

Opening remarks by Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights at the Graduate Institute for International and Development Studies, Maison de la Paix, Geneva

The Elders

Lessons from the Syrian Refugee Crisis: Towards New Global Coordination

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Distinguished colleagues,

I am honoured to be invited to speak at this meeting. Across the globe, disgraceful human suffering is being generated – avoidable suffering – and the world is badly in need of the experience and wisdom of the Elders.

I refer, first, to the policy disarray of many States with respect to migration. We need far more coherent and principled migration governance, at global, regional and national levels. No matter what their administrative status, migrants are human beings, with rights, and the primary aim of systems to manage migration should be their protection.

I urge States to stop the routine, and often harsh, detention of people who are not criminals. In particular, children should never suffer detention because of the irregular status of their parents.

Furthermore, the increasing militarisation of borders, with higher fences, bigger guns, drones and armed warships, is folly. It comes at enormous human cost, firstly, but huge financial cost too, and it is creating a market for criminal smuggling – on a level of organisation that is able to circumvent this military-grade technology that is being deployed. I also note that although many countries claim to be leading a “war on smuggling,” they show little regard for the victims. There should be far stronger efforts to ensure that abused migrants have access to remedy and justice.

Migration governance could also usefully be reviewed in the light of the real needs of labour markets. Several countries where low-skilled labour needs are currently met mainly by migrants nonetheless provide few, or even no, legal channels for their entry.

If xenophobia and political demagoguery are allowed to set the governance agenda, what we will see is more deaths and greater brutalisation of society as a whole, with communities that are cleaved from one another and prospects for greater violence. I have been profoundly shocked by hate-filled rhetoric – and even action – directed against vulnerable migrants by leaders of some of the world's most prosperous and privileged societies.

But alongside these urgent migration governance reforms, there must also be a deep and broad-based effort to address the root causes of forced movement. The migration we are seeing today is the living illustration that human rights violations in one country are the business of us all.

Forced migration is a symptom – a powerful symptom, and one which has many run-on effects. But despair, multi-faceted and overwhelming, is its cause. This despair is evident in the flight of refugees from indiscriminate warfare in Syria, oppression in Eritrea, persecution in Myanmar.

It is also evident in other forms of forced movement: children fleeing gang violence in Central America; young men driven out of Bangladesh by the lack of opportunities and broken governance systems; families forced to move across the Sahel because of water scarcity and land degradation. Only strong collective action can end these overwhelming human rights violations.

Migration also calls us to meet the challenges of integration. This is, I believe, eminently feasible, and it does not threaten the fundamentals of any culture. Every society on this planet was fashioned by women and men who came from elsewhere, contributing creativity and flexibility, and adapting their values to their new homes.

I urge States to acknowledge and enabled the contributions of migrants, without discrimination against them or their children. Equality, and a voice, builds confidence and cohesion. Rather than viewing migration as a threat, we can see it as an opportunity to build societies in which people, whatever their origins, can express their abilities – with hope in a future that is shared.

As we mark the UN's 70th anniversary this month, I believe it is time for migration, an issue which touches the three pillars of the UN, to be more systematically discussed within the UN's structures. There needs to be a multilateral, participatory and accountable global discussion of these many challenges – and I trust that you will use your considerable influence to help States find the wisdom to meet these challenges together.

Thank you