Citation by Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle at the presentation of the Walther Rathenau Award to UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres

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-- Translation of advance text --

High Commissioner Guterres,

Fellow Members of the Bundestag,

Members of the Walther Rathenau Institute,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Walther Rathenau was an industrialist, a writer and a liberal politician. As Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic, he was the embodiment of a policy of compromise and diplomacy. His name is a byword for freedom and responsibility and for the clear rejection of revanchism, radicalism and violence. He was murdered 91 years ago.

Violence is the main reason for the some 43 million refugees and displaced persons worldwide. This figure represents more than half the population of Germany.

In view of the scale of the problem, awarding this year’s prize to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is an important political signal.

Antonio Guterres has headed the United Nations Refugee Agency since 2005. He is a politician through and through having recently served as Portuguese Prime Minister. For the last eight years, he has personified the untiring support for refugees around the world.

Almost every evening, the news brings new images of people fleeing for their lives. In the last four weeks alone, more than 200,000 Syrians have fled over the border to Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. More than four million Syrians are displaced in their own country having fled the escalating violence.

Such cold statistics mask an unimaginable amount of human suffering affecting first and foremost the most vulnerable in society. My visit to the Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan a few

months ago was a very moving experience as more than half the people in the camp are children.

Mr Guterres, you also visited the region just recently. You worked to help the refugees in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan and gave the international community a wake-up call.

No one can fail to be moved by the images from the camps. Germany is helping Syrian refugees in their hour of need and will remain active in the future. We have just increased our humanitarian aid by 5 million euros and it now totals 130 million euros.

And we are going to use a further 15 million euros to help the Syrian opposition develop the capabilities they need and begin the reconstruction process.

In the European Union, we took targeted steps on Monday to ease the sanctions regime to enable the opposition to provide the people with direct assistance.

What we want to do is alleviate the suffering of the people in Syria. At the same time, it needs to be made clear to everyone that there is a real alternative to the Assad regime.

The German Government will not stop at this wide-ranging support. Together with our partners, we know the responsibility we shoulder.

Our world is not a peaceful place. Refugee crises in Syria and Mali have been added to the list in the last 18 months.

At the same time, protracted crises continue. At the Horn of Africa, in Pakistan and Iran, we see refugee camps that were set up more than 30 years ago.

The United Nations Refugee Agency saves lives. It gives the people a roof over their heads. It provides them with food, medical care and at least a degree of hygiene.

But humanitarian aid cannot root out the causes for people fleeing their homes or being displaced. That is something only politics can do, above all politics in their countries of origin.

Alongside the trouble spots, new risks are emerging. The number of natural disasters has doubled in the last 20 years, from 200 to 400 a year.

But funds for humanitarian aid are not keeping pace.

If we are to keep providing the same level of assistance, we need to rethink our approach to humanitarian assistance.

We need to shift our focus from reacting to crises as they arise to actively managing risks. Disaster reduction is efficient and can save lives.

Under your leadership, Mr Guterres,

UNHCR

is actively tackling the new challenges. You have adapted the instruments for protecting refugees.

You have made major efforts to make the humanitarian system more efficient.

I know just how dedicated you are in pushing ahead with reform within

UNHCR

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The German Government regards

UNHCR

as one of its closest and most important partners in humanitarian assistance. In 2012, Germany provided it with more than 51 million euros.

We also work closely together on international refugee protection. Germany has taken in more than half a million refugees, the fourth highest figure worldwide.

By hosting 5000 Syrian refugees we want to show the world what international solidarity is about.

Yet, Germany also owes much to the

UN

Refugee Agency. After all, one of its first major tasks was to look after the homeless in Germany in the 1950s. The Convention relating to the Status of Refugees was mainly drawn up as a response to the millions of people uprooted in Europe after the Second World War.

Since then, the world has changed dramatically. Unfortunately, the challenges facing humanitarian aid have yet to abate.

Overview "Newsroom"

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