



Press Release SG/SM/8522

SECRETARY-GENERAL STRESSES 'CLEAR NEED' FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ON REFUGEE, MIGRATION POLICY

Following is the statement by Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the launch of the Declaration on the Future of Refugee and Migration Policy, The Hague, 22 November:

I am very pleased to join you today for the launch of a Declaration on an issue of great political, economic and moral significance. How we deal with the question of refugee and migration policy will have a profound effect on relations between the peoples of the developed and developing world. It will also, I believe, say a great deal about our moral character and commitment to human equality and human dignity.

Today there are more people living outside their countries of birth than ever before. In 2000, an estimated 175 million lived outside their country of birth. Of these, about 159 million were deemed international migrants; approximately 16 million were recognized refugees fleeing a well-founded fear of persecution; and 900,000 were asylum seekers.

Behind these numbers are human stories: the skilled Nigerian computer engineer working in Sweden; the agricultural worker from Guatemala working illegally in the United States; the woman trafficked from Ukraine to Bosnia; the refugee from Afghanistan now in Pakistan and about to return home; and many, many more.

Globalization is affecting in profound ways the character and impact of migration. Lower travel costs, and the information and communication technologies that are among the driving forces of globalization, have made migration much more viable. Financial integration and liberalization have made sending money abroad easier and cheaper, increasing workers' remittances.

Migration can thus have a vital role in determining the development prospects of the poorer countries -- both positive, through remittances and the gain in experience and education, and negative, through brain drain. It also, of course, has important economic and social implications for the countries of the North.

There is thus a clear need for international cooperation on the question of migration and refugee policy. Much effort has been put into the development of multilateral refugee policies over the past 50 years. The policies adopted by individual States affect not just the migrants and refugees, but also other States, near and far.

Demands for labour -- particularly in Europe, but throughout the Western world -- are likely to rise as the labour force of industrial countries declines relative to the number of retired persons their taxes must support. At the same time, millions of individuals and families from poorer countries are seeking opportunities to raise their standards of living through access to better paid employment overseas.

There are no easy choices or simple solutions in this area. Migration and refugee flows can create problems, lead to human trafficking, disrupt settled patterns, and make the very fact of change seem threatening to many people. However, I am convinced that if the issue is tackled properly, citizens of developed as well as developing countries will understand that the benefits of migration — in economic, social and cultural growth — far outweigh the problems it may bring. The same applies if durable solutions can be found for refugees.

This is, above all, a task for political leaders — particularly in the privileged North, and most particularly here in Europe. Politicians have a choice to make. They can embrace the potential that migrants and refugees represent, or use them as political scapegoats. I hope they will begin by “demythologizing” migration, addressing the negative myths and fears that surround migration and informing their publics of the benefits that well-managed migration can produce. To realize these benefits, political leaders must develop a strategy to integrate migrants into their societies as full members, with the privileges as well as the obligations which that entails.

Immigrants and refugees should not — and must not — be seen as a burden. Those who risk their lives and those of their families are often those with the greatest ambition to make a better life for themselves, and they are willing to work for it. They do not leave their familiar surroundings, their culture or their families for a life of dependence, crime or discrimination thousands of kilometres away. They merely want a safer, more prosperous future for their children. If they are given a chance to make the most of their abilities, on an equal basis, the vast majority of them will be assets to society.

This declaration is both broad and deep in scope. In it, you have shown the courage needed to tackle hard questions, and to think anew on this issue which is so central to relations among, and within, States. I urge everyone who has contributed to this Declaration to continue your good work in serving as catalysts for a new debate — more visionary and more humane than those of the past — about the fate of our fellow human beings who leave their homes in search of a better future.

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