

**15th OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Winter Meeting:
Special debate on the theme “The migrant and refugee crisis in
the OSCE area: strengthening the collective response”**

Vienna, 26 February 2016

**Keynote speech by
Christos Stylianides
European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid & Crisis
Management**

Excellences,

Dear Colleagues,

I am particularly honoured to be opening this special debate today. In fact this feels like a homecoming for me. Seeing so many colleagues and friends here today brings back many fond memories of my six years as a Parliamentary Member of the OSCE.

I know very well the importance of this forum. And the important role it can play in supporting dialogue. In sending a clear message of solidarity. And most importantly in strengthening our collective response to the refugee crisis.

Dear colleagues,

- The challenges that Europe and the broader region are facing these days are truly unprecedented. The refugee and migration crisis has put the

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Union as a whole under great pressure. Our institutions. Our Member States. And especially our societies.

- It is not an exaggeration to say that this crisis is testing our unity. Our principle of diversity. Our principles of tolerance and openness. It even tests our determination to safeguard the vision of the founding fathers for a united Europe.

We have a historical duty to help the refugees coming to our shores. To provide to these desperate people shelter and basic needs. To help them feel welcome to our countries.

These humanitarian commitments are the foundation of our moral framework. Through these commitments we ensure our historical duty to preserve our unity. To safeguard the pillars of our Union. Otherwise the risk to return to the politics of fear and disintegration is real. The risk to become again a continent of fragmentation is real.

Nobody denies the fact that the crisis is putting a huge pressure on our societies. Anywhere you are, our people can feel the ripple effects of the crisis.

And of course, there is no question that these humanitarian commitments go hand in hand with our obligation to secure our external borders. Collectively if needed. But raising internal barriers will not solve the problems. Raising walls will not alleviate the pressure our citizens feel. On the contrary.

Dear friends,

This is a crisis of global proportions. It is not only a European problem. It is a global problem.

Some of you come from countries of arrival, transit and destination for the refugees. You know very well the complexities of this crisis. And you understand why this global crisis requires a global response. This is the critical moment for political leadership. Now is the time to be bold. To be determined.

And this highly challenging situation should not make us forget our core common values of solidarity and humanity. This is where the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has a key role to play. To promote solidarity and tolerance. Together, we must continue to uphold the highest standards of protection for refugees. After all, this is also what we are asking our international partners to do.

Dear colleagues,

Let me now speak specifically about the humanitarian dimension of the refugee crisis. This is of critical importance in addressing the influx of refugees in Europe. In parallel with other actions to address the root causes.

You know the facts: the conflict in Syria has resulted in the largest humanitarian tragedy since World War II. The crisis has displaced more than 11 million and left more than 18 million people in need of assistance. Half of the people coming to Europe are directly from inside Syria.

The EU has been the leading donor in response to the Syria crisis from day one. With more than 5 billion euros in humanitarian, development and stabilisation assistance. This month at the London Donors Conference for Syria we reconfirmed our commitment. The EU pledged more than 3 billion Euros for this year alone. We tripled our contribution compared to last year's donors' conference in Kuwait. We made it clear that the EU will remain committed to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people.

For as long as it takes.

But we need to do more.

What we see in Aleppo right now – reflected in many other places across Syria – is an obvious violation of international humanitarian law. The attacks on civilians must stop immediately.

People fleeing must be granted safe and free passage. Aid organisations must be granted full and unrestricted access to all people in need. Wherever they are. Regardless of their ethnic or religious origins. The EU will continue to remind all parties to the conflict of their obligations to respect international humanitarian law.

At the same time we are not forgetting our support to Syria's neighbouring countries who are hosting refugees. Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The burden on these host countries is simply not sustainable.

I visited Lebanon and Jordan last November. I saw the humanitarian needs with my own eyes at the Za'atari camp in Jordan.

While in the Bekaa valley I visited education activities and witnessed the difficult living conditions. The need for a multi-sector response.

Turkey, on the other hand, is key in managing the refugee crisis. Our engagement and cooperation with Turkey is instrumental in our common efforts to address the crisis. The full and speedy implementation of the EU-Turkey Action Plan is a top priority.

Turkey is hosting more than 2,6 million Syrian refugees. The biggest refugee population in the world. I visited Turkey a few weeks ago together with HRVP Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn. I met with Syrian refugees and humanitarian partners.

I was especially touched by a visit I made to the "home" of a refugee family: a converted garage in a poor part of Gaziantep where a Syrian family with many children lives. The situation of this family as it is the case for many others is desperate.

At the same time, I also witnessed the positive impact of the EU's assistance to this and many other families. Through a card-based transfer system that allows refugees to access food and basic needs.

And let us not forget the recently agreed Facility for refugees in Turkey with 3 billion Euros funding support for this and next year. We must continue to work closely with Turkey. And deliver – both sides - on the commitments we agreed.

It is also important to ensure that the refugees stranded on the Syrian border receive immediate care. That women and children and those with medical need are immediately granted access to Turkey.

Dear colleagues,

The flow of refugees transiting through the Western Balkans continues. I am very much aware of the fatigue these countries are experiencing. The flow of refugees of between two to four thousand per day and sometimes even more is overwhelming.

I was in Serbia in mid-January to see the reality of the humanitarian situation on the ground. And to talk to refugees along their long journey. I have seen first-hand how well the Government of Serbia is managing this crisis.

And I really commended the national, regional, local authorities, and civil society groups, for their response. Also the police forces for their work in supporting the refugees.

At the border with Croatia, in Sid, I observed that as long as close coordination between EU and non-EU Member States is maintained, we can manage to establish humanitarian response systems. Able to cope with the flux of transiting refugees.

Since the beginning of the emergency in Europe in 2015, the Commission has also provided humanitarian aid amounting to 22 million Euros to the Western Balkans. To provide temporary shelter, food, health, water, sanitation and protection.

This is in addition to 28 million provided by my colleague, Commissioner Hahn specifically for the refugee crisis. Since the beginning of the year there is a high proportion of women and children who now account for nearly 60%. They have special protection needs which have to be addressed.

I also visited Croatia and Slovenia in the previous months. Two EU Member States of the region facing the same challenges. Both the authorities and the civil society in these countries are doing their best.

In kind assistance has also been provided through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. When Hungary, Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia and Greece requested assistance. With winter in Europe, this assistance was essential and represents a strong symbol of EU solidarity. However, this has not gone far enough.

Dear friends,

We need to be prepared for the upcoming spring. This is why the Commission is working on contingency plans depending on the evolution of the humanitarian situation on the ground.

The EU will stand by all countries facing large numbers of refugees and migrants to respond to the rapidly changing environment.

Including EU Member States, like Greece. The pressure on its shores is unprecedented. Disproportionate. We are exploring ways to step up our support to Greece. And other EU countries with overstretched capacities. Following the latest European Council on migration last week, I will be bringing forward a concrete proposal next week. To put in place the capacity for the EU to provide humanitarian-type assistance to refugees inside the European Union. We are working extremely hard to this end. And I reiterate, once again, that there can only be European solutions to this crisis.

Dear Colleagues,

I already said that the crisis we are facing is global. A few weeks ago I visited the Dadaab camp in Kenya. It remains to this day the largest refugee camp in

the world. It hosts mainly Somalis. Some of them being third generation refugees born in the camp.

The vast majority of refugees are unable to work or travel outside the camps. In general, the Horn of Africa continues to be affected by major forced displacements: With food insecurity and the el Niño phenomenon particularly affecting Ethiopia.

Nigeria is severely affected by the horror of Boko Haram, which only recently attacked an IDP camp in North-Eastern Nigeria.

The new EU Trust Fund for Africa is a tool that aims exactly at addressing the root causes of irregular migration and displacement in the continent.

Dear colleagues,

During my field visits to conflict areas all over the world I have witnessed that the most vulnerable are always children. This is why the needs of children in emergencies is one of my main priorities. Especially education.

Because I believe that education is a strong shield. Protecting children from radicalisation. From forced recruitment. From sexual exploitation and early marriage. From entering into dangerous migration routes. Education in emergencies can give children a sense of normalcy and safety. It can teach them important life skills and restore their hope for a better life. Today many parents are not fleeing to Europe only to get food or shelter. They do so to secure education for their children!

Still, education is often forgotten in the middle of an emergency. This is why I decided to increase the EU's humanitarian budget allocation dedicated to Education in Emergencies from 1% to 4 %. And I am glad that this target will be reached already this year.

Because we have a responsibility to give every child prospects for the future. In order to do so access to quality education is crucial. We cannot afford a lost generation.

Dear colleagues,

Humanitarian assistance alone, while important and necessary, will not put an end to the human suffering. It will not stop the flow of refugees to Europe.

What is also needed is the engagement of the human potential of the displaced. What is needed is self-sufficiency and sustainable living conditions for them. This is why development actors need to be involved at an early stage of a crisis. Systematic cooperation with development actors is necessary. Because without development opportunities, tensions between host populations can lead to the destabilisation of entire regions. Most of which are already fragile. This could trigger massive secondary displacement, including to Europe.

This is why we are currently working in the European Commission towards a new and innovative long term-oriented approach: to support refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees and host populations in partner countries.

Dear friends,

I really believe that dialogue within the Parliamentary Assembly and debates such as this one, can contribute to strengthening our cooperation.

The responsibility is enormous for all of us. No single country or actor can respond to the scale and complexities of our challenges. We need to work all together. This is the only choice we have. And it is the choice we have already made. We have to respect it.

Thank you for your warm welcome back to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. I wish you a fruitful debate.