



Presentation by His Excellency Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva  
at the 60<sup>th</sup> Session of the Standing Committee of UNHCR  
*Geneva, 1 July 2014*

Mr. Chairman,

Today's world is confronted with the highest number of people, over 50 million, fleeing their home, since the Second World War. The causes of such tragedy unfortunately have become too familiar: persecution, human rights violations, armed conflicts, life-threatening extreme poverty. Moreover, one needs to take into account those forced from their homes because of natural disasters and large-scale development schemes.

The first U.N. High Commissioner for refugees, Dr. Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart, summarized the solution as follows: "The essence is to find a little place, which is not just a roof over one's head, not just a place to live in. It is the all-embracing term for a series of elements which together constitute a man's independence and therefore his freedom and his dignity" (Address, Oslo, 12 December 1955). We are all challenged to ensure that all uprooted persons may recover at least a minimum of freedom and dignity.

In fact, refugees and displaced persons are subjects of rights and duties as all human beings, and not merely the objects of assistance. They deserve protection, which should translate into concrete action the values and principles of respect for human rights and dignity. The evolution over the years of political and humanitarian circumstances have necessitated a wider interpretation of the concept of refugee. The UNHCR promoted this process by encouraging the international community to enlarge existing notions. The High Commissioner often has found it necessary to exercise his "good offices"<sup>1</sup> in order to assure protection to refugees and other displaced persons. Such past actions need to be repeated, and even strengthened, at the present time. Protection of persons should take precedence over disproportionate concerns about State security. Nor should hospitality be limited to the private sphere. It needs to become part and parcel of the world of politics and thus make a difference at national and global levels. Burden sharing and solidarity extend to having more flexible borders policies and an easier access to asylum procedures. In addition, substantially increased resettlement possibilities could greatly advance the achievement of durable solutions.

In Europe, a common strategy is essential, so that the countries of first arrival may not be forced to bear the full burden alone. This requires a strategic accord that allocates

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<sup>1</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution. A/RES/1388. 20 November 1959, par. 2, authorizes the High Commissioner, in respect of refugees who do not come within the competence of the United Nations, to use his good offices in the transmission of contributions designed to provide assistance to these refugees"

refugees among all EU countries, taking into account criteria like the economic situation of the country, its size and population, and the talents and preferences of the people involved.

This further demands the education and sensibilization of public opinion with regard to our common responsibility on the causes of conflict and on the search for peaceful solutions and co-existence. Faith communities, which are present everywhere, advocate a shared message of compassion and solidarity. They are particularly attentive to accompanying people on their journey to safety and can offer a unique contribution, that forced migration should be seen in a fuller perspective of individual, social and community consequences. This more inclusive, coherent and cohesive vision on forced migration facilitates a comprehensive analysis of causes and consequences motivated by full respect for human life and dignity.

In conclusion, the current situation shows the replay of a familiar tragedy with changed faces and new methods of escape. Arguments are restated on the ethical responsibility to eliminate the root causes of so much suffering. It remains urgent in the world of today calls for a renewed commitment and to implement the good conclusions reached. As Pope Francis has remarked: "... I ask leaders and legislators and the entire international community above all to confront the reality of those who have been displaced by force, with effective projects and new approaches in order to protect their dignity, to improve the quality of their life and to face the challenges that are emerging from modern forms of persecution, oppression and slavery"<sup>2</sup>.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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<sup>2</sup> Speech Plenaria Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and People on the Move, 24 May 2013.