



**Opening Statement by Mr. Damtew Dessalegne,  
UNHCR Representative in Cyprus  
At the launching of the ECRE campaign “Europe Act Now”  
Nicosia, 12 March 2014**

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Dear Friends,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the invitation to be with you at this launch of a pan-European campaign by ECRE and its member organisations urging European and national leaders to act now to protect refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria - a conflict that has caused one of the worst humanitarian crises in decades.

The scale and gravity of the humanitarian crisis posed by the Syrian civil war is perhaps the most acute since the end of the Second World War. UNHCR has so far registered nearly 2.5 million Syrians as refugees in the region, although the real number is much higher. We fear that over 4 million Syrians may become refugees by the end of this year. In addition, there are already over 6 million internally displaced Syrians, and more than half of the country’s population now depends on humanitarian assistance for their daily survival.

Children are hardest hit. Nearly 5.5 million children are now affected inside Syria and in the neighbouring countries. An entire

generation of young Syrians is being shaped by violence, displacement, lack of education, separation from families and trauma. With every day the fighting goes on, these children are at real risk of losing their future forever.

Syria's neighbours - Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt - have received an unrelenting stream of refugees, at enormous cost to themselves. Few refugee influxes have ever generated this profound an impact on their host countries, with such dramatic demographic, economic and social consequences.

At the same time much fewer refugees have made it to Europe. EU countries received some 77,000 asylum applications since the beginning of the conflict and until January 2014, of which 55 per cent by Sweden and Germany. The share of Cyprus for the three year period was 1,308 applications, or 1.7 per cent of the EU intake. The numbers, for both the EU as a whole and Cyprus, are of course not small in absolute terms, but they represent a very tiny fraction of the over 2.5 million Syrian refugees hosted by the five countries neighbouring Syria.

The aid the European Union and its Member States have given to Syria's neighbours has been unquestionably generous. But that's not enough. These countries bear a near-impossible strain and they do not just need financial and technical support; they also need Europe to receive some of the refugees they are hosting.

In this respect, UNHCR aims to find resettlement or humanitarian admission places in countries outside the region for 30,000 Syrian refugees by the end of this year. Additional measures, such as establishing more flexible visa arrangements and family reunification mechanisms, can also help to allow Syrians to find safety in Europe and elsewhere in the developed world without having to resort to dangerous escape routes, including sea journeys in unseaworthy and overcrowded boats.

We will hear shortly from the organisers about the details of the campaign. But, let me encourage people from all walks of life in Cyprus to actively engage in this campaign. We invite politicians, the media, civil society organisations, activists, celebrities, religious leaders, students and others to get involved in the campaign in one way or another and show solidarity with the survivors of this horrific conflict.

Promote the campaign's messages and call for action through your social media accounts and join the petition calling on European leaders to take urgent action to protect the survivors of the Syrian crisis. ***Giving refugees a safe way into Europe; protecting them when arriving at Europe's borders; and helping families torn apart by the war to reunite*** will alleviate some of the human tragedies caused by this horrendous war.

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Thank you.