

101

**Speech by the Greek Minister for Migration Policy  
to the 69<sup>th</sup> session of UNHCR's Executive Committee  
(Geneva, 3 October 2018)**

Excellencies, Chairperson, ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here with you today and to have the opportunity to address UNHCR's Executive Committee.

As you are all very well aware, Greece has been at the forefront of the 2015-onwards refugee crisis affecting Europe. For the past three years, the Greek Government and the Greek people have kept our borders, our hearts and our minds open to the plight of refugees, trying to address their need for assistance. The Geneva Convention and its Protocol are guiding our efforts to provide international protection to those entitled to it.

This has been an incredible challenge for my country, given the large number of people arriving on our islands. Following the **EU - Turkey Statement** of March 2016, which aimed at putting an end to irregular migration from Turkey to the EU the mixed migratory influx, has decreased considerably. However it has never really ceased. Since the beginning of this year flows have increased. Only during the past four months, over 17.400 new arrivals have been registered. Let me reiterate from this forum as well, the need for the full and sustainable implementation of the EU – Turkey Statement with the ultimate goal to bring flows to a halt.

I am well aware that the situation in few of the camps on our islands is of concern to you and to UNHCR. It goes without saying that it is a primarily issue of concern to the Greek Government and the local communities. We have been and will continue to be in close cooperation with UNHCR, and of course with our partners in the European Union, to explore ways to address the situation. Currently 25.000 asylum seekers are hosted in apartments under the rental scheme ESTIA, run by UNHCR and funded by the EU, while 25.000 are in accommodation facilities in the mainland and another 18.000 are still on the islands. It is evident that more resettlement is urgently needed. At the same time it is imperative to reach collective answers, within the European Union, in order to resolve the existing responsibility and solidarity disparity.

The consensual agreement last July on the text of the Global Compact on Refugees gives us hope that not only EU member states, but the whole international community, will continue supporting, assisting and protecting refugees, among others, through resettlement. In this framework, we look forward to discussions on the foreseen Resettlement Strategy of the UNHCR.

Greece, through our Permanent Mission in Geneva, has been very actively engaged and supportive of consultations on the Global Compact on Refugees, taking into account a) our own experience with increasing number of people in need of international protection, b) the need for burden and responsibility sharing and c) the fact that no country alone can deal effectively with such challenges. We will support its endorsement and its implementation, with a view to keeping up with our international obligations. It is our strong believe that saving lives must be the common denominator underlying our shared humanity, which we must all strive to maintain when faced with people in need of international protection. And we do believe that under the leadership of UNHCR, the international community will be able to change the way we work for and with refugees.

In this spirit, Greece is taking all possible measures, in order to better address the situation and improve reception conditions at the overcrowded camps. With the help of UNHCR, we are continuing the transfer of those eligible from the islands to reception accommodations in the mainland, where we are creating additional accommodation places expanding current facilities and creating new ones. We are implementing the new legislation on asylum, adopted last May, with positive results in speeding up the procedures in line with European and International standards. We are also at the last stage of establishing eight (8) additional Appeals Committees with operational focus on the islands.

At the same time we are paying particular attention to the integration of refugees. The new National Strategy for Integration, adopted last July, foresees the cooperation and engagement of all levels of government and other relevant stakeholders; it is by definition a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, as stipulated also within the Global Compact on Refugees and the CRRF. As a strong facilitating element for integration, we are providing language courses for refugees. The program will target 15,000 persons over the course of 3 years. We are also providing training and job opportunities in different sectors along with other vocational training for refugees.

Another very important element for integration is **free access to education** for refugee children. During the previous academic year over 8,000 children attended classes in Greek public schools and this academic year the number will increase to around 9.500 children. I would like also to underline that free access to basic health services is also provided.

Ladies and gentlemen, no man – and no country for that matter – is an island. Addressing root causes, prevention, and burden and responsibility sharing are crucial components of our discussions and our efforts in supporting those in need. This approach should remain at the core of our global humanitarian discourse. We are joined by a common humanity and we need one another to support those in need. This is the policy of the Greek Government and it is a reflection of the Greek psyche.

Thank you.