EUROPEAN UNION

Brussels, 20 June 2012
A 281/12

Joint Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Cecilia Malmström, on the occasion of the World Refugee Day

Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission and Cecilia Malmström, Commissioner for Home Affairs , made today the following statement:

"Today, on the World Refugee Day, our thoughts are, more than ever, with the millions of women, children and men, around the world who are forced to flee their home countries because of war, conflict, or persecution. This is still a reality in today's world.

Protecting the persecuted, the weak and the vulnerable is our obligation. All EU Member States have acceded to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees and are committed to its implementation. In a world where people continue to fear for their lives just because of their race, religion, or political beliefs, Europe has to remain true to its principles by showing solidarity towards refugees. We are proud that so many Europeans share the conviction that the EU must offer protection and asylum to all those who need it.

The EU is stepping up efforts to put in place common rules on asylum which guarantee high standards of protection and is aiming to complete the strengthening of the Common European Asylum System by the end of this year. This objective is within reach, with the final stages of the negotiations now underway. Work is also progressing on enhancing solidarity between EU Member States.

P R E S S

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The UNHCR's 2011 Ministerial Conference underlined the importance of eliminating the phenomenon of statelessness. We welcome the pledges made during this Conference, and underline the EU's determination to step up its efforts to address statelessness worldwide.

In 2011, just over 300,000 asylum applications were lodged in Europe, more than the year before but well below the peak of 425,000 in 2001. This represents about 34 % of the total worldwide. However, contrary to widespread belief, it is not Europe but other countries – often the poorest – that host the world's largest refugee populations. Last year, South Africa alone received close to 107 000 applications – one tenth of all asylum applications worldwide. In terms of the individuals recognised as refugees, approximately four fifths are hosted in developing countries.

Therefore, refugee resettlement should form an integral part of the EU common asylum policy. Resettlement is not only a life-saving measure but an important humanitarian gesture of solidarity on the part of the EU towards countries hosting large numbers of refugees.

We welcome the European Parliament's and the Council's decision to establish a common EU resettlement programme for 2013. The programme will include specific EU resettlement priorities, identifying the nationalities of refugees and the countries from which resettlement should take place as a priority and for whom EU funding is available. In 2013 that list will include refugees from Congo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Burma and Eritrea.

We are gravely concerned about the plight of refugees fleeing the violence in Syria. The EU, in close co-operation with its partners, is providing significant humanitarian and other assistance to these refugees, and will throw its weight behind all efforts to ensure the protection of the victims of this conflict."

For more information

Third Annual Report on Immigration and Asylum:

http://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/doc_centre/immigration/docs/COM%202012%20250%20final%201_EN_ACT_part1_v5.pdf

Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the report:

http://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/doc_centre/immigration/docs/SWD%202012%20139%20final%201_EN_autre_document_travail_service_part1_v3.pdf

Eurobarometer report: 'Awareness of Home Affairs'

http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_special_399_380_en.htm