

Speaking notes Minister Leers
Global Hearing on Refugees and Migration
June 4th 2012

Your Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen

Ten years ago pragmatic, forward looking people gathered here in The Hague. Their aim was to make sense of the challenges related to migration. They knew they had to work 'from challenges to solutions' and 'from policy to practice'. They realized that the time for singular abstractions was over and that a holistic approach was badly needed.

The outcome of their getting together was the The Hague Declaration. And ever since the "The Hague Process" (based on that Declaration) has been actively involved in moving the migration debate to a next stage, and quite successfully so. In particular building links with big corporations was an appropriate move: after all, international corporations probably know what a global community stands for, what the future may look like and what problems need to be overcome to create such a global community in which everyone in his own world can develop his own skills. Because every individual has skills, everyone has potential, and we owe it to each other to keep that in mind.

Every day we are facing practical problems. My day-to-day work mostly involves the regulating of the everpresent flow of immigrants and is influenced by the economic crisis and the political upheaval that comes with it. It is hard to distinguish between refugees and migrants. It is hard to categorize individual aims and hardships. Still, we have to make hard decisions involving people's lives and future. We send people away when we apply our strict but just rules about immigration. We luckily can also sometimes invite refugees to find a safe place in our country. Only last week I was in Kenya to witness the preparation of refugees for their trip tot Holland.

The most important reason for migration in Europe is obviously economic. And it is not only economic motives on behalf of the immigrants. More and more we realize – again – the need we have for people to keep our economy and care-systems working. But the mutual needs are not the same as in the fifties and sixties.

For years it has been clear that we do need bright minds to strengthen our industries and defend our economic position. These days, we realize that, at least in my country, we also need well educated craftsmen. I mean not only the highly qualified, but in particular the well-trained craftsmen: the plumber, the IT-system-maintainer, the electrician to keep our trains and infrastructure running and our houses and our manufacturing plants going. In short the many activities modern cities strive on.

Ladies and gentlemen:
is migration a problem that seeks a solution or is a solution to a deeper problem?

Posing the question this way gives you a clue to what my answer is: it is both.

Yes, we do need migrants. On the other hand we cannot solve all the problems that unmitigated migration creates. But do people have to move to where the economy is or can we move the economy?

In this context I would like to refer to the preamble of a 1973 ILO convention in which it was stated that,

and I quote

“Considering that in order to overcome underdevelopment and structural and chronic unemployment, the governments of many countries increasingly stress the desirability of encouraging the transfer of capital and technology rather than the transfer of workers”.

Unquote

This way of looking into the phenomenon of migratory movements has for a long time been considered not feasible.

Today however, this way of looking into the relationship and balance between labour and capital deserves to take centre stage again. We should not bring people to where the capital is, but rather capital to where the people are.

Migration as the solution to many economic or population challenges is too simplistic. Moreover migrants are not robots but human beings like you and me: they want to live a meaningful life.

In this context it is quite obvious that the Netherlands has expressed an interest in inviting the highly skilled. And they do come, and they do contribute. Just walk around in the offices of international corporations. Just check the origin of the researchers and PhD students at e.g. Maastricht University: Some 40 scholars involved in migration studies, with probably some 25 nationalities.

10 years ago you agreed on the ‘Declaration of The Hague on the Future of Refugee and Migration Policy’. This concise document identified 21 key principles constituting a comprehensive approach to the migration and refugee challenge and in particular ideas for innovative international ways forward.

In it you stated: I quote “Our starting point is to re-think the long term interests of states and societies as well as the aspirations and needs of people on the move ...With good international co-operation, managed migration offers great potential, while one of the international community’s major goals for the future should be to make the right and the option of remaining in one’s own country viable for all” unquote.

In the Declaration you focus on themes like migration management, security, orderly migration, migration and development, conflict and conflict prevention, integration and social inclusion, participation and responsibilities, leadership education and information, as well as state responsibility.

An important conclusion was that orderly and just refugee and migration situations are only possible when the receiving countries move towards more planned approaches and transparent policies.

New policies will may and can serve legitimate national interests. They will –however - also be determined by the growing obligations of States to meet universal standards in international human rights, in international humanitarian law and in refugee law.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It can not be denied that mass migration makes societies and politicians nervous.

It is an issue and it sometimes brings out the worst in people.

Often administrations want to show the electorate that they have immigration 'under control'. But increased human mobility and the complexity of managing this flow of people has made migration control a daunting task.

Moreover the geographic border has been moved to the social welfare office, the entry desk at the hospital or the doorsteps to a school.

We may wish to talk about flow management. Such an approach recognizes that we will have to harness the positive effects of people movement, while reassuring the genuine fears felt by many in receiving countries.

Kishore Mahbubani, the Singaporean diplomat, famous for his publications on the rise of Asia and the decline of the West, talks about the openness of societies and minds.

He submits that India is an open society with closed minds, and China a closed society and open minds. We need to ask ourselves the question which direction Europe is going. We all hope that it remains an open society with open minds. I subscribe to that idea.

But creating or keeping an open society does not mean that we should have open borders. There has to be a balance of interests coupled to just and efficient migration procedures.

We may wish to discuss a model based on the creation of International Transit Centres, offering basic shelter and services to migrants. It would treat all migrants equally and remove the incentive for people to make false asylum claims.

These centres would offer an alternative to the unscrupulous activities of human traffickers. It would have offered an alternative for the 1500 that drowned last year whilst trying to cross the Mediterranean.

I know that there are no simplistic answers to complicated problems. We need to sit down together, like we do today. It is always time to act, yesterday, today, tomorrow. But we need to know what action is the preferable one.

And that indeed is the purpose of this gathering.

Thank you.