

PAM 10th Plenary Session

Tirana, Albania, 18 February 2016

Statement by H. E. Mr. Andrew Mayne, Mr. Andrew Mayne, Regional Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for South Eastern Europe.

Madam Chair,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Filippo Grandi, appointed as of 1st of January, sends his greetings to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean, his best wishes for a successful meeting and he hopes for a continuation of the close and consecutive cooperation between the PAM and UNHCR.

I am the Regional Representative of UNHCR in South Eastern Europe, covering the Western Balkans Region. High Commissioner Grandi has asked me to make these remarks in his behalf. As we know, there is no single way to address the current refugee situation in the Middle East and in Europe but rather a package of measures, including:

- Borders control
- EU MS agreements with Turkey
- Support to countries of asylum neighboring Syria
- Hotspots and relocation
- Developing pathways for travel to Europe

All these measures are necessary, and it is broadly understood and agreed that they need to be applied in combination; some progress is now being seen, for example with all but one of the five planned hotspots opening in Greece- but too little has so far been so implemented. Together, these measures are not keeping in place. The objectives of Relocation, and of alternative legal pathways into Europe, are not yet being met.

Meanwhile some things are also moving in the opposite direction:

- Regrettably we see even more border fences, entry restrictions, quotas, caps and ceilings, rumors of impending border closures, and refusal of entry;
- This suggests that some countries are prioritizing keeping refugees and migrants out, over finding realistic solutions;
- Despite repeated calls by the UNHCR to expand legal pathways to allow refugees and asylum seekers to access asylum, many European Member States are in fact reducing the legal avenues available;
- The UHCR recognizes the challenges that some host countries are facing due to significant arrivals of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants; clearly States have a sovereign right to manage their borders. However, this must be done in accordance with national, EU and international law;

- UNHCR calls on all actors to consider the possible demanding impact of individual measures and practices the rights and lives of refugees;
- Looking back over the past years, the hospitality and solidarity offered by countries – including their civil society organizations and ordinary people along the route, such as in Greece, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia as well as Germany, are among the most remarkable and moving phenomena that should long be remembered as among the defining moments of the refugee crisis in Europe;
- At the same time, we must recognize that the hardening of attitudes, growing xenophobia and hostility towards newcomers, including the traditionally tolerant and liberal countries, has been reaching levels that some say are unprecedented since the dark years of the 1930`s.

And more people will come - indeed they are already coming, and more are on their way – and their protection needs are not diminished - far from it, they are greater than ever:

- During the first six weeks of 2016 alone, over 80.000 refugees and migrants arrived in Europe by boat and over 400 have died trying to cross various parts of the Mediterranean;
- Despite rougher seas, harsh winter weather, and numerous hardships endured upon arrival, over 2.000 people a day continue to risk their lives and the lives of their children attempting to reach Europe;
- More people arrived during the first six weeks of 2016 than during the first four months of 2015; comparably large numbers began arriving in Europe only by July 2015;
- The majority of those arriving in January 2016, nearly 58%, were women and children; one in three people arriving in Greece were children, as compared to just 1 in 10 in September 2015;
- Over 91% of those arriving in Greece come from the world`s top ten refugee producing countries in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. When survived upon arrival, most cite they have to leave their homeland due to conflict. More than 56% of the January arrivals to Greece were from Syria.

So, with these restrictive policies, sometimes hostile public and political attitudes, combined with continuing arrivals and growing protection needs, it seems that pressure is set to build – and when pressure builds, suffering could swiftly follow:

- Increasingly and vulnerable and desperate and desperate families choose the fastest and not the safest route, taking impossible risks,
- They resort to smugglers and face the consequent exploitation and abuse,
- They face shipwrecks in unseaworthy boats in treacherous weather conditions;
- They face violence, sometimes beatings, sometimes in-fighting;
- Exposure to sickness, hunger, lack of care.

This can be disastrous:

- It is the care for the vulnerable, the sick and exhausted that is the mainstay of the operations of the Western Balkan route, where UNHCR and some 67 partners are working together;

- Without these services, that are currently needed 24 hours a day, and 7 days a week, terrible things would be happening to the people with international protection needs;
- Skilled, decisive and continuous action is needed, to help people, to process them, to differentiate those who have protection needs from those who do not, and to keep finding solutions.

So, with this these growing pressures and dangers on the horizons, not is not the time to stop or to do less, or to say we have done enough:

- There can be serious consequences if anyone gives up, pulls out or simply leaves the task to others.

What can we do to avoid this? What can the EU and its Member States do? What can UNHCR do? And what the PAM's Members do?

Here there is the only effective answer: we all have to do more and to do it better:

- Governments, civil society and international organizations – we all need to work better together, in a more consistent way, and to an even high standard;
- We have to do more to solve the problems in the country of origin;
- We have to do more to help Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon:
 - o Turkey, as you will be aware, is hosting the largest number of refugees in the world, including more than 2.5 millions Syrians under temporary protection (roughly 260.000 in camps and urban areas), and over 250.000 asylum-seekers and refugees of others nationalities, predominantly Iraqis and Afghans.
 - o Jordan, hosts over 600.000 Syrian refugees and Lebanon over one million.
- We have to do more to ensure that no one country is left alone with the problem and without adequate support;
- We must do more to identify protection needs – those who really need help – as early as possible, and more o provide effective protection where the people are, so they do not to move on;
 - o UNHCR hopes that EU Member States will implement at a faster pace all EU-wide measures agreed upon in 2015. Including the implementation of hotspots and the relocation process for 160.000 people already in Greece and in Italy and the EU-Turkey-Joint-Action Plan.
 - o More needs to be done to reinforce reception capacities at the points of entry to Europe, to allow for the humane and effective accommodation, assistance, registration and security screening of people arriving every day. This is needed to identify those requiring protection, those who should be relocated to other countries within the EU, and those who do not qualify for refugee protection and for whom effective and dignified return mechanisms have to be put in place.
- Countries therefore also need to do more to be firm and take back persons that are not in need of international protection, where it is safe to do so;
- Within the context of the necessary reduction of dangerous sea arrivals, safe access to seek asylum, including through resettlement and humanitarian admission, is a fundamental human right that must be protected and respected;

- Combating smuggling and trafficking in the Eastern Mediterranean should not result in undermining the institution of asylum;
- Regular pathways to Europe and elsewhere are important for allowing refugees to reach safety without putting their life in the hands of smugglers and making dangerous sea crossings;
- Avenues, such as enhanced resettlement and humanitarian admission, family reunification, private sponsorship, and humanitarian and refugee student/work visas, should be established to ensure that movements are manageable, control and coordinated for countries receiving these refugees. UNHCR hopes that States will make pledges;

So, now, is the time where core values of PAM, hospitality and solidarity, are needed and can come into their own:

- The PAM Members include countries of origin, countries of asylum as well as destination countries, sometimes in multiple roles;
- The dialogue between the PAM countries and your dialogue with Europe, and with so many others actors including UNHCR, is both rich and essential;
- Together we have to further straighten European response to the crisis and the emerging plan for addressing all aspects of the situation as coherent package;
 - o UNHCR is convinced that this crisis is manageable for Europe through solidarity and coordination. Solutions to this situation in Europe are not only eminently possible but have already been agreed by States and urgently need to be implemented. Stabilization is essential and something for which there is also strong public demand.
- Equally importantly we have to build up the international asylum regime and the emerging system for protection-sensitive management of migration, make sure it is not undermined – and through our joint efforts to make it work. UNHCR, therefore applauds the PAM for convening this meeting, the 3rd Standing Committee for including and chairing this debate on migration and inter-cultural dialogue, and inviting UNHCR to participate. We also thank the Government of Albania for hosting the event and for providing such an excellent venue for the dialogue.