

Remarks by President Obama at Leaders Summit on Refugees

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PRESIDENT OBAMA: Thank you. (Applause.) Yusra, we could not be prouder of you -- not just for the great introduction, but more importantly, for your courage and your resilience and the great example that you're setting for children everywhere, including your eight-year-old sister, who I know must look up to you. (Applause.)

Good afternoon. Mr. Secretary General; Your Excellencies, we are here because, right now, in crowded camps and cities around the world, there are families -- from Darfur in Chad, Palestinians in Lebanon, Afghans in Pakistan, Colombians in Ecuador -- who've endured years -- in some cases, decades -- as refugees, surviving on rations and aid, and who dream of someday, somehow, having a home of their own.

We're here because, right now, there are young girls -- like Yusra, like my daughters -- who are just as precious and just as gifted -- like the 16-year-old refugee from Myanmar that I met in Malaysia -- who've suffered unspeakable abuse at the hands of traffickers, modern day slavery, girls who pray at night that someone might rescue them from their torment. There are boys, fleeing the fighting in South Sudan, violence in Central America, wars in North Africa and the Middle East -- who are at the mercy of criminals who pack them into trucks or makeshift rafts, and who die on treacherous seas -- like little Alan Kurdi from Syria, lifeless, face down on a Turkish beach, in his red shirt and blue pants.

We are here because, right now, there are mothers separated from their children -- like the woman in a camp in Greece, who held on to her family photographs, heard her children cry on the phone, and who said "my breath is my children...every day I am dying 10, 20, 30 times." We're here because there are fathers who simply want to build a new life and provide for their families -- like Refaai Hamo, from Syria, who lost his wife and daughter in the war, who we welcomed to America, and who says, "I still think I have a chance to make a difference in the world."

Mr. Secretary General; heads of state and heads of government; distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen: As you saw in the video, we are facing a crisis of epic proportions. More than 65 million people have been driven from their homes -- which is more than any time since the Second World War. Among them are more than 21 million refugees who have fled their countries -- everything and everyone they've ever known, fleeing with a suitcase or the clothes on their back.

And I'm here today -- I called this summit -- because this crisis is one of the most urgent tests of our time -- our capacity for collective action. To test, first and foremost, our ability to end conflicts, because so many of the world's refugees come from just three countries ravaged by war -- Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia.

And I said today to the General Assembly, the mentality that allows for violence with impunity is something we cannot excuse. And collectively, we continue to make excuses. It's not the subject of this summit, but we all know that what is happening in Syria, for example, is unacceptable. And we are not as unified as we should be in pushing to make it stop.

It's a test of our international system where all nations ought to share in our collective responsibilities, because the vast majority of refugees are hosted by just 10 countries who are bearing a very heavy burden -- among them Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia. Countries that often have fewer resources than many of those who are doing little or nothing.

It is a crisis of our shared security. Not because refugees are a threat. Refugees, most of whom are women and children, are often fleeing war and terrorism. They are victims. They're families who want to be safe and to work, be good citizens and contribute to their country -- I was talking to Yusra -- she's now in Germany. She already speaks some English. Now she's trying to learn German -- who are interested in assimilating and contributing to the society in which they find themselves.

In recent years, in the United States, we've worked to put in intensive screening and security checks, so we can welcome refugees and ensure our security -- in fact, refugees are subject to more rigorous screening than the average tourist. We've seen in America, hardworking, patriotic refugees serve in our military, and start new businesses and help revitalize communities. I believe refugees can make us stronger.

So the challenge to our security is because when desperate refugees pay cold-hearted traffickers for passage, it funds the same criminals who are smuggling arms and drugs and children. When nations with their own internal difficulties find themselves hosting massive refugee populations for years on end, it can risk more instability. It oftentimes surfaces tensions in our society when we have disorderly and disproportionate migration into some countries that skews our politics and is subject to demagoguery.

And if we were to turn refugees away simply because of their background or religion, or, for example, because they are Muslim, then we would be reinforcing terrorist propaganda that nations like my own are somehow opposed to Islam, which is an ugly lie that must be

rejected in all of our countries by upholding the values of pluralism and diversity.

And finally, this crisis is a test of our common humanity -- whether we give in to suspicion and fear and build walls, or whether we see ourselves in another. Those girls being trafficked and tortured, they could be our daughters. That little boy on the beach could be our son or our grandson. We cannot avert our eyes or turn our backs. To slam the door in the face of these families would betray our deepest values. It would deny our own heritage as nations, including the United States of America, that have been built by immigrants and refugees. And it would be to ignore a teaching at the heart of so many faiths that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us; that we welcome the stranger in our midst. And just as failure to act in the past -- for example, by turning away Jews fleeing Nazi Germany -- is a stain on our collective conscience, I believe history will judge us harshly if we do not rise to this moment.

First and foremost, we must recognize that refugees are a symptom of larger failures -- be it war, ethnic tensions, or persecution. If we truly want to address the crisis, wars like the savagery in Syria must be brought to an end -- and it will be brought to an end through political settlement and diplomacy, and not simply by bombing.

We have to insist on greater investments in development and education and democratic institutions -- the lack of which fuels so much of the instability we see in the world. And we need to continue to speak up for justice and equality, and insist that the universal human rights of every person are upheld, everywhere.

In the face of this crisis, with what often seems grim news, we are grateful for the heroic work of so many around the world. Leaders who, often in the face of difficult politics at home, welcome refugees as new neighbors. Businesses, such as those I met with right before I came here, which had made commitments worth more than \$650 million to empower refugees. International institutions and faith groups and NGOs, including InterAction -- the alliance of American NGOs -- whose members will invest more than \$1.2 billion over the next three years to assist the world's displaced people and refugees.

As Americans, we're determined to do our part. The United Nations [United States] is the largest single donor of humanitarian aid around the world, including to refugees and to the people of Syria. We resettle more refugees than any other nation. As President, I've increased the number of refugees we are resettling to 85,000 this year, which includes 10,000 Syrian refugees -- a goal we've exceeded even as we've upheld our rigorous screening. And I called for this summit because we all have to do more.

I want to thank our co-hosts, Secretary General Ban, and Jordan. Obviously, Jordan is carrying an enormous burden as a consequence of the conflict, and we are grateful for His Majesty and the work that they've done. Mexico, which is absorbing a great number of refugees from Central America. Sweden, which has made enormous humanitarian contributions in addition to taking on refugees. Germany and Canada -- two countries that have gone above and beyond in providing support for refugees. And I want to

personally thank Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Trudeau, and the people of both those countries -- because the politics sometimes can be hard, but it's the right thing to do. And Ethiopia, which as was noted in the video, bears an enormous burden.

I also want to thank the more than 50 nations and organizations participating in this summit for making tangible, concrete commitments. Collectively, our nations have increased our contributions to humanitarian organizations and U.N. appeals this year by some \$4.5 billion, and that includes a \$1 billion increase this year from the United States. This will translate concretely into lifesaving food, and medicine, and clothing, and shelter.

But since we can't just keep on doing the same thing the same way -- allowing refugees to languish in camps, disconnected from society -- we've also been working with the World Bank to create new financing facilities to assist countries hosting refugees build schools and economic opportunities. As part of these efforts, the United States will contribute at least \$50 million to help middle-income countries, and we'll do more to help low-income countries so that refugees and their host communities can flourish and grow stronger together. The refugees in places like Ecuador or Kenya don't always get as much attention as some of the recent migrations, but they need help too. And that's part of our goal here.

Collectively, our nations are roughly doubling the number of refugees that we admit to our countries to more than 360,000 this year. Again, I want to especially commend Germany, Canada, Austria, the Netherlands and Australia for their continued leadership, as well countries like Argentina and Portugal for their new commitments. And today, I'm proud to announce that the United States will continue our leadership role. In the coming fiscal year, starting next week, the United States will welcome and resettle 110,000 refugees from around the world -- which is a nearly 60 percent increase over 2015. We intend to do it right, and we will do it safely.

Collectively, the major commitments by Turkey, Thailand, Chad and Jordan will help more than one million children who are refugees get an education; will help one million refugees get training, new skills or find a job. And in all of this work, we cannot forget those who are often the most vulnerable to abuse -- young girls and women. So a key part of our efforts must be a renewed commitment to stopping sexual violence and forced marriage. And we need to do more to truly empower women and girls -- because every girl deserves the chance to grow and be safe, and every woman should have her human rights and dignity upheld.

So I'm heartened by the commitments that have been made here today. They will help save lives. But we're going to have to be honest -- it's still not enough; not sufficient for a crisis of this magnitude. And that's why I believe this summit must be the beginning of a new global movement where everybody does more: More nations donating more assistance and accepting more refugees. More institutions and NGOs finding new ways to deliver aid. More businesses contributing their expertise. More faith groups making this work their own. More young people demanding action. More states and cities and towns

coming forward and saying, yes, we will open our communities to our fellow human beings in need. And more pressure on those countries that are willing to perpetrate violence on their own citizens in pursuit of power that carries such a heavy human toll.

We can learn from a young boy named Alex, who lives not far from here in Scarsdale, New York. Last month, like all of us, Alex saw that heartbreaking image -- five-year-old Omran Daqneesh in Aleppo, Syria, sitting in that ambulance, silent and in shock, trying to wipe the blood from his hands.

And here in New York, Alex, who is just six years old, sat down and wrote me a letter. And he said, he wanted Omran to come live with him and his family. "Since he won't bring toys," Alex wrote, "I will share my bike and I will teach him how to ride it. I will teach him addition and subtraction. My little sister will be collecting butterflies and fireflies for him...We can all play together. We will give him a family and he will be our brother."

Those are the words of a six-year-old boy. He teaches us a lot. (Applause.)

The humanity that a young child can display, who hasn't learned to be cynical, or suspicious, or fearful of other people because of where they're from, or how they look, or how they pray, and who just understands the notion of treating somebody that is like him with compassion, with kindness -- we can all learn from Alex. Imagine the suffering we could ease, and the lives we could save, and what our world would look like if, seeing a child who's hurting anywhere in the world, we say, "We will give him a family and he will be our brother."

We spend, so many of us in politics and in leadership, so much time devoted to ascending the ladders of power. We spend time maintaining it; we spend time trying to win over public opinion. And maybe sometimes we forget that the only rationale for doing it is to help that little boy. I hope and pray that we remember.

I appreciate all of your support. Thank you. (Applause.)

END

4:02 P.M. EDT