



## **The crisis in Syria**

### **«The Policy of the European Commission»**

**Addressed by Mr George Markopouliotis, Head of the European Commission Representation  
in Cyprus**

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**House of the European Union in Nicosia**

*Check against delivery - Ισχύει μόνο ότι λεχθεί*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would also like to welcome you to the EU house for this very interesting and timely policy conference on the Syrian crisis.

There are currently more than 6 million internally displaced persons in Syria in need of protection and some 2.7 million refugees in the countries neighbouring Syria. The on-going war is a crisis like no other.

The European Union has a moral responsibility to act because solidarity is at the core of our values. And we do act. The European Union, that is the European Commission and the Member States, is the largest donor since the start of the crisis, providing humanitarian and non-humanitarian support in Syria and in the neighbouring countries. So far, some € 2.8 billion has been committed to such support.

This on-going humanitarian tragedy is forcing people to flee for their lives. With regards to the Syrians who arrive at the external border or at the territory of a Member State seeking protection, it is clear that these persons must be treated in accordance with the EU acquis and must have full access to all rights and procedures guaranteed under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Since May 2011, when the crisis began, more than 80.000 Syrians have requested international protection in the EU. The number of Syrian asylum seekers in Cyprus, some 1.380 persons, is modest in comparison to other Member States.

There are no mechanisms for allocating or assigning between Member States a specific number of refugees who arrive at the territory of an EU Member State or at the EU external border to request protection. As regards intra EU-solidarity mechanisms, in particular relocation of asylum-seekers and/or beneficiaries of international protection from one Member State to another, such mechanisms are voluntary. Cyprus has never requested relocation, that is, persons to be relocated from the island to other Member States.

At this point, it is important to highlight the general consensus among Member States: Syrian refugees should not be returned to Syria. Returns are not executed. The recognition rate for genuine Syrians in all Member

States is "in practice 100%", according to information from the European Asylum Support Office (EASO). The small numbers of what appears to be "rejections" in statistical overviews are persons who only claim to be Syrians, but after evaluating their claim, it turns out that their place of origin is not Syria.

According to UNHCR, there appears to be a divergence between what kind of status Syrians receive in the different Member States: refugee status or beneficiary of subsidiary protection or some humanitarian status. This also appears in EUROSTAT statistics. EASO has organised a series of technical meetings to discuss this point and to encourage more convergence between the Member States' practices.

It is true that compared to the number of refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, the number of Syrians seeking protection in the EU is very small. However, such influx can put pressure on a Member State's reception capacity and the capacity to process cases efficiently. In 2013, the European Commission committed some € 28 million of emergency assistance to help Member States to deal with such problems. €3,1 million was earmarked for Cyprus, mainly in order to increase the country's accommodation capacity and to strengthen its registration system and the medical screening procedures.

The decision on whether or not to engage in resettlement activities, and if so, how many refugees and from which groups are to be resettled, rests

solely with the authorities of the Member States. However, in order to increase the impact of the EU resettlement efforts in providing protection to refugees and maximising the strategic impact of resettlement through a better targeting of those persons who are in greatest need of international protection, a so-called Joint EU Resettlement Programme was created in 2012 under the Asylum and Migration Fund.

As noted, setting up resettlement procedures, as well as defining the legal position of a resettled person within the national legal system, remains within the exclusive scope of Member States' competence. In this context, it is important to note that EU co-financing under the Joint EU Resettlement Programme can only be made available if under the national resettlement scheme its beneficiaries are granted either the refugee status or a status which offers, the same rights and benefits under national and Community law as refugee status. Finally, the programme offers additional financial incentive for the countries that start to engage in resettlement activities.

For the period 2014-2020, the Commission has proposed under the new Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund to set up a mechanism which will be somewhat more flexible and attractive for the Member States and which will allow for more strategic use of resettlement. It is hoped that this should lead to a substantial increase in resettlement to the EU. The aim is to see more national resettlement schemes established and to increase the already existing ones. The exact details of this mechanism are still under

negotiation. Syrian refugees are included under one of the common EU priorities of the new Fund.

It is also important to note that the European Commission— and Commissioner Malmstrom in particular – is very favourable to the idea of resettlement, and is calling for more Member States to consider resettling more refugees.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has appealed to the international community, to admit up to 30,000 Syrian refugees on resettlement, humanitarian admission, or other programmes by the end of 2014, with a focus on protecting the most vulnerable.

Guided by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees expertise and operational assessment of the situation on the ground, the European Commission has supported this initiative, calling on the Member States to show generosity and solidarity with the refugees and host countries in the region by offering both temporary humanitarian admission and resettlement places.

In addition, the Commission has been calling on Member States to adopt a generous attitude towards the granting of humanitarian visas to persons displaced by the Syrian crisis who have family members present in the EU and to admit any Syrians arriving at the external borders of the Union. So

far, many Member States have responded positively to this call offering some 15.000 humanitarian admission and resettlement places.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

An uprising that started 3 years ago in Syria has evolved into a full-blown civil war which has killed tens of thousands and has uprooted millions of people from their homes. According to the UN, this makes Syria the "biggest humanitarian and security crisis in the world".

We must react; we must help those in need. And we are doing exactly that. As President Barroso said, "we are now proud of what we are doing, as European Union together with our Member States and with our partners. It is important that the public in the European Union knows about what is going on. "

Thank you.

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