



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 66<sup>th</sup> Session of the Executive Committee of UNHCR

*Geneva, 8 October 2015*

Madam President,

Today, as already pointed out, more than 60 million people have been forced to leave their home. It is an exceptional moment of crisis that sees people being persecuted, as victims of war, or obliged to leave their host countries because of lack of hope. The Syrian case presents this situation in a very dramatic way.

The 1951 Convention clearly states that refugees are a common responsibility of the international community. Gradually, however, this responsibility has shifted to the host countries in the developing world notwithstanding their own limited means. They continue to bear the burden with financial assistance from donors. Many times, the combined assistance is inadequate and refugees find themselves in very difficult predicaments. Nevertheless, geographical proximity does not define responsibility. Many powers destabilize the countries of origin of asylum seekers and they should, therefore, take responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

Syrian refugees and other asylum seekers now are reaching Europe through desperate paths that leave many casualties at sea and on land. So far this year some 3,000 asylum seekers and migrants drowned in the Mediterranean where they lay buried together with their dreams of a more dignified life. They arrive directly from conflict areas, or they leave situations with no hope and no prospect for the future. They escape extreme poverty and a systemic violation of their human rights. The host communities are under strain. Humanitarian programmes remain underfunded. These asylum seekers cannot use normal transport since carriers want to see the documentation required by countries of destination and they do not have such documentation and, in fact, do not need to have it. Access to the European territory to apply for asylum has thus become almost impossible. Huge amounts are paid to smugglers as a result. Humanitarian visas would be a remedy. One might even consider the lifting of carrier sanctions. Asylum seekers could then arrive safely in Europe without risking their lives.

The increased number of asylum seekers and refugees challenges the European Union. Measures have been taken to relocate asylum seekers and to provide additional donor money. However admirable, these measures remain only a first step. A parallel agenda is also in place: reinforcing borders and trying to prevent people from arriving. The question remains whether EU obligations to refugees will be put in the first place or that securing borders get the upper hand.

There is fear that too many people are knocking at the door of the EU and its 28 Countries. Arguments are presented that too much strain would be placed on EU structures and societies and that it would be better to settle refugees in their region of origin. However, a sense of perspective is called for. Most refugees are in fact in their region of origin, in the neighbouring Countries of

Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. More accurate information and balanced reporting in the media would dispel unfounded fears and support the needed political will to show concrete solidarity in solving the current difficulties.

The political priority remains the need to save lives. Then the legal obligation deriving from the treaties should be honoured. The current emergency calls also for a more effectively coordinated global governance of population movements. This emergency is not new. Unfortunately, at regular intervals the world has to witness refugee emergencies. In 1956, 220,000 Hungarians crossed into Austria in three weeks. In 1975 the end of the Vietnam War caused more than a million refugees, boat people and others, to look for a refuge. Millions of refugees were produced by the independence and civil wars in Mozambique, Congo, Angola. In the 1990s when the peace agreement was signed to end the Balkan wars, more than 3 million people from the region were displaced, an estimated 1.3 million were internally displaced, approximately 500,000 refugees had fled to neighbouring countries, and some 700,000 refugees were in Western Europe. Elsewhere, there are new “boat people” looking for a welcome. Yesterday and today the causes of so much suffering are the same: wars, persecution, policies of oppression, discrimination, tyranny and extreme poverty.

The International Community cannot afford to continue along this path. Innovative reflection needs to be undertaken, keeping in mind the situations of the past, through initiatives like the International Conference on Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA I and II), or the Global Consultations on International Protection. Above all, the root causes of forced displacement have to be addressed by ensuring peace and sustainable development, the two tracks on which run a future without asylum seekers.

At this turning point when practical decisions are urgently required, Pope Francis’ words to the American and to the European political representatives are timely in pointing the way forward:

“Our world is facing a refugee crisis of a magnitude not seen since the Second World War. This presents us with great challenges and many hard decisions.... We must not be taken aback by their numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation.... in a way which is always humane, just and fraternal. We need to avoid a common temptation nowadays: to discard whatever proves troublesome.”

“Europe will be able to confront the problems associated with immigration only if it is capable of clearly asserting its own cultural identity.... Only if it is capable of adopting fair, courageous and realistic policies which can assist the countries of origin in their own social and political development and in their efforts to resolve internal conflicts – the principal cause of this phenomenon – rather than adopting policies motivated by self-interest, which increase and feed such conflicts. We need to take action against the causes and not only the effects.”

Madam President, allow me to add a word of thanks to the High Commissioner António Guterres, his leadership, *humanitas*, determination, compassion, have marked his service, inspired us and provided effective protection and assistance to millions of uprooted persons. My Delegation wishes him God’s speed and a happy future.

Thank you, Madam President.