacks to Morocco of migrants entering the cities of Ceuta and Melilla. In December 2014, the Spanish parliament «approved legislation allowing for the summary expulsion to Morocco of migrants entering the country’s cities of Ceuta and Melilla in North African». We join the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Commission, and UNHCR in urging Spain to withdraw these amendments.

• We call on France to provide protection and shelter for the hundreds of migrants squatting Calais, most of them homeless, as they wait to attempt the perilous Channel-crossing to England. UNHCR’s Vincent Cochetel described the conditions in Calais as worse than those at refugee camps in Turkey, which shelter hundreds of thousands of new arrivals from Syria each month. To quote Cochetel, “The conditions ... are not consistent with the kind of values that a democratic society should have ... This is a shameful situation to witness in the heart of the European...
"Union." We call on France, and Britain, to face the severity of the situation.

- We call on the Greek State to make full compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights a priority. We welcome the Greek government’s announcement, on 17 February, that it would detain migrants only exceptionally and for no more than six months. Yet much remains to be done. The Greek government has acknowledged that the current immigration detention conditions amount to inhuman and degrading treatment. We ask Greece to turn this acknowledgment into concrete reform measures.

- Finally, we join PACE, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in calling on Ukraine to implement the newly adopted legislation on the rights of internally displaced persons. And we ask the Russian authorities to offer protection to Ukrainian refugees and to allow them to settle anywhere in the country.

We ask all European States to keep protection channels open, to work together to stop deaths at sea, and to develop common protection standards that respect the dignity of each asylum seeker.

Thank you, Mister Chair

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