

# EUROPE ACT NOW

#HELP **SYRIA'S** REFUGEES

## Open letter

FAO: Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament  
Members of the European Parliament on the AFET Committee  
Members of the European Parliament on the LIBE Committee  
Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council  
Antonis Samaras, EU Presidency  
José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission  
Cecilia Malmström, European Commissioner for Home Affairs  
Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission  
Ikkka Laitinen, Executive Director, Frontex  
Robert Visser, Executive Director, EASO

14 March 2014

Dear Madam, dear Sir,

On 6 March 2014, over 100 organisations from over 30 countries including Association Européenne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme (AEDH), Amnesty International, Caritas Europa, CCME - Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe, European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, European Network Against Racism, Human Rights Watch, International Catholic Migration Commission, International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT), Jesuit Refugee Service Europe, Reporters Sans Frontières and Save the Children EU Office launched a **campaign** to call on European governments and the EU institutions to make a concerted European effort to offer protection to those fleeing the conflict in Syria in a spirit of solidarity with Syria's neighbouring countries. This campaign **petitions** European leaders to act now to ensure access to protection for the men, women and children fleeing the conflict in Syria.

It has been three years since the outbreak of the unrest in Syria that gradually led to an internal armed conflict. The scale of this conflict is well known: over 2.4 million people, half of whom are children, are currently registered as refugees. UNHCR estimates that there will be 4 million refugees in the region by the end of 2014. In comparison, just 81,000 Syrians had sought protection in the EU, Norway and Switzerland by end of February 2014; representing just over 3% of the total number of people who have fled. Peace talks in Geneva on the situation in Syria held under the auspices of the UN failed in February 2014, leaving no end in sight to the violence and suffering.

UNHCR characterizes the flight of civilians from Syria as a refugee movement and that persons fleeing Syria require international protection.<sup>1</sup> While recognition rates for refugees fleeing the conflict are high in most European countries, many refugees often face insurmountable hurdles or life-threatening challenges in accessing the territory to be able to benefit from this protection. These challenges and barriers have been reflected in several reports, including from ECRE<sup>2</sup>, Pro Asyl<sup>3</sup> and Amnesty International<sup>4</sup>.

Refugees have little or no safe and legal means of accessing protection in Europe. Acquiring visas to travel to Europe is virtually impossible due to difficulties in obtaining documents. People with protection needs have few possibilities to apply for protection or humanitarian visas in European embassies in the region. Stringent family reunification requirements mean that those who have family in Europe cannot always be reunified with them. In addition, the number of resettlement and humanitarian admission places for Syrian refugees offered by European States remains very low in view of the numbers hosted by the neighbouring countries.

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, International Protection Considerations with regard to people fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update II, pp 7-8, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> ECRE/ELENA, Information Note on the Treatment of Syrian Asylum Applications in Europe, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Pro Asyl, Pushed Back: Systematic Human Rights Violations Against Refugees in the Aegean Sea and at the Greek-Turkish Land Border, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, Frontier Europe: Human Rights Abuses on Greece's Border with Turkey, 2013.

Access to protection is further undermined by deliberate deterrents at the EU's external borders such as push-back operations, fences and European states' incapacity to ensure effective rescue at sea for migrants' boats in distress. The persistent allegations of push backs in particular at the Greek-Turkish border and the growing number of refugees and migrants, including those fleeing the conflict in Syria, dying at the EU's Southern and South-Eastern land and sea borders is simply unacceptable. Such practices undermine the credibility of the EU's common policy on asylum as a whole. All efforts must be undertaken to ensure that fundamental rights, in particular the right to asylum and the principle of *non refoulement*, are respected in practice at the EU's borders so as to ensure that all protection claims, including from those fleeing the Syrian conflict are properly examined.

The undersigning organisations have identified a number of **crucial measures** that European governments should implement urgently in order to create safe and legal channels for Syria's refugees to reach Europe and to ensure effective access to protection and fair and efficient asylum procedures in EU Member States for those arriving at the EU's borders. These measures include granting access to protection through embassies, facilitating family reunification, offering resettlement and humanitarian admission places, continuing the suspension of all returns to Syria and neighbouring countries, respecting the principle of *non refoulement* at land, air and sea borders and guaranteeing prompt and effective access to asylum procedures.

We call on the EU institutions and EU agencies, Frontex and EASO, to take all measures at their disposal to support, encourage and enforce at the EU level the effective implementation of such measures for refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria. We call in particular on:

### **The European Commission to:**

- Develop European Commission guidelines on a common approach to humanitarian visas for protection reasons and to promote the possibility to apply for international protection through EU embassies in third countries.
- Encourage Member States to make full use of funding opportunities for the resettlement of refugees from Syria as one of the common Union resettlement priorities under the Asylum and Migration Fund.
- Allocate emergency funding to address the situation of Syria's refugees within the EU and in the countries in the region where necessary and appropriate.
- Pursue infringement proceedings against the States that are found to be in breach of the EU asylum *acquis*, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Schengen Borders Code.

### **The Council and the European Parliament to:**

- Support an EU moratorium on returning people to Syria to ensure that no person is returned to a place where they may risk persecution, serious harm or being exposed to conflict and generalised violence. People should not be returned to countries already hosting large numbers of refugees from Syria and to any country where they may risk violations of their human rights.
- Encourage the use of appropriate solidarity measures with EU Member States facing an increase in the number of asylum applications, including from Syria where necessary to ensure swift and effective access to protection for refugees arriving in the EU.

### **Frontex to:**

- Ensure that joint operations on the Greek-Turkish and Bulgarian-Turkish borders are carried out in a protection sensitive manner in line with its fundamental rights strategy by raising awareness of international protection obligations amongst border officials and enhancing training initiatives, including through intensified cooperation with EASO, UNHCR and NGOs.
- Ensure that EUROSUR and other sophisticated surveillance technology at the EU's external borders is used for the purpose of saving lives and does not impede access to international protection in the EU to those fleeing persecution and conflict.

### **EASO to:**

- Continue to support Member States in ensuring a swift and fair examination of protection needs of those fleeing the conflict in Syria, including through pooling of expertise in the field of COI, training of caseworkers and the provision of interpreters in particular in Member States facing a sudden increase of the numbers of asylum applications.

- Further enhance reception capacities of EU Member States through targeted solidarity measures in close cooperation with UNHCR and NGOs and engage in contingency planning as considered necessary.
- Use all means at its disposal to facilitate and support Member States' activities with regard to the resettlement of refugees from Syria in close cooperation with UNHCR and NGOs, such as support on the use of available EU funding for resettlement, preparation for potential joint selection missions, and direct assistance to less experienced Member States on reception and integration post arrival.

Many refugees, other than those fleeing the conflict in Syria, face the same barriers to protection in Europe. Therefore, many of these recommendations are equally vital for them. Nevertheless, the conflict in Syria has generated the largest refugee movement since the Rwandan genocide and is described as the defining refugee crisis of our era and as such needs specific attention. A crisis of this magnitude on our doorstep requires European solidarity. We are counting on you to make a stand for what is right.

# SIGNING ORGANISATIONS

## European/International Level

Association Européenne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme (AEDH)  
Amnesty International  
Caritas Europa  
CCME - Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe  
European Council on Refugees & Exiles  
Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network  
European Network Against Racism  
Human Rights Watch  
International Catholic Migration Commission  
International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT)  
Jesuit Refugee Service Europe  
Reporters Sans Frontières  
Save the Children EU Office

## Austria

Asylkoordination  
Caritas Austria  
Diakonie Österreich  
Frauenhetz - Feministische Bildung, Kultur und Politik  
LeEZA (Liga für emanzipatorische Entwicklungszusammenarbeit)  
Plattform 20000frauen  
SOS Mitmensch  
Verein Integrationshaus  
UKI - Unterstützungsverein zur Integration von MigrantInnen

## Belgium

Belgian Refugee Council (CBAR-BCHV)  
Broederlijk Delen  
Caritas International Belgium  
CIRE  
CNCD -11.11.11  
Flemish Refugee Action  
Medecins du Monde Belgium

## Bulgaria

Bulgarian Council on Refugees and Migrants  
Bulgarian Helsinki Committee  
Bulgarian Lawyers for Human Rights Foundation  
Bulgarian Red Cross  
Caritas Bulgaria  
Council of the Women Refugees in Bulgaria

## Croatia

Autonomous Trade Union of Service Sector of Croatia/Samostalni sindikat uslužnih djelatnosti Hrvatske  
Centar za gradjanske inicijative Poreč / Centre for Civil Initiatives Porec  
Centre for Peace Studies  
Croatian Law Centre

## Cyprus

Future Worlds Centre  
KISA

## Czech Republic

OPU

## Denmark

Danish Refugee Council  
DFUNK – Danish Refugee Council Youth  
Tværkulturelt Center (The Intercultural Christian Centre)  
Women's Council

## Estonia

Estonian Refugee Council  
Estonian Human Rights Centre

## Finland

Finnish Red Cross  
Finnish Refugee Council

## France

Secours Catholique Caritas France  
Forum réfugiés-Cosi  
France terre d'asile

## FYR Macedonia

Macedonian Young Lawyers Association

## Germany

Arbeiterwohlfahrt  
Jesuit Refugee Service Germany

## Greece

Greek Council for Refugees  
Greek Forum of Refugees  
Greek Helsinki Monitor  
Initiative of Detainees Rights  
Klimaka  
KSPM-Ecumenical Refugee Program  
Caritas Hellas

## Hungary

Hungarian Helsinki Committee  
Menedék

## Ireland

Irish Refugee Council  
JRS Ireland

## Italy

Italian Council for Refugees (CIR)  
Jesuit Refugee Service Italy  
Asilo in Europa

## Kosovo

Civil Rights Program Kosovo

## Lithuania

Lithuanian Red Cross

## Luxembourg

Caritas Luxembourg

## Malta

aditus

## Monaco

Caritas Monaco

## Norway

NOAS  
Norwegian Refugee Council

## Poland

Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights

## Portugal

Jesuit Refugee Service Portugal

## Romania

Jesuit Refugee Service Romania  
Romanian National Council for Refugees (CNRR)

## Serbia

Asylum Protection Centre  
Grupa 484

## Spain

Accem  
Caritas Spain  
CEAR  
Jesuit Service for Migrants Spain  
Rescate

## Sweden

Caritas Sweden  
Jesuit Refugee Service Sweden  
Swedish Red Cross

## Switzerland

Gemeinschaft Christlichen Lebens (GCL)-Schweiz  
Swiss Council for Refugees

## The Netherlands

Dutch Council for Refugees  
Foundation for Refugee Students UAF

## Turkey

Helsinki Citizens' Assembly  
Human Rights Agenda Association  
Human Rights Association (IHD)  
Human Rights Research Association  
Kaos GL  
Mazlum-Der (Association for Human Rights and Solidarity with Oppressed People)  
Mülteci-Der

## United Kingdom

Asylum Aid  
British Refugee Council  
City of Sanctuary  
Crucible Centre for Human Rights Research  
Freedom from Torture  
Northern Refugee Centre  
Refugee Action  
Regional Refugee Forum North East  
Scottish Refugee Council  
Student Action for Refugees (STAR)  
Welsh Refugee Council  
Muslim Aid

