

THE DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS AT EVENT ON MIGRANTS, REFUGEES AND CITIES

New York, 18 May 2016

[as delivered]

I am pleased to be with you today and I thank the organizers for taking this important initiative.

On the 19th of September the General Assembly is convening a Summit on large movements of refugees and migrants.

There are many important issues to address: the causes of forced displacement; the safety of migrants and refugees as they cross international borders; and not least support for host countries to integrate newcomers into their communities.

When we deal with the challenge of integration, we must very much focus on cities. It is in cities where most migrants and refugees in the end will settle.

While it is true that many refugees, especially in Africa and the Middle East, reside in camps, many more settle and work in host communities. In fact, just one-quarter of all refugees reside in camps according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

More than half the number of refugees around the world live in urban areas. In Turkey, less than 10 per cent of the more than 2.5 million Syrian refugees reside in camps. In Jordan, around 20 per cent of registered Syrian refugees live in camps. In Lebanon, there are no camps –except for Palestinians- and over one million registered refugees live across communities in all over the country.

While most of the humanitarian assistance goes to refugees living in camps, the “urban refugees” –if you allow that expression- are largely overlooked. They often end up living in slums or informal settlements on the fringes of the cities, in overcrowded neighborhoods and in areas prone to flooding, sanitation hazards and disease.

Generally, they have a hard time finding their way to camps or reception centers, which in some cases, are established for their support. And the UN system, for its part – I must admit- cannot provide services in the same way as we can in camps.

With this in mind, UNHCR in 2009 changed its policy and practice towards refugees in cities and towns. It is now working closely with national authorities, municipalities and local communities and authorities to protect urban refugees, respecting of their refugee status.

There is much for us to do. Every day, millions of refugee children are unable attend school. Every day, the dignity and well-being of millions of people is compromised due to lack of basic services and job opportunities.

The report of the Secretary-General, prepared for the 19 September Summit draws attention to the important role of local authorities. They, many of you here today, are at the forefront in

providing refugees access to housing, education, healthcare and employment.

We should bear in mind that refugees and IDPs often are just a small proportion of those who are swelling the ranks of cities, while the speed of urbanization is getting faster.

But the Secretary-General's report notes that rural poverty, natural disasters and environmental degradation are very much contributing to the numbers of persons moving to cities today.

The frequency and intensity of these factors are expected to rise, not least as a result of climate change. Urban planners need to take these movements and trends into account.

Let us also remember that, even if cities struggle to accommodate large flows of migrants, they also largely benefit from their presence and work.

As Bill Swing, Director-General of the International Organization for Migration, has said: "Migrants need cities – and cities need migrants".

In many countries in the world, immigrants often take up low-paying jobs and provide services in areas like domestic work, agricultural labour, and home-care.

Let us also recall that in major cities around the world, neighbourhoods that were once in decline are being revitalized thanks to the presence and hard work of immigrant groups.

New businesses are established both by and for migrant communities, creating new jobs and contributing to the tax base. Diaspora groups are developing new trade partners as the demand for goods from their home countries rises.

The links between diversity and opportunity are nowhere as clear as in today's cities. The two-way dynamics between migration and cities is increasingly being recognized as a positive factor.

Let me again in closing refer to the Secretary-General report and draw your attention to a challenge mentioned there that seems to get more serious by the day.

That is the very real problem of growing xenophobia, and intolerance, polarization and discrimination.

As migrants and refugees continue to arrive - and there are no signs that these flows will diminish any time soon- we must resolve to uphold and implement the principle of every human being's equal value.

This is a fundamental human right, never to be compromised.

There is particular reason to be concerned about political rhetoric that stigmatizes refugees and migrants. We must do everything possible to counter this false and negative narrative. We must dispel the myths about migrants and migration which tend to poison the public discourse.

Let us build our policies on the realization of the value that migrants bring to our societies: economic and demographic growth, development, not least through remittances, and I want to add: the beauty of diversity in our nation states.

Let us ensure that the public has access to accurate and unbiased information. For this reason, the Secretary-General is proposing a global campaign against xenophobia. I very much hope that cities and city leaders will take up this challenge.

In closing, let me thank you once again for bringing this great community of city planners together here in New York.

As we work towards the Summit on September 19 and to Habitat III in Quito in October, I look forward to learning more about your initiatives and commitments locally, nationally and internationally.

Thank you.