

Statement attributable to the Secretary-General on recent refugee/migrant tragedies

New York , 28 August 2015

I am horrified and heartbroken at the latest loss of lives of refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean and Europe.

Yesterday saw the grim discovery of the bodies of more than 70 people inside a truck abandoned near the Austrian border with Hungary. Reports indicate that many of the victims were Syrian asylum seekers – including children.

Recent days have brought yet more news of hundreds of refugees and migrants drowning in perilous journeys on the sea.

Earlier this year, I visited search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean. Despite the concerted and commendable efforts of the joint European search and rescue operation – which has saved tens of thousands of lives – the Mediterranean Sea continues to be a death trap for refugees and migrants.

These repeated tragedies underscore the ruthlessness of people smugglers and traffickers whose criminal activities extend from the Andaman Sea to the Mediterranean to the highways of Europe. It also highlights the desperation of people seeking protection or a new life.

A large majority of people undertaking these arduous and dangerous journeys are refugees fleeing from places such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. International law has stipulated -- and states have long recognized -- the right of refugees to protection and asylum. When considering asylum requests, States cannot make distinctions based on religion or other identity – nor can they force people to return to places from which they have fled if there is a well-founded fear of persecution or attack. This is not only a matter of international law; it is also our duty as human beings.

I commend those leaders and communities who have stepped up to our shared responsibilities and obligations. But much more is required. I appeal to all governments involved to provide comprehensive responses, expand safe and legal channels of migration and act with humanity, compassion and in accordance with their international obligations.

Let us also remember: the high number of refugees and migrants are a symptom of deeper problems – endless conflict, grave violations of human rights, tangible governance failures and harsh repression. The Syrian war, for example, has just been manifested on a roadside in the heart of Europe.

In addition to upholding responsibilities, the international community must also show greater determination in resolving conflicts and other problems that leave people little choice but to flee. Failing that, the numbers of those displaced – more than 40,000 per day – will only rise.

This is a human tragedy that requires a determined collective political response. It is a crisis of solidarity, not a crisis of numbers.

I am encouraged that these issues will be an area of focus and priority when world leaders gather at the United Nations headquarters in New York next month for the opening of the General Assembly. I am organizing a special meeting devoted to these global concerns on September 30.