

Debate article to European church media, August 2009

## **Europe should take its fair share of responsibility in refugee protection – and the active role of the churches is essential**

Most of the world's refugees are not to be found in Europe today. Rather they are hosted in countries in Africa and Asia such as Kenya, Sudan, Iran, Syria and Pakistan. Of the around 32 million persons of concern to UNHCR (the United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees) globally, only 3.4 million are to be found in Europe, one of the richest regions in the world.

In order to draw attention to the crucial issues around refugee protection during the Swedish presidency of the European Union, the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe, the Church of Sweden and the Christian Council of Sweden last week jointly organized a conference on refugee resettlement and its role in building a Europe of asylum.

Refugee resettlement is about reaching out to the most vulnerable persons in protracted refugee situations to find durable and lasting solutions in order to give them a chance to rebuild their lives in a new country. The selection is done in close co-operation with UNHCR.

In this context it is important to state that refugee resettlement is complementary to the right to spontaneously seek asylum, and the possibility to enter the EU and ask for asylum without risking one's life must always be defended! Nevertheless resettlement provides one important avenue in providing legal access to protection.

So far the EU with its 500 million inhabitants has offered protection to around 5 000 resettled refugees per year, while for example the 33 million inhabitants of Canada each year welcome 7 500 resettled refugees - this also thanks to a stronger involvement of Churches and civil society actors in all phases of resettlement in Canada. This illustrates clearly that the EU needs to assume a stronger global role in providing refugee protection and that the role of the civil society actors is imperative.

The European Commission will shortly present a proposal for a common European refugee resettlement programme. We are looking forward to this proposal and hope it will provide a beginning of a new era of enhanced solidarity by European countries. The Swedish government is highly supportive of expanding refugee resettlement and making it an integral part of the so called Stockholm programme for the EU migration and asylum plans for the coming years. Therefore the moment is ripe to act.

In order for the proposal to be accepted in the council of minister meeting in December this year much advocacy is required from civil society in all the European Union countries.

Churches have lots of experience and high credibility in speaking on refugee and asylum issues; churches have global networks and meet refugees in different situations – churches are present in emergency relief in refugee camps and work with refugees in the urban slums all around the world. The churches are also involved in advocacy for the right to asylum and are active in receiving and welcoming refugees into new societies. The role of the churches in advocating for a Europe which take a greater responsibility in refugee protection can not be underestimated! As the vice president of the European Commission, Jacques Barrot said in his

address to the conference: “The churches have an essential role to play. They can educate people’s minds and activate their hearts”.

As representatives of churches in Europe we urge faith communities to raise their voices in support of the development of resettlement in the building of a Europe where refugees are welcomed! As Christians we are called to welcome the refugee and the stranger as we welcome the Lord Jesus Christ amongst us. Let us take this challenge seriously.

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