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UNHCR welcomes the relocation of asylum-seekers from Greece to Cyprus

The first group of asylum-seekers relocated from Greece arrived in Cyprus yesterday afternoon. The six asylum-seekers are from Syria, Iraq and Eritrea and their transfer to Cyprus is part of the EU relocation programme agreed by the European Union institutions and a number of Member States in September 2015. Under this scheme, Cyprus has pledged to accept the relocation of 440 asylum-seekers from Greece and Italy. Cyprus has also agreed to offer resettlement places for 69 vulnerable refugees selected by UNHCR in countries outside the EU.

UNHCR strongly believes that this EU responsibility-sharing scheme, which foresees the relocation of 160,000 refugees from Italy and Greece, is an important step towards stabilizing the biggest refugee crisis that Europe has seen in decades. It provides a safe legal avenue for refugees to seek protection in Europe without putting themselves and their families at risk by engaging in secondary movements. It is also a tangible measure of solidarity towards those frontline Member States disproportionately affected by the rising arrivals of refugees and migrants.

“Efforts must now be stepped up to accelerate the relocation process for the 160,000 persons as agreed by the EU in September 2015,” said the UNHCR Representative in Cyprus Damtew Dessalegne. But the EU relocation programme can only work if relocated persons have access to adequate reception and integration support in line with international and European standards in order to avoid post-relocation secondary movements. To be successful, relocation also needs to be complemented with alternative pathways for refugees to reach Europe safely and in an orderly manner, including enhanced resettlement and humanitarian admission, family reunification, private sponsorship and employment visas.

More than 1 million people arrived by sea in Europe in 2015. The majority were refugees fleeing persecution and violence in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Tragically 3,771 persons died or declared missing as a consequence of the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean sea. In 2015, Cyprus received 2,105 asylum applications, including 908 from Syrian nationals.

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