



Declaration of the High-level Conference on the Eastern Mediterranean - Western Balkans Route

08/10/2015 | 20:00 | Press release | 714/15 | Justice | Home Affairs | Foreign affairs & international relations

1. In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in flows of refugees and migrants towards countries neighbouring Syria and thereafter along the **Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans route**. The majority are persons in need of international protection. This is placing **reception capacities of most affected countries^[1] under severe pressure**, with serious humanitarian consequences. It poses significant challenges to border management and asylum systems, as well as security challenges.

2. International protection and assistance must be granted to all those entitled to it, in full respect of the principle of *non-refoulement*. In parallel, irregular migrants who are not in need of international protection must be effectively returned to their countries of origin, according to existing and future agreements, as well as mutually agreed arrangements.

3. Relevant rules in the crossing of borders must be respected in order to ensure safe and well-managed traffic. Irregular crossing of borders threatens security and can fuel organised crime. Effective management of borders and fight against organised crime responsible for migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings are essential. It is therefore of utmost importance to step up our joint efforts aimed at establishing comprehensive border management.

4. **We are facing a common challenge. As partners, we need to respond collectively with solidarity.** We also need to increase the engagement of the broader international community. Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey^[2] are at the forefront of efforts. We commend them for their generosity in hosting and addressing the needs of over 4 million Syrian refugees. The Western Balkans, at present in particular Serbia² and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia², are part of transit routes for refugees and migrants heading to EU Member States and are hosting persons in need of international protection. We appreciate the assistance they provide to many thousands of persons in need of international protection and their willingness to fully assume their own responsibilities, including readmission of their nationals as safe countries of origin. Finally, many EU Member States are also under strong pressure as countries of transit and destination.

5. Today, in addressing these challenges, we reiterate **our firm commitment to respect international obligations and human rights**. Respect for the dignity of refugees and migrants and protection of their human rights remain our priority at all times. Particular attention shall be given to the protection of vulnerable groups. We also reiterate our commitment to work with relevant United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, international organisations, as well as with relevant international and national NGOs that are supporting refugees in the region.

6. Collective responsibility must be translated into **collective action**. From the solid base of stabilisation and association, enlargement or neighbourhood processes that anchor our relations, we agree today to step up our engagement in response to the current refugee crisis.

7. To this effect, we shall pursue the following **key actions**:

A) Support to Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey

8. **Mobilise increased development support to host governments and host communities**, and make this support more effective. Enhance measures to support host countries through economic incentives, including private sector contributions, and support for national economies and public infrastructure heavily strained by the massive refugee influx and continued presence of large numbers of refugees.

9. Ensure that persons in need of international protection receive the **necessary information, documentation and assistance, including legal assistance, to register in host countries** - responsibility of which lies primarily with host countries in cooperation with international organisations - with special attention to vulnerable groups. On this basis, continue to provide **immediate and principled humanitarian aid and development assistance**, improving as required access for humanitarian actors, in order to address the most urgent humanitarian needs of refugees based on their vulnerability, including shelter, protection, food, health, water and sanitation. This should be based on a joint-up approach with sustainable development assistance to cover as well resilience needs. Reception and registration capabilities in host countries will be enhanced to face increasing pressure, including in order to enhance ownership of national and local authorities.

10. Improving refugees' **access to education**, including higher-education and vocational training, while recognising the strain placed on host countries' education system and the need to support the education sector. Improving refugees' **access to labour market and employment opportunities and to basic services**. All this will be implemented in line with national capabilities and in compliance with applicable legal frameworks. Invite the donor community to contribute to finance income generating initiatives for refugees which would enhance their self-reliance, without prejudice to the temporary nature of their presence, and benefit host communities and promote social cohesion. Enhancement of resilience and livelihood opportunities should **target both refugees and host communities**.

11. Inform refugees and migrants, including through information campaigns and in cooperation with UNHCR and IOM, about risks of irregular migration channels and about alternative **legal opportunities to enter Europe** (e.g. family reunification, students' mobility, private sponsorship programmes etc.). Where possible, consider whether such legal opportunities for mobility should be enhanced.

12. Work in close cooperation with UNHCR and IOM to ensure that **the international community provides more resettlement opportunities to refugees**, including in particular Syrian refugees, and **honours pledges made**.

13. Improve and share **data collection, tracking of movements of population, joint needs assessments, mapping or analysis of socio-economic impact** in order to ensure a more targeted and effective response and anticipate trends, while respecting privacy of personal data and legal safeguards.

B) Support to affected transit countries

14. Provide **immediate first line principled humanitarian assistance**, such as food, shelter, health care, psycho-social support, protection, water and sanitation, to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants transiting.

15. Enhance **reception and accommodation facilities**, as required, to ensure that refugees and migrants are received in a dignified manner and are provided with the **necessary information referral and assistance, including legal assistance, to get registration and access to basic services and tailored support to the most vulnerable**.

16. Enhance **capacity to manage borders and to ensure prompt registration of all refugees and migrants and effective, rapid and quality processing of asylum applications**, in full respect of human rights and in line with international standards. Support **swift return to their countries of origin of persons not entitled to international protection**, in full respect of the principle of *non-refoulement*.

17. Undertake **awareness-raising and outreach activities at community level** to prevent tensions and counter xenophobia.

18. Enhance **regional coordination and information exchange**, including through national authorities and other international and regional actors, to better coordinate the management of migration flows.

C) Cooperation to fight organised crime responsible for migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings

19. Enhance **border management** (checks at crossing points and surveillance) in full respect of human rights. The agreement between Turkey, Greece and Bulgaria concluded in May 2015 provides a good example. In order to ensure better coherence in managing migration flows, **regional cooperation on border management** will be fostered.

20. Enhance **police and judicial cooperation, including intelligence-gathering, sharing and analysing, as well as capacity building of law enforcement and judicial authorities**, with a specific focus on the conduct of financial investigations.

21. Ensure **support to and protection of victims of migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings**, with special attention to vulnerable groups, such as women and children.

22. Enhance **cooperation with relevant EU agencies and international organisations** (e.g. Frontex, EASO, Europol, Eurojust, Interpol and UNODC), making best use of existing regional arrangements.

D) Addressing the root causes of forced displacement

23. Address structural causes of instability in a comprehensive way. In this context, intensify our **diplomatic engagement** with all relevant international partners, including in full support of the United Nations Secretary General Special Envoy's efforts, **to reach a political solution to the conflict in Syria**, which would include a safe return of refugees and internally displaced persons. Intensify our efforts for the development of **Afghanistan**'s institutions to provide the resilience needed for the building of an effective and ultimately sustainable Afghan State. Intensify our support for the **Iraqi** Government with a view to achieving inclusiveness, national reconciliation and long-term peace, stability and unity.

24. Step up our efforts in the **fight against terrorism and violent extremist groups**, including in particular against ISIL/Da'esh. These efforts shall also comprise counter-radicalisation programmes, in particular targeting youth.

25. In complement to our actions addressing the root causes and in line with the humanitarian imperative and mandate, we will increase **needs-based principled humanitarian assistance to support internally displaced people and other affected populations, as well as affected host communities, in Syria and Iraq** with food, water, hygiene, shelter, health, education and protection, in all accessible locations, in line with humanitarian principles, based on vulnerability and needs and in line with relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions. Delivery of humanitarian aid to besieged and hard-to-reach areas should be pursued.

26. In addition, increase our efforts through **stabilisation assistance**, including support for local

governance, rule of law and re-establishment of basic public services, where possible.

E) Engagement with countries of origin of irregular migrants

27. Enhance **engagement with countries of origin of irregular migrants**, mobilising all instruments and processes of dialogue to achieve full and effective implementation of mutual obligations with regard to **return**, including through readmission agreements.

28. Support **assisted voluntary return programmes** as well as **reintegration programmes** to facilitate the return of migrants not entitled to international protection into their countries of origin, in full respect of international human rights standards and the principle of *non-refoulement*.

29. Increase investments in **improving socio-economic conditions** in these countries, focusing particularly on education and creating opportunities for youth, promoting their participation in social, economic and political institutions, as well as women's rights.

Way forward

Broader international engagement

30. We commit to further **engaging the broader international community in an effort to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict and enhance financial support as well as resettlement opportunities and other forms of humanitarian admission**, to address the refugee crisis. We recall the importance of respecting international humanitarian law. We welcome the offer of Norway, Germany and the United Kingdom to host early next year an international donors' conference to help Syrians displaced by war. We encourage all States to make substantial contributions in response to this severe crisis.

31. We recognize the key role of the **United Nations and its relevant agencies, funds and programmes, other international organisations, non-governmental organisations and civil society** in supporting these efforts and we therefore commit to reinforce our **cooperation and partnership** with them.

EU support^[3]

32. The EU will support these efforts through both **increased financial resources and technical cooperation** through Frontex, EASO, Europol and Eurojust. In consultation and coordination with candidate countries and potential candidates, the EU will use the financial instruments available within the accession/stabilisation and association process, including the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, to strengthen cooperation with candidate countries and potential candidates and provide support for their efforts.

33. The EU will increase its **humanitarian funding** in Syria and Iraq, and to respond to the rapidly growing needs in neighbouring countries and those on the Eastern Mediterranean/Western Balkans route, bearing in mind its changing nature. Assistance will be provided through partner organisations, including UN agencies, international organisations and national and international non-governmental organisations, in coordination, where appropriate, with local authorities. Additional support can be provided through the **Union Civil Protection Mechanism**.

34. The **EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis** can improve efficiency, flexibility and speed of delivery of EU support across the neighbouring countries affected by the Syrian crisis in order, *inter alia*, to increase resilience of affected communities. The extension of the scope of the Trust Fund to the Western Balkans is being proposed and additional contributions are being considered. The EU will make full use of the **Regional Development and Protection Programme** for the Middle East to

support refugees and host communities in the region. The EU will step up its **conflict prevention and resolution efforts**, notably by mobilizing the **Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace** for stabilization programmes in areas of conflict but also in neighbouring countries, in particular Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. The EU will ensure that its support is provided in a coordinated way among the various financial instruments and actors involved. The EU will further promote resettlement as agreed by its Member States.

Follow-up

35. The follow-up to this Declaration will be ensured through regular contacts both at political and technical level and, as appropriate, relevant action plans will be developed. Where relevant, existing bilateral and regional frameworks for dialogue and cooperation will be used, including the EU stabilisation and association, enlargement or neighbourhood processes and high-level dialogues. The Mobility Partnership with Jordan and the Dialogue on Migration, Mobility and Security with Lebanon also provide important frameworks, including with a view to future possible agreements on visa facilitation/readmission. The Silk Route Partnership for Migration under the Budapest process will provide an opportunity for further engagement between main countries of origin, transit and destination. The Prague process will also provide a useful platform of cooperation. Other regional initiatives, such as MARRI and the Brdo process, will contribute further to this goal.

36. Specific challenges caused by large numbers of asylum seekers coming from the Western Balkans will be addressed in the upcoming Justice and Home Affairs EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Forum, including through concrete and appropriate measures concerning all aspects of the phenomenon.

37. We agree to keep the situation under review. Senior officials of the participants will meet to examine the follow up to this Declaration in early 2016.



[1] The use of the term "countries" or "borders" in this Declaration does not imply recognition of statehood.

[2] Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey are candidate countries for EU membership.



[3] Including Schengen Associated Countries, where relevant.

Press contacts

 [Virginie Battu](#)
Press officer

 32 22815316
 32 470182405

 [Raquín Nogueroles Garcia](#)
Press officer

 32 22812074
 32 473854991

Last reviewed on 09/10/2015

The **General Secretariat of the Council** is a body of staff responsible for assisting the European