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A ten-point plan for a European refugee policy response

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"Never before have so many people fled political persecution and war as today, many of whom seek refuge here with us in Europe," German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Economics Minister Sigmar Gabriel wrote in an opinion piece, identify a 10 point plan for a European refugee policy response. Read the article in full below.

Europe is facing a great challenge for our generation. Never before have so many people fled political persecution and war as today, many of whom seek refuge here with us in Europe. In view of the crises in our neighbourhood, we must assume that this could remain the case for years. As Europeans, we owe it to ourselves and to the world to rise to the great challenge posed by these people looking for help.

One thing is clear, and that is that the response so far does not meet the standards that Europe must set for itself. Europe cannot put this off any longer and the EU must act now. We must therefore pursue a European asylum, refugee and migration policy that is founded on the principle of solidarity and our shared values of humanity. Ten points must urgently be addressed in this regard:

1

First, humane conditions must prevail throughout the EU when refugees are received. For this, we need EU-wide standards that are complied with in every EU member state.

2

Second, a common European code of asylum must guarantee asylum status that is valid throughout the EU for refugees in need of protection. Looking to the future, we need a new, much more ambitious integration of European asylum policy.

3

Third, we need a fair distribution of refugees in Europe. The citizens of our country are helping to receive and integrate refugees into our society as never before. This solidarity will only be maintained long-term if people see that the refugee crisis is being approached fairly throughout Europe. A state of affairs in which – as today – only a handful of member states shoulder the entire burden is just as unsustainable as a system that forces those countries that happen to form the outer border of the EU to take the strain alone. We must therefore reform the existing Dublin system. We need binding and objective criteria for refugee quotas for all member states that take their respective capabilities into account.

4

Fourth, Europe needs a common approach to managing its borders, which cannot be merely restricted to securing our frontiers. Above all, we need more European responsibility for registering and looking after newly arrived refugees.

5

Fifth, we must provide immediate assistance to the EU countries that are currently under particular strain. Germany is the only EU country to have made available emergency funds to improve the situation of refugees on the Greek islands. The EU and its member states must become more efficient in this area and quickly offer countries first receiving refugees practical and financial support. For us in Germany, we must ensure that the municipal authorities above all are able to cope with the giant challenges before them. In order to do this, we must provide them with lasting and systematic financial support.

6

Sixth, we cannot stand idly by and watch people risk their lives trying to get to us. The Mediterranean Sea cannot be a mass grave for desperate refugees. Europe's humanitarian legacy, indeed our European view of humanity, are hanging in the balance. With this in mind, we launched enormous concerted efforts to organise marine rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea in the spring. We must consolidate these efforts across Europe in the long term and equip the EU with the required capacities.

7

In the long run, we will only be able to help refugees in need of protection if those who are not entitled to asylum return to their countries of origin. For this, we must, seventh, make readmission a key priority of our relations with the countries of origin and also be prepared to make technical and financial support for these countries contingent on constructive cooperation. Existing incentives such as visa facilitations could be expanded.

8

Eighth, we must come to an EU-wide understanding as to which nations we consider to be safe countries of origin. All countries of the western Balkans aim to join the EU, and we have good cause to extend to them the prospect of accession to the Community. By the same token, this means that we cannot treat them as persecuting countries at the same time. In the future, a country that fulfils the criteria to be an EU accession candidate should be considered throughout the EU to be a safe country of origin.

9

Ninth, Germany needs an immigration Act. We need a prudent, controlled immigration policy that facilitates lawful stays for the purposes of employment. We must reduce the burden on the asylum system in this area.

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Tenth, a comprehensive European asylum, refugee and migration policy also requires new political initiatives to fight the causes of flight in the countries of the Middle East and Africa. Stabilising failing states and curbing violence and civil war must go hand in hand with concentrated efforts to achieve economic development and create genuine economic and social prospects – especially for young people in the countries of origin. All of the international community's efforts, above all those of the European Union and the United Nations, must be focused with the utmost intensity on this aim.

All of this goes to show that the political framework for action has long since ceased to be national – also and particularly with regard to refugee and migration policy. Only together and only at the European level will we be able at all to find rational solutions. This is why refugee and migration policy is currently the most important policy field in which we must further the project of European integration with dynamism and conviction.

Germany stands ready to do its utmost to drive forward the common project of a refugee policy based on the principle of solidarity.

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