

WCC/UN High Level Conference: Refugee Crisis in Europe

The Ecumenical Centre, Geneva

18 January 2016

Opening remarks from the WCC general secretary

Your excellences, your graces, ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters,

To be human is to have the ability to hope. Faith in God is a hope that the present reality can change to something better, change through actions of love. The refugees themselves need that we, through this conference, provide them signs of hope.

The European countries and people must live up to their humanitarian values and standards reflected in commitments to international conventions. This must be evident in a crisis for so many refugees that are coming to Europe or who are already in Europe. In this situation there is a need for genuinely new efforts of coordinated collaboration between the countries in Europe and between all sectors of society that can contribute, also churches and religious communities. Through this conference we want to provide an even better and more realistic understanding of the challenges, and to encourage more commitment, calling for much better coordination and collaboration in the efforts needed to receive and assist them.

Many of you are here as representatives of European countries, European organisations and churches in Europe. Some of you are working in organizations particularly dedicated to addressing the challenges for refugees and other migrants, many of you with a special commission from churches in Europe and beyond Europe. The hosting organisations are global institutions: UNICEF, UNFPA, UNHCR, and the World Council of Churches. I thank the partner organisations warmly for their contributions, support and participation in this conference. The fact that we all are here is a sign of hope in itself. There is a unique combination of partners, participants and perspectives in this meeting.



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The discussions today and tomorrow are related to other crises that affect people in several countries and continents. The most efficient response to the situation for many of the refugees coming to Europe would be a solid, political peace process for Syria, to stop the actions of war and to more efficiently coordinate efforts to stop the terror of ISIS. The war in Syria is one crisis reinforced by the delay of a coordinated action for peace from the UN Security Council.

Hopefully, there will be a start of a new political process here in Geneva next Monday.

The refugees are coming also from other states in Asia and Africa that do not provide security required for all their citizens, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Eritrea, and Libya. Many have to leave their homes to seek a livelihood, some for the sake of security, and others for the sake of survival in areas suffering from the negative effects of poverty, climate change, and lack of stable governance.

When we call for a conference to discuss a crisis in Europe, we understand this refugee crisis in a twofold sense: So many refugees, particularly from the Middle East and from Africa, have arrived in Europe. They are in this continent to seek protection, survival, and to find a safe home. Further, it is a crisis in how Europe as Europe has handled this situation. It is a crisis of cooperation and coordination between the countries in Europe. The European Union as union of democratic, human-right based and peace-loving countries in Europe has in solidarity served and helped in many crises outside Europe. We have seen that the EU has not proved to be able to coordinate in solidarity among their own countries in a situation that calls upon solidarity, human-right based calls for protection, and a sharing of resources.

There are many representatives at this conference from partners that offer support and help to the refugees who have had to leave their homes. A lot of this is offered in the neighbouring countries by many of the organisations and institutions represented here. In October many of you and other church leaders from Europe and the Middle East were gathered in Munich to discuss how the churches are responding to the issues we are here to further elaborate upon. The Munich meeting called for genuine respect for human and Christian values. One of the clear outcomes of that conference was to call for more collaborative action.



A common value shared by all the organizers of this conference is **hope**. This is more than mere optimism, and definitely more than ignoring the harsh realities we are facing. Hope is the ability we have as human beings to expect something else; that something better can happen than we are just now able to see. A real hope is hope for all, not only a hope for me and my group, it is a hope for others as well, particularly those who need it the most. A criterion for genuine hope is, therefore, love, that we prepare for a future for all and do care for the others than ourselves now and in the future. We do hope that the efforts we are making together in this conference shall be signs of hope that we are willing to do more together, to coordinate our efforts better, to bring more justice, more peace, more hope for those who need the power to hope for a better future.

I remember today the hope I saw in the eyes of a family of four, mother and father carrying their two children, one 2 years old, the other 6 months, like my two grandchildren. They were walking in the mud and rain at the border between Greece and Serbia along the railway tracks. They had left their home in Homs, with the hope in their minds that there would be a safe space somewhere for them. I asked where they were heading, and the answer was: Germany.

The historical decision made under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel in Germany last year to receive many more refugees created hope, a hope that made many able to handle their tragedy in another way. Some refugees had other countries as their preferred destiny. Some countries were not accessible or desirable to any of them, also due to the attitudes shown to refugees during this crisis.

This historical decision was a sign of respect for the human dignity and human rights of people in crisis and need. It is also a sign of the humanitarian values on which Europe claims to be founded, shown in attitudes of solidarity, fairness, openness, generosity, and hospitality. Many would also say these are expressions of the values of the Christian legacy in this continent.

Those attitudes, expressed in Germany and other countries of Europe represented here today, as well as in other countries overseas, are shown in remarkable ways by what we call ordinary people. I speak of those with little resources: people, civil society organizations, churches and other faith based communities, willing to facilitate the response to the basic needs of the refugees and the further, long-term process of integration in another home. Some of us



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are also vocal in the public debates about what should be done to meet basic needs in the countries of origin, to secure safe transits, and to provide asylum and proper means for establishing a new life. We know that if the investments in the integration process are ignored, the refugees and also the countries in which they live are likely to face new crises, particularly if ghettos of underpaid or unemployed people develop. This situation cannot be handled without the efforts of all.

I want to express my delight that Dr Thomas de Maizière, the Minister of the Interior of the Federal Republic of Germany is able to participate in our conference. He is well placed to elaborate further upon the reasons and values behind the decision of Germany to open its borders last year, and to reflect on what the situation now requires in a short and longer term perspective. He is representing the Party of Germany, and he is also member of the Presidium of the German Kirchentag.