



# Urgent action needed on European Refugee Crisis

IRC Situational Briefing – 24 March 2016

*Due to the lack of a humane response by Europe, thousands of refugees fleeing violence and persecution continue to lose their lives and their dignity. Last week the EU and Turkey reached an illogical and unethical deal that will only mean more indignity, more disorder, more dangerous journeys and more lives lost. This is a desperate situation. Addressing it is not beyond reach, but European states must take urgent action now.*

## The IRC's humanitarian work in Europe

In addition to providing urgent humanitarian assistance to refugees in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the IRC has emergency staff working in Greece and Serbia. The IRC is working on the Greek island of Lesbos and at the northern border of Greece to provide clean water and sanitation, information to refugees, and specialised protection services to the most vulnerable. In Serbia, we are supporting local organisations to provide basic aid and recently we began a partnership with a local organisation to provide gender-based violence response services for women and girls.

### Urgent action is needed in five areas:

1. **Address the dire and chaotic situation in Greece by prioritising humanitarian and protection needs**
2. **Accelerate humane relocation of refugees from Greece**
3. **Do not fuel smuggling by making pathways to safety contingent on bringing refugee flows to zero**
4. **Replace the EU-Turkey 'one-in-one-out' deal with expanded resettlement that does not hinge on returns**
5. **Safeguard the principle of asylum and the protection of all refugees without discrimination**

### 1. Address the dire and chaotic situation in Greece by prioritising humanitarian and protection needs

- (a) More than 50,000 asylum seekers are now in need of urgent humanitarian and protection support in Greece.<sup>1</sup> Closure of the Greece's northern border continues to have severe humanitarian implications as both needs and tensions grow amongst thousands of refugees gathered at the informal refugee site at Idomeni.<sup>2</sup> Facilities elsewhere in mainland Greece are overcapacity.
- (b) Greece is under-supported to meet this unprecedented challenge and the technical expertise for onsite camp management and service provision is missing. Tens of thousands of people not only require accommodation, but also access to information and a range of services. The military is being mobilised to build new camps, but management of these camps by the government now needs to be established urgently, along with coordinated access for NGOs and UN agencies to provide essential services.
- (c) Currently there is a lack of prioritisation, funding, and clear accountability for delivery of vital services – such as safe spaces, designated shelters, and case management – for women and girl refugees. For example, IRC is the only agency running a much-needed safe space for women in Idomeni.
- (d) The recently agreed EU-Turkey agreement has resulted in a chaotic situation in Greece. Greek authorities have no clarity as to how asylum and deportation processes will work, nor what to do while refugees wait.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, between 200-550 men, women and children continue to arrive daily into Lesbos, where IRC is working, seeking refuge.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, 23 March 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=930>

<sup>2</sup> The Telegraph, 22 March 2016 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/greece/12201401/Refugee-sets-himself-alight-as-EUs-grand-plan-to-staunch-exodus-of-asylum-seekers-unravels.html>

<sup>3</sup> The Guardian, 23 March 2016 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/23/refugee-crisis-aid-agencies-unhcr-refuse-role-mass-expulsion-greece-turkey>

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, 21 March 2016 <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=937>

- (e) IRC, UNHCR and other agencies are reflecting deep humanitarian and protection concerns with the EU-Turkey agreement through their operations.<sup>5</sup> UNHCR is suspending most activities in “hotspots” it now considers “detention facilities”.<sup>6</sup> On Monday the IRC in Lesbos informed the Greek Coastguard it would not transport refugees to the now closed facility at Moira as we cannot knowingly participate in the transportation of some of the world’s most vulnerable to a place where their freedom of movement is in question.
- (f) On 2 March the European Commission announced €700m Euros of urgently needed funding would be made available for humanitarian response in countries within the EU.<sup>7</sup> In light of the current situation, funding must be swiftly disbursed to those most able to meet immediate humanitarian needs.

## 2. Accelerate humane relocation of refugees from Greece

- (a) The Greek authorities, EU Member States and EU Agencies should heed commitments made on 19 March to achieve 6,000 relocations within the next month and at least 20,000 relocations completed by mid-May 2016. Accelerated relocation provides a mechanism for European solidarity with Greece, and to ease the dire humanitarian situation there. There is a serious risk that as humanitarian needs in Greece continue to grow, refugees seek out even more dangerous smuggler routes onwards into Europe.
- (b) Meeting these ambitious targets will take significant resource and capacity from across Greece and the EU. Since a commitment last September to relocate 160,000 refugees from Greece and Italy, EU Member States have only made 7015 places available for relocation.<sup>8</sup> The pace of progress with enacting these relocation pledges has to date been inadequate. Over the past months only 569 people have been relocated from Greece.<sup>9</sup>
- (c) A rapid increase to the speed of relocation must not come at the expense of fair, thorough, and humane asylum procedures. In addition, relocation schemes must take refugee wishes - including country, language, and family ties - into account.
- (d) Refugees must be provided with information on the availability of the relocation scheme and how it is supposed to work. Thousands of refugees currently amassing around Idomeni at Greece’s northern border are in the dark about the options available to them.

## 3. Do not fuel smuggling by making pathways to safety contingent on bringing refugee flows to zero

- (a) One lesson of the past year has been that an approach to migration based on containment costs lives. Since 2014, 7493 people have lost their lives at sea, including many children. Even the strictest border control efforts will not stop refugees coming - it will only make journeys even more dangerous and play into the hands of smugglers.
- (b) Recent EU policy decisions have been fuelled by the inadvisable and unattainable desire to close borders and reduce refugee flows to zero. Yet people, not borders, are in urgent need of protection. Making pathways to protection in Europe contingent on zero migration, such as the EU has outlined for the Turkey Voluntary Admission Scheme<sup>10</sup>, will clearly only fuel smuggling. Without effective pathways to safety first being provided, desperate refugees fleeing from violence and persecution will continue to seek out even more dangerous smuggler routes to Europe.
- (c) Smugglers will be the real winners of the EU-Turkey agreement. If the number of refugees the EU accepts is based on how many attempt the journey and are returned to Turkey, then Turkey – understandably eager for the EU to take more refugees – is incentivised to let the smuggling continue. Our teams in Serbia are noticing increased numbers of arrivals via smuggling routes. There are also concerns that shutting the maritime border between Turkey and Greece, and the return of new arrivals to Turkey, will only result in the reopening of other smuggling routes into Europe, such as the Libya-Italy route.
- (d) NATO involvement in the Aegean maritime border must not hinder effective search and rescue operations that stop deaths at sea, nor deny individuals the right to seek asylum in Europe. All agencies involved at sea must have adequate training and support to humanely receive refugees who have made traumatic journeys; this

<sup>5</sup> The Guardian, 23 March 2016 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/23/refugee-crisis-aid-agencies-unhcr-refuse-role-mass-expulsion-greece-turkey>

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR Operations Cell Daily Report, 23 March 2016 <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=941>

<sup>7</sup> The Guardian, 2 March 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/02/refugee-crisis-europe-eu-countries-greece-receive-700m-extra-aid-funds>

<sup>8</sup> Member States’ Support to Emergency Relocation Mechanism, as of 22 March 2016. [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state\\_of\\_play\\_-\\_relocation\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state_of_play_-_relocation_en.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> European Commission, 22 September 2015. [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_STATEMENT-15-5697\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-15-5697_en.htm)

<sup>10</sup> Member States’ Support to Emergency Relocation Mechanism, as of 22 March 2016. [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state\\_of\\_play\\_-\\_relocation\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state_of_play_-_relocation_en.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, 19 March 2016 [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-16-963\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-963_en.htm)

includes taking boats to the nearest safe port. NATO's modus operandi must be in line with the international law.

***"We have most problems with large groups that include several women and children. They are terrified of the possibility of not being able to move forward. What they keep saying is 'We should have found a better smuggler.' This perception of a 'need for more efficient smuggling' is omnipresent among the refugee population." IRC programme partner, Serbia***

#### **4. Replace the illogical and unethical EU-Turkey 'one-in-one-out' deal with expanded resettlement that does not hinge on returns**

- (a) The fact is that the number of people fleeing their homes due to conflict and crisis continues to rise. As a result, people will continue to risk their lives in pursuit of safety in Europe. Europe's choice is not whether or not to accept refugees. It is whether they allow inhumane and disorderly arrivals of refugees to continue, or succeed in agreeing humane, orderly alternatives.
- (b) While resettlement from Turkey could be a vital part of the solution to the refugee crisis, making this conditional upon people being returned to Turkey is both unethical and illogical. Far from creating safe and legal routes for Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans and other refugees to reach Europe, this deal does the opposite.
- (c) A meaningful and unconditional resettlement scheme, in which Europe takes in 108,000 refugees per year for five years as the IRC has proposed, is what is needed. European leaders are missing the opportunity to take resettlement in the right direction.
- (d) Resettlement would help flows of refugees to become more predictable and manageable, provide greater security guarantees, and diminish reliance on smugglers. It would also help stabilise fragile situations and alleviate immense pressure on refugee-hosting countries surrounding Syria, thus offering credibility for EU states' diplomatic efforts in the region.
- (e) Resettlement is part of a package of tools that can be used to stabilise the current situation but must work in tandem with alternative pathways to safety, such as humanitarian visas and family reunification.

#### **5. Safeguard the principle of asylum and the protection needs of all refugees without discrimination**

- (a) The EU-Turkey deal ignores non-Syrians. By limited options for resettlement and voluntary admission to Syrians, thousands of asylum seekers from refugee-producing countries such as Iraq or Afghanistan are being denied safe alternative pathways into Europe.
- (b) Nationality must not equate to refugee status, nor be the basis of arbitrary discriminatory decisions. Under international law, all nationalities must be granted their right to a fair and thorough status determination procedure based on their individual circumstances.
- (c) All asylum seekers must be provided with full access to information as to their options to apply for asylum. Our teams hear rumours that refugees stopped by police in the Eastern Balkans are not being systematically provided with information as to their rights to asylum.
- (d) The EU-Turkey agreement states that all new "irregular migrants" crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey. There are concerns about what happens to those people who are returned to Turkey, and then in turn potentially sent back from Turkey to their countries of origin.<sup>11</sup> We seek assurances from the Turkish authorities, and from EU authorities, that all asylum seekers and refugees will be protected, and treated in a fair and humane way, and that no-one will be returned to a place where they are not safe.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Turkey still maintains a geographical limitation to its ratification of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Refugees fleeing non-European countries are only given conditional refugee status. UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e0fa7f.html>

<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International. 16 December 2015. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/12/turkey-eu-refugees-detention-deportation/>