

Item 61 - UNHCR

Third Committee

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Statement by

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Mr. Chairman,

Malta would like to express its deep appreciation to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for his detailed presentation and for his Report to this Committee. Belgium has already intervened on behalf of the Member States of the European Union on this important item. My delegation would therefore like to make a few additional comments on the aspect of illegal immigration and its serious effects on Malta.

In order to understand the true extent of the challenges that illegal immigration and asylum pose to Malta, the country's geographic and demographic characteristics have to be taken into consideration. Malta's population density stands at almost 1,300 persons / km², making it by far the most densely populated EU Member State, and one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Malta's position at the centre of the Mediterranean has exposed it to huge influxes of illegal immigrants over the years.

Though the number of migrants arriving by sea has indeed declined this year, the situation in Malta is not sustainable. There still remains a considerably large number of persons who reached the Island in previous years and were granted international protection. A durable solution still needs to be found for this population of beneficiaries of international protection, which has grown over the past years.

It should be noted that at the outset Malta seeks resettlement of beneficiaries of international protection as a solution to overcome the difficulties which such beneficiaries encounter in integrating in Malta. Such difficulties arise from the fact that a large number of asylum applicants in Malta are eligible for international protection in accordance with international and EU law, while at the same time, Malta's absorption capacity is very limited, due to the country's high population density and small labour market prone to saturation.

These objective limitations, are inherent to the country's demographic and geographic characteristics, rather than the consequence of any shortcomings on the part of the authorities. In fact, integration programmes have been, and are being implemented, also with the assistance of EU funds, but these efforts cannot eliminate the difficulties posed by the abovementioned characteristics. The pressures borne by Malta as a result of arrivals experienced over the previous years remained high, also because of practical difficulties experienced in returning irregular migrants to their respective countries of origin.

The UNHCR, and other organisations such as the IOM, have aptly acknowledged the disproportionate pressures being faced by Malta. In fact the UNHCR and IOM are contributing through the implementation of the Pilot Project for intra-EU settlement of beneficiaries of international protection from Malta.

The Pilot Project is being implemented this year with the objective of resettling approximately 250 beneficiaries of international protection in a number of European EU Member States. The Pilot Project constitutes a positive step forward and highlights the EU's commitment to humanitarian values, since the real beneficiaries of such a system will be the beneficiaries of international protection themselves, who gain a better opportunity for integration, and a truly durable solution. This project has also served to emphasize the fact that the level of success of such mechanisms depends on a country's willingness to participate therein, since participation remains voluntary. Malta's aim was to resettle between 1,500 and 2,000 beneficiaries of international protection. However, the number of resettlements are far below this aim and therefore further efforts are required to effectively address them.

Malta also has another ongoing resettlement scheme with the United States, under which beneficiaries of international protection have been resettled since 2007 and more are expected to be resettled later this year.

I would like to take this opportunity to express Malta's appreciation to UNHCR for its assistance in the resettlement of beneficiaries of international protection through this Pilot Project, to the USA and to other EU Member States, through its participation in the referral process. Our gratitude also goes to those countries that are playing a part in contributing to the alleviation of our pressures. Though the number resettled may be small from the perspective of other countries, it would be of considerable benefit to Malta and above all to the beneficiaries of protection themselves.

The European Union has also recently decided to set up an Asylum Support Office endeavouring in harmonising different national asylum procedures, so as to ensure a more consistent EU wide asylum policy. We hope to see close cooperation between the European Asylum Support Office, the UNHCR and the authorities responsible for asylum matters in the EU Member States. Malta, as the host of this Asylum Support Office sees its setting up as a step in the right direction. Though there is no one single solution to this problem the Asylum Support Office will play a considerable role, including through the provision of technical assistance and sharing best practices, in curtailing this problem.

We look towards the UNHCR for assistance in encouraging other UN Member States to resettle beneficiaries of international protection from Malta. Resettlement benefits, first and foremost, the beneficiaries of protection as it affords them a durable solution – something which is difficult in Malta due to our limited absorption capacity.

My Government continues to be committed to its international protection obligations, and fully supports the international and EU commitments to strengthen efforts to implement mechanisms and enhance coordination amongst the relevant stakeholders to combat illegal immigration. However, Malta also believes that more should be done by the international system, particularly countries of origin to improve the current situation and cease the proliferation of these situations.

Thank You