Speech by Minister of State Maria Böhmer on the invitation of the New Zealand Ambassador and the 'Asia-Pacific Ambassadors’ Group'

2015-12-02

Ambassador Harris,'

Excellencies!

I am delighted to be here with you this evening.

Ambassador Harris, thank you very much for inviting me to your Residence and giving me the opportunity to meet the members of the Asia-Pacific Ambassadors’ Group.

You have asked me to speak about German and European migration and refugee policy.

Germany is now a country of immigration. In my previous role as Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration, I, along with the Federal Chancellor, adopted a new course

in integration policy.

Many important integration policy changes were set in motion at that time. These included the provision of integration and German courses nationwide, improvements in educational opportunities and vocational training, the adoption

of the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Professional Qualifications Act and the establishment of a culture of welcome in Germany.

The current focus of Germany’s migration and integration policy is on helping refugees. There are now over 60 million refugees in the world – the highest number since the Second World War.

In our globalised world, the global flows of refugees are a challenge that concern us all.

As the international community, we are called upon to find solutions together at the international and European level so that people can live in peace and security in their native countries and no longer have to flee terror and war.

This also includes supporting our alliance partners in the fight against the terrorist organisation Islamic State. We stand united with France in this!

Terror reached Europe a long time ago – not just since the despicable attacks by IS in Paris.

I recall the attacks in Madrid and Brussels. But the truth is that this barbarity has been raging in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Nigeria for years. And we witnessed it again just a few days ago in Tunisia and Mali.

Many of the people currently fleeing to Europe are seeking refuge from this terror. And that is why such terror is an attack on everyone who wants to live in peace and freedom,

be it here in Europe or elsewhere. The terror waged by IS affects Christians, Muslims, Jews, people of all religions, and atheists.

All of us are called upon to stand up and defend the values of human dignity and freedom!

Allow me to first say a few words about the refugee situation in Germany, before I speak about Europe.

The large number of refugees is an extraordinary challenge for our country. This year alone, more than 900,000 refugees have arrived in Germany – in other words, between 6,000 and 10,000 refugees per day! Most of them come from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Federal Government, Länder, municipalities, aid organisations, doctors, staff in refugee shelters and a huge number of volunteers have all got down to work and are looking after these people. They make sure that the refugees are accommodated and treated in a humane way. This is the culture of welcome in action!

The Federal Agency for Technical Relief – a German civil and disaster protection organisation – is an example of this. Its staff have told me that they can receive a phone call in the morning saying that accommodation is needed for 400 refugees in a particular location that day. Thanks to the Agency’s voluntary workers, 400 beds are set up by the end of the day for the new arrivals.

This example also shows that we are facing our humanitarian responsibility together! Those who have grounds for asking for protection in Germany will receive it. This is a principle of humanity. And it is in line with our values, as enshrined in the Basic Law, that “human dignity shall be inviolable”.

However, we want more than that. We want to give refugees with a right to stay in Germany opportunities. The key here is integration from the start. The culture of welcome that is extended to the new arrivals all over Germany and helps them during their first days and weeks must lead to long-term integration.

It is crucial that everyone learn German. This is the prerequisite for participation in Germany and for integration in schools, training and work. Many of the refugees are well educated. It is important that they learn German quickly and have their professional qualifications assessed and recognised. Some of the new arrivals are illiterate or less qualified. In addition to language classes, they need targeted education and training opportunities.

In light of the flows of refugees to Europe, we need greater responsibility and solidarity in the European Union.

This includes the following points:

Firstly, we need to reduce the burden on the Member States at the

EU's

external borders and share the burdens fairly and in a spirit of solidarity. We need to give greater support to the countries most affected, that is, Greece and Italy, the

EU

countries where most refugees arrive, in setting up hotspots.

Secondly, we urgently need to increase our support to international humanitarian agencies. The dramatic situation in the refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, where there is not enough food or shelter, is shocking. We are increasing our humanitarian aid funding by 80 percent to 725 million euros. And we will also provide a further 75 million euros for the

UNHCR

and World Food Programme's underfunded programmes by the end of the year.

Thirdly, we must support Syria's neighbouring countries. Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey are shouldering most of the burden of the refugee crisis. Turkey has taken in over two million refugees from Syria and is one of the main transit countries for refugees making their way to Europe. This means that it is particularly important to work closely with Turkey. A few days ago, the

EU

Member States agreed a joint action plan with Turkey at the

EU

-Turkey summit. Turkey undertook to monitor the borders to Europe more closely. It will receive three billion euros in aid to look after refugees in the country.

Fourthly, we need to tackle the causes of flight and displacement in the countries of origin so that people are no longer forced to leave their homes.

The talks in Vienna offer the most realistic chance of reaching agreement between the parties to the conflict in Syria. In answer to the question of whether the arrival of refugees in Germany is seen as a burden or an opportunity, I say unequivocally that the diversity of the people coming to Germany is a great opportunity for us!

Our experience is that refugees mainly integrate well into schools, the workplace, neighbourhoods and our communities. Diversity is a real advantage in successful companies and plays an important role in making them fit

for the future.

Saeid Fasihi, who came to Germany as an asylum seeker, is just one example of this. He is now chief executive of his own company in Ludwigshafen. His firm’s software has over 100,000 users. In 2014, he was awarded the Großer Preis des Mittelstandes, a prestigious award for small and medium-sized enterprises. Now that’s what I call a success story!

It should encourage us to see migration as an opportunity, for instance as regards demographic change and the lack of skilled labour in Germany.

And now I look forward to discussing these topics with you!

Thank you very much.

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