

“We Need a European Response with European Solidarity”

In this interview **António Guterres**, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, discusses the dramatic rise of forcibly displaced persons worldwide, the serious lack of resources to protect refugees, the challenges of protecting internally displaced people, and the urgent need for a common European asylum and migration strategy.

Question: In the media the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean and elsewhere make the headlines nearly every day. The numbers seem to have been constantly and dramatically rising over the past five years. Is that true?

Guterres: It is true that there is an increase in the number of people crossing the Mediterranean. Last year we have had more than 200,000 people. Not all of them are refugees; some are economic migrants who cross especially the central and western Mediterranean. So, this is a serious problem that needs to be addressed properly. But it is a very small problem compared to the dramatic escalation of displacement in the rest of the world in the recent years. We are talking about 59.5 million people displaced by conflicts today. Let us not forget that 86 per cent of the world’s refugees are living in the developing world. As a matter of fact, the larger majority does not want to come to Europe, they want to go back home in faith and dignity as soon as the wars end. But unfortunately, we don’t see many solutions for the conflicts we are currently facing.

The increase to nearly 60 million refugees—was it a continuing rise?

If you look at the number of people displaced per day in the world by conflicts—not to mention natural disasters or other factors: In 2010 it was 11,000 people per day, in 2011 14,000, in 2012 23,000, in 2013 32,000, and in 2014 42,500. That means that in 4 years we had 4 times more. And this shows a staggering escalation of displacement with which the humanitarian community, UN Agencies, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and civil society struggle to cope. To be entirely clear: We no longer have the resources needed to provide the minimum levels of protection and assistance these people require.

How many refugees and internally displaced people respectively are among the 60 million?

Essentially, one third of this number, who cross borders, are refugees according to international law. Two thirds are internally displaced. That means they stay within the borders of their own country, which sometimes is even worse than being a refugee. When, for instance, they are in the middle of a conflict zone or when their government is part of the problem instead of being part of the solution.

António Guterres and UNHCR

In June 2005, António Guterres took office as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). He is the 10th High Commissioner since the organization was founded in 1950. The former Portuguese prime minister was also a founding member of the Portuguese Refugee Council in 1991, and during his time as politician he was spearheading the international efforts to peacefully solve the crisis in East Timor. UNHCR is located in Geneva, Switzerland. More than 9,300 staff members work in 123 countries providing protection and assistance to nearly 55 million refugees, returnees, internally displaced people and stateless persons. Legal foundation of UNHCR’s work is the 1951 Refugee Convention and its Additional Protocol of 1967. The organization's needs-based budget for 2015 is US\$ 7 billion.

What are the main reasons for people fleeing their homes?

We see a multiplication of new conflicts. In one year and a half, since the beginning of 2014, we have 6 or 7 new conflicts in the world. At the same time we have a mega crisis in Syria and Iraq that led to about 15 million

people being displaced today. And then the old crises never die: Afghanistan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo etc., with millions of people unable to go back to their countries of origin. What is clear is that in the international community today there is very little capacity to prevent conflicts and to timely solve them. We live in a world where is not only a global governance system missing, but power relations became unclear. Therefore we have impunity and unpredictability everywhere. Everybody can start a conflict in any part of the world. More and more people suffer and there is less and less capacity to bring a solution to their plight.

Is terrorism the main cause for the refugee crisis we face?

Most of the conflicts today are internal, but they have actors outside the countries supporting the parties financially or with weapons. Many of these conflicts, even if they look internal, have really internationalized. Syria is the best example. I think it is necessary for all parties involved in a conflict and for external supporters to understand that these developments are turning into very dangerous situations—not only for the countries involved and for their regions, but for the whole world. If you look at the map, starting in Nigeria, then moving to Mali, Libya, the Sinai, Somalia up into Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, North-West Pakistan, all these conflicts are becoming more and more interlinked. They are also linked to global terror with fighters going from one country to another. They come from all over the world, also from Europe. There are many European citizens fighting in Syria, in Iraq, and in other places. People need to understand that we are facing a global danger and so those that have an influence on the parties of any of these conflicts should do everything possible to stop them, in the interest of everyone.

But you cannot push the international community or the Security Council more than you already do, I guess. So, what are the biggest challenges for UNHCR at the moment?

As a matter of fact our global governance system either does not exist or does not work. As you said the Security Council is paralyzed and there is no capacity of either the big powers or the countries of the regions to stop these conflicts. And so, more and more people are displaced. Unfortunately, the resources needed in order to support them are no longer available sufficiently. It means that the notion that some people might have that it does not matter that conflicts are created because the ›humanitarians‹ will eventually clean up the mess, is no longer true. We no longer have the resources and the capacity to pick up the pieces, which means that more and more people are left dependent in dramatic circumstances.

That would be the least the international community could do: to give enough money for humanitarian agencies to do the work. But even that is not the case. I have heard that the World Food Programme (WFP) had to cut in half the portion of nutrition for Syria per day, is that true?

It's not only Syria. This has happened in many situations. They are no longer able to maintain their food support programs and they are reducing them by 30, 40 or even 50 per cent. In one situation, in Mauretania, they had to cut it by 100 per cent. And this shows that indeed today the humanitarian community as a whole is financially broke. There is no capacity to respond to the needs that are growing at exponential rates.

One measure could be to coordinate UNHCR even better with the other UN Agencies, like the WFP, or UNICEF.

Coordination is not able to solve a problem like this. We are very well coordinated with the WFP and the other UN agencies. We have 720 NGOs working with us all around the world in a very effective way. The problem is not a lack of coordination. The problem is simply a lack of resources. It is important to make the international community understand that the humanitarian and development scenes can no longer be seen separately. Because there is much more money for development cooperation than for humanitarian action we need to make sure that development actors come very early into crisis situations, in order to support host communities of refugees and displaced persons or in order to organize the reintegration of people who go back home. So, we need to make sure that development and humanitarian communities will work hand in hand since the very beginning of a crisis.

This would be a paradigm shift, would' it?

It is and it is absolutely essential to make world leaders understand that some countries are essential for keeping the stability of the regions we are talking about: Be it Jordan or Lebanon in relation to Syria; or the case of Kenya in relation to Somalia, or Cameroon in relation to Nigeria. These are all middle income countries that do not benefit from a number of instruments of development cooperation. But being fundamental pillars of stability in the regions they should be a priority in development cooperation. The world is much more dangerous today and this needs to be reflected in the way that political leaders and international institutions define their strategies and priorities.

There are large numbers of internally displaced people and their numbers are rising. What can be UNHCR's role without an official mandate?

No organization has a specific mandate on internally displaced people. The responsibility lies fundamentally on the countries to which the internally displaced people belong. Unfortunately, there are many circumstances where the countries are part of the problem and not part of the solution. Together with all other UN agencies and with the broader humanitarian community we work when we are allowed to do so and when there are prospects of success in support of these people. And we do it with a division of labor. UNHCR is responsible for the coordination of protection, for camp management, relief items and shelter. WFP is responsible for food security; UNICEF for water and sanitation, as well as education. We all combine our efforts to try to support people.

You would not argue for reopening the 1951 refugee convention in order to include internally displaced people in the UNHCR mandate?

When you look at the discussions that we have today about refugees in the world then I am very much afraid to reopen the 1951 convention. I am afraid that we would end up with a much worse convention than we have now.

How about an additional protocol?

I am very doubtful about the capacity of the international community today to define legally binding instruments that are effective. It has happened in Africa¹, fortunately, but I see with difficulty this happening in other continents. But in any case, there are guidelines that were approved by the General Assembly² and that could be called soft law by which states should be bound. But unfortunately, we are far from having those guidelines being respected.

Is the international system well equipped to take care of internally displaced people?

I think the international system is not well equipped. We are simply not able to deliver because of a lack of resources and in some cases either because states do not allow us to work or because the conflict parties do not allow us access to the populations in danger. The problem is that I do not see the international community reaching consensus on legally binding instruments that could force states to guarantee internally displaced people the full respect of their rights.

¹ See African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention), 22.10.2009, www.unhcr.org/4ae9bede9.html

² Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, UN Doc. E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2, 11.2.1998.

60 per cent of newly displaced people come from five countries: Iraq, South Sudan, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria. Are there specific strategies for each country or is UNHCR trying to address the problem on a global scale?

Each country is a different story. The situation in a country depends on specific dynamics; its relations with the neighbors are different and the capacity to protect people in the region is different. So, each country requires a different plan of action even if the strategy is basically the same: to guarantee for people's access to protection—which means open borders—, to guarantee that the people's rights are respected and to try to mobilize international support for assistance.

In light of thousands of casualties in the Mediterranean in the last 12 months, the deficiencies of the Common European Asylum System (Dublin III regulation) have become crystal clear. How would you evaluate Europe's response to the current crisis?

First of all, I think we should separate things. One thing is the lack of capacity for rescue at sea in the first part of 2015 after Mare Nostrum ended and the fact that the Triton operation was clearly not adequate. Fortunately, that has now improved substantially. By the way, the number of people that crossed from Turkey to Greece is bigger than the number of people coming from Libya and Egypt to Italy, which is a fact people are not aware of. If you think that people coming to Greece are facing a better life you have to see that they are coming to a country which has very little reception capacity. Then they normally move onwards through countries with many problems like Bulgaria, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Serbia and then they come to Hungary which has, as you know, also very restrictive measures. It means that coming to Europe is not exactly an easy thing. We need a European response with European solidarity and European responsibility. Unfortunately, we are still very far from it, even if the proposals of the European Commission have been in our opinion a step in the right direction. I am sorry that the European Council was not able to fully approve them, namely that mandatory relocation in order to have a fair share and a full assumption of responsibilities by the countries of entry was not entirely adopted by the Council.

So, you would approve of a quota system for a fairer distribution of responsibility for asylum seekers across EU member states?

In extreme situations, I think there should be a collective responsibility. One way to achieve this collective responsibility is a quota system—provided that the countries fully respect their responsibility of registering, fingerprinting, identifying all the people and being able to determine who is in need of protection.

Do you think that the new military mission EUNAVFOR Med which shall fight smugglers in the Mediterranean is the right answer?

For the moment we just have exchanges of information and intelligence. Our position is always clear: we are very much in favor of cracking down on smugglers and traffickers, provided that it is done in accordance with international law, provided that victims are effectively protected, and provided that avenues are created for people to come to Europe legally. That means more flexible visa policies, more possibilities of resettlement, humanitarian admission and enhanced family reunification programs, as it was the case in Germany. So, the idea that you can solve the problem by just cracking down on smugglers has been proven wrong by all kinds of smuggling in human history.

What do you suggest instead?

You need to have a comprehensive strategy, addressing the root causes of displacement in countries of origin, increasing the protection mechanisms in countries of transit, creating conditions for people to be able to choose to stay instead of being forced to move and obviously cracking down on smugglers and traffickers. The latter means taking the legal measures to arrest and punish them. But at the same time the countries need to provide legal avenues for coming to Europe. A European solidarity mechanism is needed. It would allow Europe

to do it in a way that doesn't penalize too much the small number of countries that really have a positive approach to people fleeing a conflict or prosecution.

Are you satisfied with the rescue operation now underway which is not comparable to Mare Nostrum?

The results prove that the number of people perishing in the Mediterranean has dramatically decreased. It means that indeed there was a very strong reinforcement of the capacity in place. That might be an improvement. But now we are particularly worried about the people coming from Turkey to Greece because they are larger in number and because their reception conditions are absolutely appalling.

What do you think about resettlement programs? Would that be a solution?

A resettlement program is something that we cherish a lot. Obviously, the opportunities in the world are limited compared to the needs. Last year, 70,000 people departed to resettlement countries of the developed world. We were able to provide them with a better life. We estimate more than one million refugees for which resettlement would be the adequate solution. So, it's clear that we have fewer opportunities in resettlement and humanitarian admission than what we would like to have. We very much praise Germany for what it has done with the humanitarian admission program of 30,000 people. If all countries in the developed world would have done the same the quotas would be much better. But even if the numbers are limited, the truth is that you cannot compare the life of someone who has lived in a refugee camp like Dadaab in Kenya for 20 years with the life of a family that can come to Germany or the US or Canada, where people can start a small business, their children can go to university and have an adequate life. For many people resettlement is the difference, if not between life and death but between hope and despair.

With respect to legal immigration: what should be valid reasons for people to immigrate and seeking asylum? Should only political persecution be a valid reason or also poverty and the lack of perspective?

I think, if you look at many countries in the world, they need immigration. One example: My mother is 92 years old and she has some health problems, so we always have one person staying with her. Whenever I went home to visit her in Portugal I have never seen a Portuguese taking care of her. They are all immigrants. And I believe in Switzerland, where I am now, or in Germany or Sweden, this is even more the case. All countries in the global North will need migration. If you look at the demographic projection of a country like Portugal with a fertility rate of about 1.3 it is obvious that migration is needed for the sustainability of a population. This should be recognized, and migration should be properly organized and managed. We should have cooperation between countries of origin, countries of destination and countries of transit to do things in an orderly and legal way. We should try to match in the best possible way the needs of the developed world with the fact that many people don't find opportunities in their own countries. For victims of conflicts and persecution we have a different situation. International law creates the obligation for states to provide protection when they come to their territory.

Are there countries or regions which could serve as a role model?

Spain could serve as an example with its cooperation with West Africa. I am not saying that it is a perfect example but it has produced some results at a certain moment. Australia and Canada have very large migration quotas and large resettlement programs. We have many instruments to organize adequate forms of migration. The problem is that in Europe, as you know, there is not such a thing as a European migration strategy. Each country is a sovereign country, each country has its own migration strategy and so most of the migration takes place in an irregular way—with all the consequences we see.

Looking back on ten years in office: Would you say that you have reached the goals you set yourself in the beginning?

Well, when you see the number of refugees growing so quickly and when you see the dramatic gaps that exist in the possibility to support them, I think it's very clear that what would have been a goal established 10 years ago was not reached.

I don't blame myself or anybody. I just say that I came into this job with the objective to make a contribution for the reduction of the numbers of refugees in the world. At a certain moment I had hope that this could become true. We were helping about 1 million people to go back home every year, and for some years the number of refugees decreased. But unfortunately, in the recent past things have gone tremendously wrong.

Are you still optimistic about the future?

Jean Monnet who is one of the fathers of Europe said when he was asked the same question: "I am neither pessimist nor optimist, I am merely determined." I think that is what we all need to be.

The telephone interview took place on 3 July 2015. The interviewer was Anja Papenfuss, Editor-in-Chief of VEREINTE NATIONEN – German Review on the United Nations. See: www.dgvn.de/journal-vereinte-nationen. The German translation was published in VEREINTE NATIONEN, Vol. 63, No. 4, 2015, pp. 147–151.