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churches' commission for migrants in europe



cec

conference of european churches

22 September 2015

**European Responses to Refugees and Migrants
Informal European Council 23 September 2015**

Dear President, Dear Prime Minister, Dear Chancellor,

On behalf of our members, Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant Churches and Christian service, relief and development organizations, and based on our extensive experience of working with people in situations of extreme precariousness and vulnerability we call on you in your discussion at the Informal European Council to commit to a unified, ambitious and rights based refugee and migration policy. We are particularly concerned that the recent Informal Justice and Home Affairs Council could not come to agreement. It must now be in your hands to identify sustainable and just solutions for the reception and acceptance of refugees and migrants in Europe.

We, along with many people in Europe and the rest of the world cannot accept the death, destitution and dehumanizing across our Union that is a direct result of asylum and migration policies that are unrealistic, unfocused on human beings and lack solidarity. The resulting loss of life or social and economic deprivation experienced by those coming to Europe has shown the urgent need for the European Union and its Member States to agree and act on a new approach to asylum and migration whether it be towards economic migrants, refugees or asylum seekers.

The majority of those taking the route to Europe come from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Eritrea and their numbers continue to rise rapidly. Most people arriving are fleeing war, conflict or persecution at home, as well as deteriorating conditions in many refugee-hosting countries and countries of transit which do not, or can no longer offer safety or the possibility to establish a new existence. The lack of safe and legal paths to Europe forces these people to take risks and forces many to rely on smugglers. This puts them in danger of falling prey to traffickers and other criminals and of losing their life.

The European Union now faces a humanitarian crisis. Our members working across Europe and the Middle East bear witness to this as they provide support and services for vulnerable people regardless of their ethnicity, legal status, and religion or how they have travelled to Europe. As Christian churches and church related organizations we expect a more human and effective response of Member States and the European Union in protecting the lives of those coming to Europe and ensuring that their inviolable dignity, value and potential is defended once in Europe. Furthermore, people who are in this situation of vulnerability should not be used as political pawns and we call on those in the public sphere to desist from the increasingly xenophobic and inflammatory discourse used to describe migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

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Policies and mechanisms must be adopted that effectively guarantee that human rights are met, that obligations and responsibilities as are enshrined in EU and international law are respected and that ensure solidarity between Member States but also solidarity with countries hosting the majority of refugees today.

We therefore wish to reiterate the call we made to the Informal Justice and Home Affairs Ministers and urge you, the leaders of the European Union and Member States, commit to the following:

- Consolidate and maintain concerted efforts to save the lives of refugees and migrants in jeopardy within and beyond EU borders and to increase the capacities for, preferably civilian, search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean.
- Put in place and finance legal and practical responses that respect the rights and dignity of refugees, migrants and persons seeking protection and improve their reception conditions - at least in line with EU minimum standards¹ - and to ensure and ease the access to asylum procedures.
- To increase resources to source countries to support organizations who are responding to the needs of refugees and internally displaced people in the international humanitarian and development context.
- Considerably increase the places for the resettlement of refugees from different crisis regions to European states. EU Member States need to come up with credible figures proving their commitment to share the responsibility to protect, and the European Commission could - in addition to funding - offer expertise and policy coordination to encourage pledging of substantially higher numbers.
- To put in place policies which enable safe and legal pathways into Europe including issuing of humanitarian visas, lifting of visa requirements for persons fleeing from conflict zones (e.g. Syria, Iraq), easier and more generous family reunification for persons in need of or granted international protection, and humanitarian admission
- To support efforts of countries in the Middle East and other conflict regions as well as UNHCR to adequately support refugees.
- To advance plans for an accessible and known system of legal migration in countries of origin, thereby providing viable and humane alternatives to smuggling.
- Ensure sharing of responsibility for refugee reception between EU Member States, and relocation and reception of refugees from Greece, Hungary and Italy to other EU Member States going beyond the pledges reached in July 2015. With the rising figures particularly for Greece, speedy relocation of higher numbers will be necessary to reduce the lengthy and risky journeys across Europe.
- Consider the needs and aspirations of refugees: particularly vulnerable persons and children. Family unity must always be respected, therefore tracing of relatives and family reunification should be pursued as a matter of priority and bureaucratic hurdles abolished. Wishes and reasons of refugees to want to go to specific countries and places should wherever possible be considered.
- We wish to raise caution concerning any common EU approach on the national lists of Safe Countries of Origin. To declare a country of origin as "safe" because the vast majority of asylum applicants is not recognised as in need of protection may lead to unjustifiable exclusion of persons actually requiring protection. We uphold our view that fair, efficient and shorter asylum procedures are necessary, rather than accelerated ones with a high potential of error. The status as EU candidate country does

¹ Council Directive 2013/33/EU of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection

not mean that all human rights standards are yet in place, and particularly where violent conflicts are raging, such a status would be against human rights obligations.

- To include one of the missing elements of the Common European Asylum System by making a proposal for the 'Recognition of the International Protection Status throughout the Union'. Such a proposal must include the ability to move from one Member State to another for the purposes of employment and reduce the currently proposed lengthy obligations to stay in one member state after a protection has been accorded there.
- Maintain a regular dialogue and collaboration with Churches, Christian organizations, civil society organizations, and other religious organizations which contribute to cover immediate basic needs of migrants and refugees and support longer term integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Ensure such organizations are adequately resourced to provide services both in the short and long term.

We have been moved by the recent outstanding actions initiated by some member states such as Austria, Germany and Italy (Mare Nostra), and the continuous welcoming reception in Sweden, and considering the broad support such initiatives have received from citizens believe such courageous actions ought to be replicated. Without concerted and committed actions in the coming days and months the European Union and its member states will violate their commitment to human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights as enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. We hope that in your deliberations on 23 September you will courageously take the responsibility to generously receive the asylum applicants currently in Europe, to end the need to walk thousands of kilometers to find a safe space, and to receive refugees from Middle Eastern countries before winter sets in again. Time matters: even if agreement could not be reached on all aspects, the already agreed relocation and resettlement of asylum applicants and refugees needs to start imminently!

In coming together to prepare this response we show a unity of concern for people both outside and inside European borders. Echoing the words of European Council President Donald Tusk, *'public debate on migration must mean in the first place the readiness to show solidarity and sacrifice, irrespective of what race, religion and nationality the need represents.'*

Yours sincerely



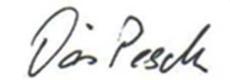
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