



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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NOTE

from: General Secretariat of the Council
to: Delegations
Subject : Plenary session of the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 12 December 2012
**Council and Commission statements - EU preparation for a possible influx of
asylum seekers from Syria**

Ms KOZAKOU-MARCOULLIS delivered the speech in annex I on behalf of the Council.

Ms MALMSTRÖM delivered the speech in annex II on behalf of the Commission.

On behalf of the political groups:

Mr PAPANIKOLAOU (EPP, EL) urged support for Syria's neighbouring countries, in particular Turkey, and expressed the view that an EU response would be needed in the event of a massive influx of Syrian refugees at the EU borders. Mr LÓPEZ AGUILAR (S&D, ES) was critical of the lack of European solidarity shown when refugees had fled as a result of the Arab spring and believed that the EU should learn from this experience. Ms GRIESBECK (ALDE, FR) and Ms SARGENTINI (Greens/EFA, NL) said that the EU should be prepared to host Syrian refugees arriving in Member States. Ms ZUBER (GUE/NGL, PT) considered that the EU should promote political dialogue in Syria.

In the ensuing individual interventions:

Mr SCURRIA (EPP, IT) pleaded for a comprehensive EU approach to protect a possible massive arrival of Syrian refugees, adding that it would show that the Nobel peace price was not only an award for past achievements.

Ms ROMERO LÓPEZ (S&D, ES) was very critical of the poor conditions in some detention centres for asylum seekers waiting at the EU borders. She also wondered about the content of the regional protection programme. Ms de SARNEZ (ALDE, FR) pleaded for three-fold solidarity: towards refugees, towards Syria's neighbouring countries and towards the most exposed Member States. Ms FLAUTRE (Greens/EFA, FR) supported the recent Council conclusions on Syria and added that it would be a shame not to host Syrian refugees on EU soil.

Ms KRATSA-TSAGAROPOULOU (EPP, EL) advocated a coherent EU strategy to confront the humanitarian situation as well as the migratory pressures, highlighting that Greece was expected to be among the most affected. Mr DROUTSAS (S&D, EL) and Mr CHRYSOGELOS (Greens/EFA, EL) believed that the EU had an obligation to welcome the people suffering from the developments in Syria but were concerned that Greece, which was already bearing a large share of the migratory burden in Europe, would again have to take responsibility. In this regard, Mr DROUTSAS found the Dublin regulation unfair and considered that refugees should be able to go to any EU country and should not be obliged to stay in Greece because of its geographical location. Mr MORAES (S&D, UK) stressed the need for a wider EU strategy in preparation for a probable increase in the number of refugees.

Ms MALMSTRÖM replied, on behalf of the Commission, that the EU would mobilise more assistance to the four countries in the region. She mentioned that the regional protection programme was an important part of a long-term solution and that, so far, the majority of people coming to Europe had gone to Germany and Sweden. She also indicated that the Commission was in contact with Member States, via EASO¹, to see how their systems were prepared for receiving higher numbers of asylum seekers from Syria.

Ms KOZAKOU-MARCOULLIS concluded, on behalf of the Council, that the EU and Member States would continue to provide humanitarian assistance and were monitoring developments closely. She stated that, should the deterioration of the situation justify it, the Council would stand ready to adopt any measures necessary to address in particular the increase of migratory flows towards the EU Member States.

¹ European Asylum Support Office

Check against deliveryAnnex I - speech delivered by Ms KOZAKOU-MARCOULLIS, on behalf of the Council

President of the Parliament,
Honourable Members,

I am grateful to the Parliament for raising this important issue this evening. The Council shares the concerns which many of you have at the seriousness of the situation in Syria, and in particular its impact on the civilian population. We continue to monitor developments as we have been doing since the beginning of this crisis, focusing in particular on the issue of humanitarian assistance to Syrian nationals who are victims of the crisis. Many of them have been obliged to leave their homes and are currently displaced in other parts of Syria or across the border in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq.

This issue has been addressed both at political and technical level, and some of those discussions have involved representatives of international organizations such as UNHCR and the IOM which are the most active in Syria.

In October the Council confirmed the continuing commitment of the EU and its Member States to provide humanitarian assistance to the affected population. But it also underlined the need for further funds, and called on all donors to increase their contributions to the latest UN appeals for funding humanitarian assistance and refugee assistance.

The EU and its Member States are together providing the largest contribution to the Regional response Plan for Syrian refugees launched by the UNHCR and other organizations in September. To date this assistance has reached a total of about 228 millions EURO - amounting to 53% of the overall international response.

The Council has also been aware of the potential challenges to the Member States of increasing migratory pressure from nationals fleeing from Syria. The issue has been discussed by ministers on several occasions, and at the most recent meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs Council last week the Council had the opportunity to hear a presentation by the United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees setting out his latest assessment of the situation.

While the overall numbers of Syrian nationals who have fled to Member States has so far remained relatively low, some Member States have begun to see a noticeable increase in the number of asylum applications. This is a trend which is likely to continue.

Given that there are no signs that the internal crisis in Syria is likely to be resolved in the near future, the Council is also taking action to prepare for the medium and long-term challenges that could result from a further increase in migratory pressure. In October the Council endorsed a proposal from the Commission to establish a Regional Protection Programme.

This Programme is designed to cope with the specific situation in Syria, drawing on the experience of similar programmes elsewhere. It will help contribute towards enhancing the capacities of the authorities and of the organisations dealing with international protection and refugee issues, and will provide lasting solutions to the plight of those who have been forced to leave the country

Plans for the establishment of a Regional Protection Programme are underway, and it is foreseen that this should become fully operational in Spring 2013.

Mr President,
Honourable Members,

The Council is concerned both at the deterioration at the political situation in Syria, and at the effects that this is having on civilians. We will continue to do what we can to try to bring an end to the crisis, as well as address the specific problems encountered by those fleeing from it. This must involve further humanitarian assistance as well as the establishment of an effective Regional Protection Programme. We stand ready to take any further action that might be needed to cope with the problems of migratory pressures as and when the evolving situation in Syria might require.

Thank you for your attention.

Check against deliveryAnnex II - speech delivered by Ms MALMSTRÖM, on behalf of the Commission

Madam President, this is indeed a very important debate. As you know, nearly half a million people have sought refuge in the neighbouring countries from the atrocities in Syria. Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq have made formidable efforts to give those people shelter and more people are likely to flee. The Red Crescent reports that some 2.5 million people are internally displaced. In addition to Syrian refugees there are also a large number of people who used to live, or had sought refuge, in Syria, such as Palestinians and Iraqis, and have now become displaced or been forced to flee.

As the President of the Council said, the EU's response has been very strong from a humanitarian point of view. We have mobilised more than EUR 230 million so far, which is being used to provide healthcare, food, shelter, water, sanitation, heating and registration to the refugees and support to the communities hosting them. We will continue to provide this support to the host communities as long as the crisis continues. Normal funds are being, and will be, mobilised to address needs as they appear.

Regarding the question of a regional protection programme, the exact modalities, which have still to be decided, are being prepared with the relevant partners, such as UNHCR. That will play an important role in the EU's response. A regional protection programme is, as you know, a specific tool of long-term capacity building in the area of international protection that aims at institution-building as well as supporting sustainable solutions for refugees. A resettlement commitment, whereby EU Member States undertake on a voluntary basis to offer resettlement places in their countries, accompanies each regional protection programme. The European Refugee Fund will provide co-financing for pledged resettlement cases.

The current rules under the EU resettlement programme allow Member States to choose to allocate a number of places under their planned pledging for the resettlement of refugees from a country in a region designated for a regional protection programme or for emergency resettlement. It is for each Member State to decide individually whether they wish to make use of this possibility, but I called on Member States at the last GA (General Affairs) Council to do their utmost to respond to this.

The Commission is urging Member States to show generosity and solidarity. Not very many Syrian refugees have come to Europe so far – around 16 000, which is not a very large number considering the huge number of people who have left the country. But nevertheless these people are asking for shelter in the European Union, and that number could grow.

We have taken action to prepare EU Member States to deal with the consequences. These issues have been discussed in several meetings with GA ministers. We have also had meetings organised by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in recent months. This has allowed Member States to exchange views on the goal of aligning as far as possible their policies in response to asylum requests from Syrian nationals. EU Member States have confirmed their intention to provide adequate protection, in particular by not returning Syrian nationals staying in the EU to Syria.

There has been a wide consensus among Member States that the majority of Syrian applicants could be entitled to receive international protection, either as a refugee as defined in the Geneva Convention, or as a beneficiary of a subsidiary form of protection. This is confirmed in practice by the recognition rate for Syrian nationals throughout the EU of approximately 92% in the second quarter of 2012. It is important for this to be standard in the European Union.

In order to prepare for the possibility of a rising influx, a constant monitoring exercise is being carried out by DG Home Affairs, including the different relevant agencies and entities – EASO, FRONTEX, Europol, other Commission departments, the Member States of course, UNHCR and other organisations in the area. This is an ongoing monitoring process; it has ensured that we have constant updates on the situation so that we can react very swiftly if the situation deteriorates to the point of placing additional pressure on our asylum system.

EASO has offered to stand by to be ready to provide assistance to Member States facing particular pressure. We have also asked those potential Member States to identify their needs and communicate them to EASO. We have received in this connection a letter from Cyprus as a pre-warning of potential crisis.

At the request of the Member States affected, up to EUR 9.8 million will be available under the European Refugee Fund in 2013 to assist in addressing situations of particular pressure created by the sudden arrival of a number of persons who might be in need of international protection and thereby place exceptionally heavy and urgent demands on the reception facilities and asylum systems of the Member States concerned.

In the event of a massive influx of displaced persons into the EU, the Commission is prepared to propose using the Temporary Protection Directive mechanism where appropriate. This would be the last resort. The numbers fall far short of that at present, and we will not use the mechanism until it is really necessary. For the moment, while some countries are under pressure, they are able to deal with applications from Syrians. A proposal to activate the temporary protection mechanism would, of course, have to be approved by Member States.

The Commission is already active in providing help to Syria's neighbours in their efforts to cope with the refugees who have fled the in-fighting in that country. We will also continue to be vigilant regarding any possible influx of refugees into the EU, and stand ready to support and assist Member States and the refugees through the relevant agencies and other forms of cooperation.