10 Urgent Steps to Address the Refugee Crisis in Europe and Beyond

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We echo calls from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres and other partners for an urgent, coherent and robust response to the refugee crisis in Europe and beyond.

The absence of such a response to the situation of refugees and other migrants moving in and across the Middle East, North Africa and Europe is causing chaos, confusion, further unnecessary human suffering and human rights violations. With few exceptions, decision-makers in Europe and around the world seem at a loss as to what to do next to meaningfully address the situation. In Brussels, for example, the current focus of debate is a plan to further relocate 120,000 new arrivals in Europe, even though this would only help a fraction of the refugees in need of protection and at least four EU Member States oppose the relocation scheme.

The world is watching Europe’s response, particularly countries hosting significant numbers of refugees in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. But the problem is not Europe’s alone. The current flight of refugees to and across Europe is the result of successive collective failures: failed interventions creating chaos in Afghanistan and Iraq, a failure to secure a political solution and humanitarian access in Syria, failure to adequately support the response in neighbouring countries, failure to support front-line European countries like Greece, failure to heed warnings that the Dublin system was not fit for purpose, and failure to prepare for and readily accept new arrivals in Europe despite early and constant warnings. In addition, the international community has failed to adhere to basic treaty obligations established to protect people in their greatest hour of need.

After surveying our network of humanitarian organizations and other civil society actors involved in all phases of the displacement cycle – from inside countries of origin, to host countries, transit countries and countries of destination - we believe the requirements are clear.

1. **Dignity and Rights:** Refugees and others arriving in Europe from situations of war and insecurity have already suffered terribly. They are entitled to be received with dignity and respect for their rights, regardless of their immigration status. The reception of refugees and migrants should be consistent with these principles - rather than focused on barbed wire, tear gas, pepper spray, water cannons, and menacing intimidation. **Acts of refoulement (pushbacks) are unacceptable.**

2. **Saving Lives:** Many people are still undertaking perilous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea, often disembarking from Libya. Europe must maintain its search and rescue operations to continue saving lives. But it must also ensure these operations have the adequate capacity and mandate to deal with the growing problem. **Saving lives, not border control, should be the priority for operations in the Mediterranean.**

3. **Asylum:** UNHCR recently reported that 93% of the individuals arriving in Greece daily are fleeing conflict in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. European governments should respect the universal human right to seek asylum. Whatever their country of origin or arrival, asylum procedures must be prompt, fair and efficient.
   - Most urgently, **reception facilities** with trained staff are required in situ to receive, assist, register, screen and relocate arrivals with respect for their human dignity.
• We urge Hungary, which just enacted restrictive border measures, to ensure that individuals seeking protection can apply for asylum.
• We call on the EU to urgently revise its asylum regulations and legal framework to respond in a coordinated and rapid approach to asylum seekers entering the EU zone. Human Rights Watch has provided some specific recommendations along these lines.

4. **Identifying Special Needs:** It is very important to screen new arrivals for special needs. For example, they may have been trafficked, traumatized or tortured. Special protection measures and reception arrangements must be put in place to meet the specific needs of women and children, in particular measures to prevent and respond to sexual and gender based violence (before, during flight and on arrival).

5. **Funding:**
• The lack of adequate protection and assistance for Syrians inside and around Syria is partly due to funding shortfalls. For example, the World Food Program recently suspended food aid to 200,000 refugees in Jordan due to lack of funds. We strongly encourage increased donor support for the 2015 Syria Response Plan (which is only 33% funded) and the 2015 Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (which is only 41% funded).
• Any funding for the response in Europe should add to, rather than detract from, funding needed for humanitarian assistance in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Local and international NGOs and the populations they serve should not pay the price by seeing their funding reduced and channelled to Europe instead.
• NGOs delivering essential protection and basic services to new arrivals in Europe will soon run out of funds. Many donors are unprepared to fund humanitarian assistance inside the wealthy EU zone. Donors should urgently create exceptional funding mechanisms (or open up existing funding mechanisms) to support the response to refugees and migrants in Europe.

6. **Planning:** Temperatures in Europe are already beginning to fall, and the harsh realities of winter are imminent. EU leaders must agree to a clear, comprehensive and robust plan to respond in the short-, medium- and long-term. **States that feel they do not have the capacity to respond should ask for assistance** through, for example, the European Civil Protection Mechanism.

7. **Solidarity:**
• EU leaders must commit to a fair and equitable system to protect, resettle and relocate refugees and asylum-seekers across EU Member States. Resettlement should be shared across the EU and be proportional to the number of people seeking protection worldwide.
• All Member States should contribute to the response in whatever ways they can. We encourage a strengthened role played by regional actors, including Gulf states, as well as refugee resettlement countries. They are strongly encouraged to provide greater financial support for humanitarian assistance in addition to resettlement opportunities or temporary protection based on UNHCR’s vulnerability screening criteria.

8. **Alternatives:** The crisis in Europe could have been mitigated if people in need of protection were able to access alternative and efficient legal pathways to admission, including refugee resettlement, humanitarian admissions programs, education visas, work visas, and family reunification schemes. Efforts should be made to develop a comprehensive plan of action for States to document, promote and support such pathways as a matter of urgency, while ensuring minimum standards of protection.

9. **Xenophobia:** European leaders should do more to tackle racism and xenophobia. Civil society organizations worldwide have organized a number of successful campaigns that can be replicated, such as the Movement Against Xenophobia (MAX) in the UK, to prevent violence against new arrivals and promote peaceful co-existence. Putting programs in place today
to facilitate language learning, quality education, livelihoods training, and citizenship courses will go a long way to minimizing tension.

10. Root Causes: Investment in addressing the root causes of conflict, violence and displacement such as poverty, inequality, injustice, the arms trade corruption, competition for resources and climate change is essential to reverse the growing flight of men, women and children in search of protection.

- Member States with influence over the parties to the Syria conflict should, among other actions, intensify their efforts to pursue a negotiated political solution.
- The upcoming Valetta Summit with the EU and African Union is an important opportunity to address root causes of displacement in Africa, including conflict, repression and poverty.
- We look forward to a discussion of root causes at the December 2015 High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges in Geneva. We recommend the Syria situation to be included in the discussion.

To conclude, we are moved by the many citizens who have warmly welcomed those seeking protection. Some feel unsupported by their respective governments. Government authorities, especially those overwhelmed by arrivals, should encourage civil society actors to help them craft a response in a way that meets human rights standards. That said, at the end of the day, the primary responsibility for refugee and migrant protection lies with States. While we recognize the many contributions of various partners to the response, it is the obligation of the States to implement the ten points above.

ICVA is a global network of humanitarian NGOs dedicated to principled and effective humanitarian action. Visit our website at [www.icvanetwork.org](http://www.icvanetwork.org).