

## **Refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs)**

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Thank you for giving me this opportunity to address this conference on a crucial concern of our times - the plight of refugees and internally displaced persons - and in so doing, to tell you something of the care the Order of Malta is providing.

#### **1. First, let us look at some significant figures.**

Right now, 180 million people are affected by war and armed internal conflicts. We have to go back to the Second World War to see similar staggering figures.

At the end of last year, the UNHCR estimated more than 59million people were displaced. Of those, about 38million were internally displaced. More than 4 million refugees were Syrians.

Since the start of this year, some 600,000 have crossed the Mediterranean Sea. 450,000 of them headed to Greece and then along the so-called Balkan Route to northern Europe. 3,100 have been reported dead or missing on this perilous journey.

For those who have arrived, over 2 million have been registered in Turkey, over 600,000 in Jordan, over one million in Lebanon. [But the real number in Lebanon may be double what has been reported, as many Christians do not dare to register with the UNHCR, because they fear the expropriation of their properties in Syria.] This influx now makes up almost one third of the Lebanese population. Moreover, there are 1.4 million displaced in Ukraine.

As we are all aware, the numbers of refugees and IDPs are increasing every day. And every day, the world's media brings us harrowing pictures of the plight of so many of them: cold, hungry, frightened. The little boy on the beach is an image that is impossible to erase from our minds, although many of our helpers have seen even more troubling scenarios. Clearly more has to be done to mitigate this situation.

From a legal position, the status and rights of refugees and the duties of States are regulated by the 1951 Refugee Convention. The Convention builds on Article 14 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognises the right of persons to seek asylum from persecution in other countries. The Convention rules beside the right to cross the borders to a safe country and to stay there, matters like the rights of free movement, of seeking labour, of access to social benefits, medical treatment and so on.

This legal framework has to be put into practise!

## **2. Thus, secondly, I would like to describe the involvement of the Sovereign Order of Malta in caring for refugees and IDPs.**

### **A little background on who we are:**

The Sovereign Order of Malta was founded more than 900 years ago in Jerusalem. Its mission has always been to care for the poor, the needy, the excluded, the displaced and the sick “without distinction of religion, race, origin and age” (Art 2,2 Constitution). That means that we help those who need help, whoever they are and wherever they come from.

The Order has 13,500 members, about 80,000 permanent volunteers, and around 25,000 employees, mainly in the field of medicine and social assistance. Today the Order has activities in 120 countries.

The Order is a religious Order of the Catholic Church and at the same time a subject of international law. It maintains diplomatic relations with 105 countries and has an official observer status at the United Nations and other international organisations. The Order is neutral, impartial and independent from any economic or national interests. Our only agenda is to offer help. This is why the Order enjoys the trust of populations, governments and other actors in areas of conflict and war.

The Order has been, or still is, active in many crisis areas.

- On the African continent, we are working in Central Africa, Eastern Congo and South Sudan, and we were in Darfur;
- In Asia, we run operations in Afghanistan, Burma/Myanmar, and in Vietnam

since the war;

- In South America we were in El Salvador and Guatemala during the civil war and are still there.

-and especially now in the Middle East, we are operating in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey.

Our international relief service, *Malteser International*, is the organisation of the Order which mainly deals with these operations. There are instances, too, where the Order can help with mediation in times of conflict, because of our neutrality.

### **Looking at our work on the ground:**

- The Order provides medical care in camps for refugees and IDPs in northern Iraq.  
- In Turkey, on the border with Syria, we run a hospital and mobile clinics. We also help with schooling for the refugee children, and provide psychological trauma counselling and other activities. The mobile clinics are staffed by Syrians who are qualified in medical aid. They go into Syria whenever the security situation allows.

- In Lebanon the Order operates 10 clinics around the country. The Order has been an active presence for many years through our National Association there. All the clinics extend their assistance to refugees. Some are run together with other religious communities, for example, the Sunnites, the Shiites, and the Druze. In the south, we have Shiite nurses, who wear our Cross on their uniforms. Lebanon is not the only country where we enjoy very good relationships with Muslim communities, but it is the most significant one.

Now, because of the overwhelming demand for help due to the recent refugee influx, we are about to expand our activities in the country even further.

- Here in Italy, since 2008 volunteers of our Italian relief corps, CISOM, have been providing medical care to refugees arriving on the boats of the Italian Finance Police and Coastguard. In the last twelve months, these boat people have arrived in greatly increasing numbers. As well as their medical needs, they are often traumatised and the work of our medical volunteers is the first sign of care they receive after their perilous sea crossing.

- Along the Balkan route we have set up mobile clinics to assist refugees making their way on their long journeys of hope.
- In Austria, Hungary and Germany the Order assists arriving refugees in many different ways. In Germany, during this last year over 50% of the 200,000 refugees and asylum seekers were hosted in reception centres of the Order. The work has not abated.
- And in France we are providing legal assistance to refugees and asylum seekers.

### **3. Turning now to the current situation and the accompanying controversies**

Time permits only a brief summary of some of these, but the following points need to be considered:

- Times without migration are rare in history. So migration is not a new phenomenon.
- The current stream of refugees and migrants will most probably continue for years.

Why?

The factors are many and relate to many countries.

- In Syria there is no end in sight for the war and the internal crisis. More and more parties are getting directly involved and making it impossible for the Syrians themselves to decide their destiny.
- In Iraq, the situation is out of control.
- In Afghanistan, Eritrea and Somalia many people live under life-threatening circumstances without clear perspectives for the better.
- In Central-Sub-Saharan Africa there is no improvement of the security situation in view. An analysis of the reasons for decisions to flee or migrate from this region show how difficult and disputable are the categorisations between refugees and economic migrants, and the legal consequences. Very often, it is a combination of insecurity and poverty which triggers the decision to get out.
- There are also those who have no reason to flee, but are looking for better job opportunities – the economic migrants. The former President of

Senegal, Abdou Diouf, once told me that they were quite successful in improving the educational level in Senegal, but were unable to create the corresponding job opportunities. As a result, many well-trained young people sought employment abroad. The jobs that are sorely needed in African countries will not be available in the short term.

- Also to note: 60 % of the migrants from the central-western belt in Africa turn to the South and only 40% choose Europe as their destination. This indicates that the push factors, the reasons to leave home, are stronger than only the pull factors- the attraction - of Europe. Therefore, making it harder for them to reach Europe will not stop them.
- The construction of walls and fences will not solve the problem. Historically, such methods have never been a great success. Nations which closed themselves from outside influences caused their own decline. As Pope Francis said in an interview on his way back from the US, these measures will probably fuel hate.

Of course, this does not mean that I disagree with the implementation of orderly border procedures and registration of migrants. The principle is that they must respect the dignity of the person.

- Two weeks ago, we held a conference here on the Aventine, with delegations from the two adversarial governments in Libya, Tripoli and Tobruk, to talk about the refugee and migrant situation in Libya. Both sides unanimously expressed great scepticism about the military enforcement of European Frontex operations. They predict that the human traffickers will use even smaller and more perilous boats, to make their detection more difficult. On one side this will cause more casualties, and on the other, it will direct more money into the accounts of the traffickers.

They also agreed that the refugees and migrants who have probably already risked their lives several times before reaching Libyan shores, would under no circumstances consider returning to their home countries. The story of a Syrian refugee, who had just survived a shipwreck where 80% of the passengers had drowned, and only hours after his return to the shore took

the opportunity to take the next similar precarious boat, is an example of the determination of these desperate people. They would rather accept death than go back.

- The situation can be compared with a balloon. When you pinch it on one side, the bubble comes out on the other. We can see this on the Balkan-Route. Since Hungary closed its borders, the refugees immediately turned to travel through Slovenia. The information available through the internet triggers very quick and flexible reactions in these refugees and migrants.

So unless we decide and accept to build walls and military barriers all around Europe we have to face the fact that the stream to Europe will not stop. It may become smaller but it will not stop and fuel more money in the accounts of traffickers and strengthen their criminal infrastructure.

- In my view, the political debate in Europe is marked by the miscalculation of those who vow that they are able to stop the stream. This is either wishful thinking or political opportunism. Only by accepting the reality can we deal with this immense challenge.

Many people in Europe fear that the influx of such a high number of people of Islamic belief will endanger the Christian civilisation of Europe. I challenge this: Will we not risk our identity even more if we put our values of human rights aside? To describe the laws and conventions for refugees and asylum seekers simply as ‘good-weather principles’ is a very dangerous direction.

- Also, we need to use correct terminology when referring to these arrivals. People without a recognised legal status as refugees or asylum seekers are often described as ‘illegals’. No person can be illegal as such. Everybody is created by God in his image and enjoys an untouchable dignity, although he may not enjoy a legal residence permit status.

This leads me to some wider considerations, which I believe fit into your overall theme of these days.

#### **4. The decline of respect for humanitarian principles**

With great concern, we observe a fast decreasing regard for humanitarian principles. The great achievements of the family of nations after the two World Wars in codifying the humanitarian conventions to be observed in wars and armed conflicts, and for the protection of the affected population, are in danger of becoming mere documents. The generation to come may only see them displayed in a museum, as evidence of the lost cultural and humanitarian achievements of a past civilisation.

There are many reasons for this decline: asymmetric conflicts where the opposing groups have very unequal military means, non-declared wars, failing States, national armed conflicts fuelled from outside, new means of warfare like drones and the acceptance of the euphemistically labelled “collateral damage”. Before World War One, 90% of war victims were soldiers, 10% were civilians. Today it is the other way round, with the consequence being millions of displaced persons and refugees.

As the impact of positive law lessens, the fundamental historical sources of this law become more important: the taboo to attack women and children and the elderly, to destroy sacred places and to kill priests. The golden rule of conduct is: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. These principles are to be found in religions of all civilisations, and religions play a decisive role in ensuring them. Where there are loopholes or a failure of positive law, religions are the safety net for upholding the essential considerations of humanity in international humanitarian law and refugee law.

This is why the Sovereign Order of Malta has set up a special initiative in view of the forthcoming World Humanitarian Summit convened by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon. It will take place in May 2016 in Istanbul. Our aim is to create awareness and draw public attention to the significant and supportive role played by faith based humanitarian organisations- especially in cases of conflict. Through the power of their conviction, their reach, their motivation and their longevity, religious actors have a unique position above that of secular organisations. Assisting the poor and the afflicted is deeply rooted in the teachings of religions.

Coping with the current refugee crisis demands a great deal from all of us. Let me share with you the recent experiences of two of our nurses serving on the Italian

ships in the Mediterranean. They put in sharp focus what every migrant faces and what every volunteer dreads. One told me that once on a boat she was faced with five migrants struggling in the water not to drown. She was only able to grasp the hands of one and pull him out of the waves onto the boat. “I had to play God and to choose. At night I still see the eyes of the other four,” she said. The other nurse saved a baby girl being held above the water by her mother, with fading strength. Before she could help the mother, a wave came and the mother was gone. Both nurses needed spiritual and psychological care to cope with these experiences.

However, there are many signs of hope and individual support for these people whose lives have been so threatened. In my home parish, we have 70 refugees, who are being cared for by 70 willing volunteers, helping them to settle in their new country and teaching them German.

In conclusion, as we reflect on our history as Christians committed to helping our fellow man, and as we seek solutions to the current migrant crisis, our call to action is for measures which are practical and possible, which are embraced by the international community and which provide clearer policies and faster administrative procedures to cope with the influx.

We must not underestimate the determination of the oppressed to find a better life, the importance of their human rights in achieving it and the contribution we must make to effect it.