Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini following the informal meeting of the EU Foreign Ministers, Gymnich

2015-09-05

We obviously focused today, in a meeting that was not an easy one, on the refugee crisis. And here we need to start using the right words: it is partially a migrant flow, but it is mainly a refugee flow, which puts us in a different situation when it comes to our legal and moral duties. In our eyes we have the pictures of the people marching from Budapest to Vienna, with European flags.

And let me start by saying that I was in contact this morning with Chancellor Faymann to thank him for what he has been arranging at the border and to show him all the support and solidarity. It is becoming every day clearer to all of us that this is not something that is affecting or is going to affect one or another Member State, but all of us. A few months ago, it was an issue only Italy, or Malta, Spain or Greece were raising; today, it's mainly focused on, when you talk of Member States, Hungary, Greece, Austria and Germany. It could turn to other Member States in the future. And I hope – finally, finally – we all realise that these people are coming to Europe, not to one or another Member State. They are coming to Europe. Unfortunately, it took us some months to realise this, but maybe that awareness is finally there.

Let me say that I believe it was very important to discuss this issue today with the Candidate Countries – that, by the way, sit on the Western Balkan route – because this is an issue concerning not only all the European Union Member States, but also Europe as a whole, as a continent. It is a regional crisis: it's not only a European crisis, it is a regional crisis. And a global crisis, too: that is why we discussed it, and I discuss it on a daily basis with the UN and UN system, starting with UNHCR. Talking about this with the Candidate Countries – who are on our same boat in dealing with this crisis, with these flows – reminded us that we have to strengthen even more our cooperation and work together without any kind of blame game among us. Among us, Europeans – Member States, Candidate Countries, institutions. We are all facing a dramatic, a dramatic event. I don't say an emergency event, because this is not an emergency: it is an urgency we are facing, but it is not something that starts one day and finishes another day. It is here to stay and the sooner we accept it, politically and psychologically, the sooner we will be able to respond in an effective way and manage it in an effective way.

So the time for blame games is over. It is time for taking decisions, turning decisions into actions and doing it united, as Europeans. Only in this way we will have the possibility to face this issue, this urgency, this dramatic event, being faithful to our European values – the values of respect of human rights and solidarity.

It was important to discuss it with candidate countries also because for historical reasons, when it comes to the Balkans, and for geographical reasons, when it comes to Turkey - they know very well what we are talking about. And I think, in these dramatic days and weeks, we Europeans have to keep in mind the history of our continent. We know what war, conflict are, and facing a situation that forces you to flee. And as Jean [Asselborn, Foreign Minister of Luxembourg] mentioned, we are talking here of a flow of people that in these weeks - can change - mainly consists of Syrians, Afghans, Eritreans and Iraqis. So we are currently not talking about a migration, an economic migration flow. We are mostly talking about refugees, to whom we have a moral and a legal duty.

Now we agreed to strengthen our cooperation – not only within the European Union, but also with the Candidate Countries – on five different levels, with very concrete actions. Some of them have started already, some of them are going to be further defined in the coming days and weeks – and in particular with the package that the Commission is going to adopt in this coming week, with the decisions that the Ministers of Interior and Justice will be called to take within one week, ten days from now.

Then our next steps as Foreign Ministers: we will have a Foreign Affairs Council, a European Council, which for the moment are planned for October, but obviously we stand ready to have emergency meetings at any time. We were the ones… I was the one suggesting and proposing, at the beginning of the perception of this acute crisis in March, to hold a joint meeting right here in Luxembourg.

Today, we took our discussions and decisions as Foreign Ministers. We might meet again with Interior Ministers. It is important that we take into consideration the fact that the external side of our action makes it possible to look for solutions, real ones, to this refugee crisis, but the internal decisions, the internal policies that the European Union puts in place – or doesn't put in place – reinforce or weaken our credibility also in the external action. So the link is there on many different levels.

So, we agreed to strengthen cooperation on five different elements.

First of all, how to ensure better protection to those in need of protection: asylum seekers are entitled to the status of refugee.

Second, manage borders in full respect of our values, first of all respect for human rights.

Third, fighting against smugglers' and traffickers' networks. This is something, as you know, we have been working a lot on. When it comes to the Mediterranean route, we launched an

operation in the Mediterranean to fight the traffickers, smugglers at sea. And as I did with the Defence Ministers the day before yesterday, today I shared again with the Foreign Ministers my suggestion to transit to phase 2 of this operation, which would allow us to operate in high seas to fight the traffickers and smugglers. And I have found a large consensus about that need for the naval operation. Obviously, we will also need to increase the level of our actions against the traffickers organisations on the mainland, when it comes to the Western Balkans route.

Fourth, strengthening our partnership with third countries, mainly countries of origin and transit. Here, obviously, we are working on readmission and return agreements, but not only. We know very well that it is very important for our partners, especially in Africa and the Middle East, to work together with us on economic developments, opportunities for growth and jobs, especially for their young people. I started to work in this direction in very concrete ways when I met the Foreign Ministers of the Sahel G5 countries, and I am planning a visit to Niger very soon, in the coming weeks, to continue working with them. As you know, Niger is one of the main transit countries on the Mediterranean route. And we have also shared with the ministers the proposal to establish a trust fund for Africa.

Fifth point, that is maybe the most important, even if it is the most long term plan - it is our common work on what we call the root causes. In this case, that has mainly two aims. One is Libya, when it comes to the Southern corridor. And here, we have re-expressed all our active support to the last phases… hopefully, the last phases of the UN-led negotiations to form a National Unity Government in Libya. Let's re-stress this again: the European Union, its Member States – I would say the whole international community, but here we can only speak for ourselves – are ready to support in all possible ways, from day one, a new government of national unity in Libya, to manage all the difficult challenges it will have in front of itself.

And [the other is] Syria: this is why the other issues we had on the agenda today and yesterday are not less relevant than this one, because we have to connect the dots. When we talk about the follow-up to the Iranian deal, or about the Middle East Peace Process, when we talk about the medium and long run – this is not detached from the difficult issue we have been discussing today, the refugee crisis. The reason why we are facing this major crisis now – [a crisis] that has different features than the ones we have seen in the past years – is exactly because the conflicts around us have multiplied. In particular, when it comes to the conflict in Syria, we have to intensify our work, and we are ready to do it as European Union, to find a political solution to the conflict. Hopefully the deal we had with Iran on their nuclear programme in July could also open the way for a different kind of regional framework that could facilitate steps for reaching a solution to the Syrian conflict.

Let me spend a few words on the other two points we had on the agenda. One in the Middle East, and not far away from the issue of migration – because we have started to see Palestinians in the flow of refugees and we know very well that there is a huge Palestinian refugee problem in the region.

On the Middle East, we had a very long and substantial discussion with the ministers yesterday to prepare our next steps. Yesterday, I shared with those of you that were here already that we have worked together with our partners in the Quartet, namely with the UN, with the US – I was speaking with John Kerry yesterday – and with Russia, to prepare a new start of the Quartet. We will have a Quartet principals/foreign ministers meeting – together with Ban Ki Moon - at the margins of the UN General Assembly later this month where we have invited the Foreign Ministers of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Secretary General of the League of Arab States. This is not irrelevant, because we have to build partnerships and a common work in the region, and our region is also the Mediterranean and the Middle East. To make sure that the Middle East Peace Process's engine could be restarted, after more than one year of stalling, is also one way for us to contribute to a better understanding and a better sense of cooperation between Europe and the Arab World, the whole Middle East.

It is not only a matter of justice, a matter of need for peace and stability and security. The Middle East conflict, when it comes to Israel and Palestine, is decades long. But there is one additional element, recently, which is the presence of Daesh in the region. We should not underestimate it. It is also our common interest to tackle the issue of MEPP, even if it is not the top issue on the agenda, or a media issue so much now. It is very important and I am confident we can prepare some steps in the coming weeks to restart the engine of the process.

Last but not least: yesterday we had a good discussion on our relations with Russia. When it comes to the issue of migration and refugees, when it comes to the issue of the Middle East Peace Process, when it comes to the issue of the Iranian deal, [our relation with Russia] is a constructive one. But in this framework, we should not forget that our Eastern neighbours are facing very difficult conditions when it comes to their relations with Russia.

First of all, on Ukraine we have restated our strong commitment to support the full implementation of the Minsk agreements. The EU contribution to that is the facilitation of the trilateral talks, especially on energy and gas and on the implementation of the DCFTA. We also discussed our relations with our other Eastern partners, especially focusing on the developments in Belarus – they are obviously very encouraging, with the release of prisoners we witnessed on 22 August. Also developments in Georgia, Moldova, and attention to Azerbaijan and Armenia - after the Riga summit we need to strengthen our work and relationship with our partners to the East.

The fact we are facing major issues to our South and South-East, the refugee crisis and many conflicts, should not make us forget that our Eastern partners need our support. We continue to work very closely with them, on a daily basis.

Thank you!

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