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JOINT STATEMENT: SYRIA REFUGEE CRISIS – EU SHOULD DO MORE

With no end in sight to egregious violence and human rights abuse in Syria, Amnesty International, Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) are calling on EU Justice and Home Affairs Ministers to act now to help refugees fleeing Syria.

Refugees from Syria in neighbouring countries

To date, over 620,000 refugees have fled to neighbouring countries and North Africa to escape the bloody conflict that has so far left at least 60,000 people dead, according to United Nations figures. At least two million others in Syria have been displaced from their homes. Civilians in Syria are bearing the brunt of violations of international humanitarian and human rights law perpetrated by the different parties of the conflict.

Many of those who have managed to flee across borders are suffering extreme hardship in harsh winter conditions as the recent flooding of refugee camps in Jordan has highlighted. Almost two years into the conflict, an overwhelming humanitarian crisis is unfolding in the region. Refugees, many of them women and children traumatised by experiences in Syria, struggle daily to access basic services including shelter, health, water, sanitation and primary education. In response to this, the UN Syria Regional Response Plan is seeking US\$1bn to support up to one million Syrian refugees during the first half of 2013.

While Syria's neighbours—Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey—continue to receive and host large numbers of people, their resources are under severe strain and it is unclear how many more refugees they can absorb. These countries have already raised valid concerns about the intense pressure on resources, and the potential unrest and instability such a large influx poses.

It is of utmost urgency that the EU responds decisively and effectively to protect refugees fleeing Syria, in the surrounding region and in Europe. Failure to do so might force regional host countries to turn away refugees and impose unacceptable conditions on those already present.

Syrian refugees in the EU

From April 2011 to October 2012, some 23,500 Syrians applied for asylum in the EU, 15,000 of them in Germany and Sweden. While many EU countries have granted some kind of protection to Syrian refugees, treatment and level of protection vary greatly between EU countries.

Many Syrians reach Europe through Greece. Those who seek asylum in Greece face major obstacles in registering their applications. Of the 214 asylum applications Syrian nationals submitted between January and October 2012, only one applicant was granted refugee status, and five others received subsidiary protection. Some Syrians trying to enter Greece said they had been pushed back to Turkey by Greek authorities.

In Cyprus the authorities reportedly refused to examine subsequent asylum applications from Syrians who wanted their claims re-examined. In some countries on the EU's eastern borders, rejections reach 50 per cent and Syrians refused asylum are left in limbo. Several EU countries continue to detain Syrians.

Recommendations to the EU and its member states

While the EU and its member states have acknowledged the scale and urgency of the refugee crisis and have increased aid to countries in the region to meet the growing humanitarian disaster, the EU should greatly increase its commitment and effort:

- The EU should adopt a common approach to those fleeing Syria. All Syrians should be allowed entry and be presumed to need international protection, and given full, immediate access to fair and effective asylum procedures. According to UNHCR, Syrian civilians, and others living in Syria, including Palestinians, are likely

to fulfil the requirements of the refugee definition in the 1951 Refugee Convention, so most of those fleeing Syria should be recognised as Convention refugees and granted corresponding rights, including the right to family reunification

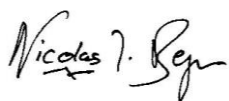
- In line with UNHCR recommendations, all returns to Syria and its neighbouring countries must continue to be suspended until the country's security and human rights situation has sufficiently improved to permit safe, dignified and sustainable return
- Syrians who have been present in the EU, whatever their immigration status, including failed asylum-seekers, should be allowed to apply or reapply for asylum, given the drastically deteriorating human rights situation in Syria since the onset of the conflict
- Immigration detention should not be used, except in the most exceptional circumstances and only as a last resort

In addition to ensuring that those arriving in the EU from Syria are given effective protection, the EU and its member states must urgently consider other tangible measures to share responsibility and support Syria's neighbouring countries who host the majority of refugees. These include:

- Donating generously to the UN Syria Regional Response Plan
- Offering a generous number of emergency resettlement places to the most vulnerable refugees fleeing Syria, currently in neighbouring countries. Priority should be given, but not limited, to those who need medical treatment, women at risk, unaccompanied minors, elderly or disabled refugees, people at risk for their involvement in peaceful humanitarian or other activities, and torture and violence survivors
- Establishing/expanding resettlement programmes to accommodate Iraqi and other third-country national refugees (from eg Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan) who were living in Syria when the conflict began and who are currently trapped in Syria by the violence
- Preparing for a prolonged humanitarian emergency so as to provide continuous support and help to neighbouring countries which receive sudden massive refugee arrivals

We call on the Ministers meeting in Dublin today to heed our calls and make concrete commitments towards assisting and protecting those who have managed to escape the devastating conflict in Syria.

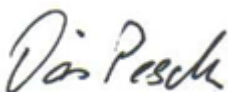
Brussels, 17 January 2013



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