



**Statement of Shelly Pitterman
Regional Representative of the
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Regarding**

The Refugee Crisis in Europe

**Before the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Helsinki Commission**

Introduction

Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, on behalf of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) I would like to express our appreciation for the opportunity to appear before you today to address the refugee crisis in Europe.

My name is Shelly Pitterman, and I am the Regional Representative for the United States and the Caribbean in Washington, D.C., a position that I have held since 2013. During my tenure I have repeatedly seen the critical role of the Helsinki Commission in shedding light on numerous humanitarian crises. Our office has enjoyed an excellent working relationship with the Commission, and we look forward to continued collaboration.

Overview of UNHCR

UNHCR is the UN refugee agency mandated by the international community to ensure refugee protection and to identify durable solutions to refugee situations around the globe. With a staff of nearly 9,500, of which about 88% are located in deep field and hardship locations, we work tirelessly to assist the world's most vulnerable people. UNHCR's mandate and international law define a refugee as a person who has a well-founded fear of persecution based on reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. While refugees remain our core constituency, our populations of concern also include internally displaced persons (IDPs), asylum seekers, and stateless persons. In certain situations, we have also helped provide protection and assistance to victims of natural disasters.

The vast number of the forcibly displaced and the growing complexity of the causes of displacement make our work and the work of our partners both more challenging and more needed than ever before. We recognize and greatly appreciate this Commission's ongoing support of UNHCR and your concern for vulnerable people worldwide.

Global displacement at historic heights

Today's global displacement situation is unprecedented. There are currently more than 60 million refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons worldwide as a result of conflict and persecution. Last year, only 126,000 refugees were able to return to their homes, the lowest number since 1983. Fifteen new conflicts have broken out or reignited in the past five years, while none of the old conflicts were resolved. The number of people forced to flee their homes each day due to conflict or persecution stood at 42,500 last year. That's a small city fleeing each day. The interlinked mega-crises in Syria and Iraq, which have uprooted over 15 million people, are powerful examples of this evolution – but not the only ones. In the last twelve months alone, 500,000 people have fled from their homes

in South Sudan and 190,000 from Burundi. Some 1.1 million were newly displaced in and from Yemen, and 300,000 in Libya. In the Asia-Pacific region, 94,000 people have crossed the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea since 2014 in search of protection and a more dignified life. Tens of thousands, many of them children, are fleeing horrific gang violence and abuse in Central America. And there has been little or no improvement in the crises affecting the Central African Republic, Nigeria, Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and elsewhere.

As these crises grow, so does the politicization of refugee resettlement and aid. A major challenge to the safety and protection of refugees arises from toxic public debates and the climate of fear they engender. In some countries around the world, there has been a proliferation of xenophobic narratives and inflammatory statements –both at the political and civil society levels. This contributes to a hostile environment, which has in some instances even led to violent attacks against refugees. In this climate, we need an all-out effort to ensure that protection – and in particular, the institution of asylum – remains life-saving, non-political, and fundamentally humanitarian. Today's problems desperately require a depoliticized space in which we can get on with practicalities, such as shelter, necessities of life, and the determination of who is in need of refugee protection.

The European Crisis

As of October 13, more than 590,000 people have arrived in Europe through Greece and Italy so far this year. September alone saw 168,000 arrivals (mostly in Greece), five times the number from the year before. In total more than 3,000 people have tragically died or gone missing during their journey. The stories and photographs of families packed into flimsy boats fleeing for their lives, camping in train stations and in the open air with just the clothes on their back, and fleeing from sometimes brutal police and border agents, have shocked the world. The conflicts in Syria and Iraq have spilled beyond that region, and the effects can now be felt throughout much of Europe as the humanitarian community struggles to provide enough assistance. Make no mistake, Europe is facing its biggest refugee influx in decades.

UNHCR is calling upon the European Union to provide an immediate and life-saving response to the thousands of refugees as they are crossing the Mediterranean and making their way through Europe. We are also calling upon the European Union to relocate thousands of refugees throughout Europe. We currently predict that that up to 700,000 people will be seeking safety and international protection in Europe by the end of 2015. While it is difficult to estimate at this point, it is possible that there could be even greater numbers of arrivals in 2016.

Who is coming and why?

Despite the extreme risks and difficulties of the trip, UNHCR continues to see thousands of people arriving in Europe every week. Although most attention is focused on Syrians, it should be noted that they are not the only refugee population making this journey. While Syrians comprise 70% of the sea arrivals to Greece, the top ten refugee producing countries represent over 90% of such arrivals. The other main nationalities of refugees and migrants arriving in Greece are Afghans, Iraqis, Nigerians, Pakistanis, Somalis, and Sudanese. All of these countries have been marked by conflict, violence and persecution. Without peaceful solutions to these crises, people lose hope and seek other options for themselves and their families. Many are resorting to smugglers to bring them to a safer haven and are clinging to the hope that a life in Europe can provide a better future for their children, one with peace and education. Of the total arrivals in Europe, 18% are children.

Syria crisis

While the refugee crisis in Europe is due to protracted conflicts in a number of different countries, the ongoing deadly conflict in Syria has become the main source of refugees. As the conflict in Syria has entered its fifth year with no end in sight, more than 4 million Syrian refugees have fled to neighboring countries. Continued danger inside Syria and deteriorating conditions in the host countries are now driving thousands of Syrians to risk everything on perilous journeys to Europe. The spike of Syrian refugees coming to Europe this year is mainly due to three factors – two long-term trends, and a more recent trigger.

First, many have lost hope that a political solution will soon be found to end the war. Second, after so many years in exile, their resources have run out and living conditions have been steadily deteriorating. Seven out of ten Syrian refugees in Lebanon live in extreme poverty, and in Jordan 86% of refugees in urban areas live below the Jordanian poverty line. The vast majority of Syrian refugees in Jordan live in urban areas rather than in camps, which is also the case in the other host countries. Refugees across the region are unable to work legally, and over half of their children are not getting any education. This situation of poverty among urban Syrian refugees is a major concern.

The third factor – the trigger that has encouraged many refugees to make the journey to Europe – is the humanitarian funding shortfall. UNHCR has been struggling to continue supporting the growing number of extremely vulnerable families with cash and shelter items, especially ahead of the coming winter. A few months ago, a lack of funding forced the World Food Program to cut their assistance by 30%. As a consequence, many refugees felt that the international community could be starting to abandon them.

To break down the causes for flight even further, UNHCR staff have identified the following seven core factors behind this movement based on observations and conversations with refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq.

Loss of hope

Hope is dwindling for many refugees. Feelings of uncertainty about the future are compounded by miserable conditions, are fueling a sense of despair and desperation.

High costs of living/Deepening poverty

Refugees in Lebanon cite the high cost of living as a factor in deciding whether to stay or go. In Egypt, refugees say it is getting harder to pay rent, manage high levels of indebtedness and provide for their basic needs. In Jordan, the inability to provide for one's family was the most common reason cited by people who knew someone who had left. The cumulative effect of four years in exile with restricted access to legal employment was also said to be taking its toll. In many cases savings are long depleted, precious valuables have been sold off, and many refugees across the region live in miserable conditions, struggling to pay rent, feed their families, and cover their basic needs.

Limited livelihood opportunities

Without the ability to work legally, many refugees struggle to make a living. Lack of livelihood opportunities or access to the formal labor market was cited as a problem by refugees in Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan. Syrian refugees in Iraq say the large number of internally displaced Iraqis has increased competition for jobs in the Kurdistan region of the country. Meanwhile, work on construction sites in the region has dried up with the drop in oil prices.

The lack of access to legal work leads refugees, desperate to provide for themselves, to resort to informal employment – risking exploitation, working in unsafe conditions or having payment withheld by unscrupulous employers. If caught working illegally, some refugees face sanctions, for example in Jordan being returned to a camp. Under new regulations in Lebanon, refugees must sign a pledge not to work when renewing their residency status.

Aid shortfalls

Aid programs for refugees and host communities in the region have been plagued by chronic funding shortages. The current inter-agency Syrian Regional Refugee and Resilience (3RP) plan for 2015 is only 41% funded, which has meant cuts in food aid for thousands of refugees. Those refugees still receiving food aid must survive on about 50 cents a day. Many refugees in Jordan told UNHCR that the WFP food aid cuts were the last straw in their decision to

leave the country. Tens of thousands miss out on cash assistance, sinking deeper into debt. As a result, people resort to negative coping strategies – including begging, child labor, and increased indebtedness. Shrinking humanitarian aid was cited by refugees in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt as cause of desperation and a driver of onward movement.

In Jordan, inadequate funding has caused refugees to lose free access to healthcare. As a result, almost 60 percent of adults with chronic medical conditions do without medicine or health services, up from 23 per cent in 2014. There is also a marked decrease in access to curative and preventative health care.

Hurdles to renew legal residency

In Lebanon, new regulations for Syrian refugees have made it harder for Syrians to reside in the country legally. Increasingly, therefore, Syrians transit through Lebanon to Turkey. Refugees already in Lebanon must pay US\$200 per year to renew their stay. The Syrians are required to sign a pledge not to work and must present a certified lease agreement. Many refugees are fearful of arrest or detention and feel vulnerable because of lapsed residency visas.

In Jordan, an urban verification exercise was launched by the authorities in February to ensure that all Syrians residing outside of camps are issued with a new identity document in order to access services. This exercise has presented a number of challenges, including the cost of obtaining a health certificate (JD30/US\$42 for those over 12 years of age) as part of the process.

Scant education opportunities

Limited education opportunities were cited as a problem for refugees in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq. Education is highly valued among Syrians, who enjoyed free and mandatory schooling at home before the war. The worsening conditions that refugees face in exile are having a devastating impact on the education of refugees. In Jordan, some 20 per cent of children are abandoning school in order to work, and in some cases girls are being forced into early marriage. Some 90,000 Syrians of school age have no formal education, with 30,000 of those accessing informal education and the rest missing out completely.

In Lebanon, where education is free to Syrians in a two-shift system, many children struggle to attend while at the same time working to support their families. While the Ministry of Education has doubled the number of places for Syrian children (that is, 200,000 in the 2015/2016 school year), another 200,000 Syrian children will be out of school this year. Across the region, Syrian youth are missing out on tertiary education and losing hope for their future.

Feeling unsafe in Iraq

In addition to the large numbers of Syrians leaving the neighboring countries for Europe, Iraqis are also undertaking the journey. Violence by armed militias has created deep insecurity in Iraq, with recent months noting increased improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide attacks in Baghdad. According to the most recent International Organization for Migration (IOM) displacement update, 3.2 million people have been displaced in Iraq since January 2014. The majority of displaced Iraqis UNHCR spoke to who were travelling outside Iraq reported feeling unsafe in their country. In particular, many Iraqis from minority groups told UNHCR that they see migration as the key to their physical safety. These reasons have driven thousands of refugees to look beyond neighboring countries and undertake the dangerous journey to Europe to find shelter.

Response in the EU

Over half a million refugees and migrants have arrived on Europe's shores since January of this year. Even on a continent of more than 500 million inhabitants, five thousand people arriving daily is a very significant number. But it is not an unmanageable one – provided that things are properly handled. The decision taken by the European Union to internally relocate 160,000 asylum-seekers is a key step in the right direction, but much more is needed for this system to work well. The solution will include the creation of adequate reception centers near the entry points, with sufficient capacity to receive, assist, register and screen tens of thousands of people, together with more legal migration avenues for those in search of protection. Immediate efforts must be undertaken to ensure adequate reception facilities and to provide humanitarian relief items in the European countries where refugees first arrive, such as Greece and Italy, and in the countries refugees travel through on their journey north. While there have been improvements in reception conditions in the last few weeks, there is an immediate need for more reception capacity and infrastructure, sanitation facilities, and core relief items such as warm clothing as the weather worsens.

Implementation of the European Union's relocation program is critical. The EU Ministers for Justice and Home Affairs met on September 22 in Brussels and adopted a decision on the relocation of an additional 120,000 people in need of international protection from Greece and Italy. UNHCR welcomes the news of the departure of the first relocation of refugees in the EU. Recently, 19 Eritrean asylum seekers were relocated from Italy to Sweden, as the first step in a process that envisions the relocation of 150,000 people from Italy and Greece to participating EU states.

UNHCR strongly urges EU member states to unite behind the emergency proposals negotiated on September 22, to manage the refugee and migration crisis that is becoming increasingly chaotic and unpredictable. As the High Commissioner for Refugees stated, "The relocation plan will not put an end to the problem, but it will hopefully be the beginning of a solution." UNHCR additionally urges a substantial and rapid increase in legal opportunities for

refugees to access the EU, including enhanced resettlement and humanitarian admission, family reunification, and humanitarian and student visas. Without such avenues, refugees will continue to be left with few options, and the increase in international efforts to crack down on smugglers and traffickers is unlikely to be effective.

UNHCR reiterates its deep conviction that only a united European emergency response can address the present refugee and migration crisis. Europe can no longer afford to continue with this fragmented approach that undermines efforts to rebuild responsibility, solidarity and trust among States, and is creating chaos and desperation among thousands of refugee women, men and children. After the many gestures by governments and citizens across Europe to welcome refugees, the focus now needs to be on a robust, joint European response.

UNHCR's Response

UNHCR is promoting a three-pronged comprehensive response to the European refugee crisis: a) saving lives and addressing humanitarian and protection needs at points of transit, first arrival and destination; b) strengthening protection systems through capacity building for various asylum procedures in the East and Horn of Africa, North Africa and Europe; and c) reinforcing the availability of protection and solutions in regions where refugees first find safety. In Europe, UNHCR's actions will support first-line reception interventions through: provision of emergency and life-saving assistance; strengthening of first-line reception capacity; provision of information; protection monitoring and follow-up; advocacy; and the provision of appropriate technical assistance and other support to national and local authorities, as well as civil society, particularly relating to emergency reception arrangements. UNHCR is also working with local partners to ensure adequate identification and response for women, men, boys and girls at particular risk, such as unaccompanied and separated children. This includes working to ensure prevention and response to sexual and gender based violence, access to child protection systems, and services for those with specific needs.

Specifically, in close cooperation with relevant government counterparts; EU institutions and agencies; international partners; INGOs; NGOs; local communities and civil society, UNHCR will:

- Support the creation of adequate reception arrangements and management;
- Enhance protection monitoring through direct or indirect establishment of UNHCR presence at entry, transit and exit points along transit routes;
- Provide interpretation support to local authorities and NGOs in the different countries that engage with arrivals and refugees on the move to ensure better communication, profiling and identification of protection concerns, and facilitate the swift access of persons of concern to the asylum procedure;
- Assist the authorities and other relevant institutions with the identification and registration of new arrivals;

- Enhance the provision of relevant information and counseling to new arrivals and persons on the move on: their rights and obligations upon entry of the country of transit/asylum; the risks of irregular onward movement; and means of accessing the asylum procedure, family reunification, the EU relocation program, and options for resettlement outside the EU, when applicable;
- Strengthen public information and advocacy strategies to elicit wider understanding by the public, governments and stakeholders towards refugees;
- Enhance communication efforts to reach communities in countries of origin and first asylum through a more concerted use of mass communication channels and platforms, to inform of the dangers of irregular crossings and existing and emerging legal ways to enter Europe, as well as provide accurate information on their rights and obligations once in Europe and the overall situation, with a view to manage expectations and counter inaccurate information relayed by smugglers and traffickers.

Global UNHCR recommendations

UNHCR has two main global recommendations to address this crisis.

1. Financial and Political Support

The humanitarian system is *financially broke*. We are no longer able to meet even the absolute minimum requirements of core protection and lifesaving assistance to preserve the human dignity of the people we care for. The current funding level for the 33 UN appeals to provide humanitarian assistance to 82 million people around the world is only 42%. UNHCR expects to receive just 47% of the funding we need this year. We have managed to avoid meaningful reductions of our direct support to refugee families, but at a high cost to our other activities.

In light of this, UNHCR is appealing for more funding to meet the immediate needs of the hundreds of thousands of refugees we are currently serving in Europe. Our most recent appeal highlights the need for \$128 million in total financial requirements for the Special Mediterranean Initiative from June 2015 to December 2016.¹ In the current volatile and fast-changing environment, we are appealing to donors to provide contributions that can be allocated as flexible as possible across the Europe region.

¹ file:///C:/Users/fisher/Downloads/UNHCRSMISBAppealJune2015-December2016-30SEPT15.pdf

2. Resettlement

Most refugees want to return home as soon as conditions allow, unfortunately continued conflict, wars and persecution prevent many refugees from being able to repatriate. Many also live in perilous situations or have specific needs that cannot be addressed in the country where they have sought protection. In such circumstances, UNHCR helps resettle refugees to a third country.

Resettlement is the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another State that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grant them permanent settlement. Resettlement is unique in that it is the only durable solution that involves the relocation of refugees from an asylum country to a third country. Of the 14.4 million refugees of concern to UNHCR around the world, less than one percent are submitted for resettlement.

According to UNHCR's current assessments, about 10% of Syrian refugees—some 400,000 persons in total-- are in need of resettlement. UNHCR is focussing its resettlement efforts on identifying and referring the most vulnerable refugees in the host countries of Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq. These particularly vulnerable refugees include survivors of torture and severe violence, women headed households, refugees with serious medical needs, and others who remain at heightened risk. Resettlement remains an important tool for refugee protection, while also being an important expression of solidarity by the international community with the countries in the region that are hosting millions of Syrian refugees.

UNHCR has already referred more than 45,000 Syrians for refugee resettlement, with more than 20,000 of those referrals made to the US. Although Syrian arrivals to the US have been fewer than 2,000 persons so far, we are encouraged by the stated intent of the US administration to admit at least 10,000 Syrian refugees in US fiscal year 2016.

Resettlement of 400,000 Syrians, a number not seen since the 1980s when millions of Southeast Asian refugees were resettled, will take a concerted international commitment over the next several years. To date, more than 30 countries have pledged 130,000 resettlement and humanitarian admission places for Syrian refugees. UNHCR is calling upon the international community to expand upon this generous initial response. Towards this end, UNHCR has also encouraged states to be flexible in their immigration laws and procedures and to offer family reunion and other migration opportunities for Syrian refugees. While UNHCR recognizes the need for all states to have thorough security screening measures applied to all refugees and immigrants, including Syrians, UNHCR has called upon states to find ways to make these necessary procedures as fair, efficient and as timely as possible. UNHCR is

dedicated to working with states to ensure that resettlement program remain safe and secure for both refugees and for receiving states.

I'd like to emphasize that, as is the case with other refugee populations globally, permanent resettlement to another country is—and will remain—a solution for only a small percentage of the Syrian refugees. Even if countries significantly increase the number of resettlement places and related opportunities that they offer, the vast majority of the Syrian refugees will remain in the Syria region. For that reason, resettlement must be approached as a critical part of a comprehensive international response to the Syrian humanitarian crisis; a response that also includes robust humanitarian assistance to the Syrian refugees and to the governments and communities in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and elsewhere that are so generously hosting these refugees.

Conclusion

We must call upon our shared humanity, histories, and sacred traditions of providing refuge to persons fleeing conflict and persecution, and remember that it was exactly for times like these that the international refugee protection regime was created. Let us recognize the reality of human displacement, remain true to the rule of law, and acknowledge the positive contributions that refugees and migrants make to our societies. To quote the High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, “This is the starting point: there is no easy solution. And so, those who believe that the easy solution is to close doors should forget about it. When a door is closed, people will open a window. If the window is closed, people will dig a tunnel. If there is a basic need of survival, a basic need of protection, people will move, whatever obstacles are put in their way – those obstacles will only make their journeys more dramatic.”