Speech by Minister of State for Europe Michael Roth to open the exhibition “Refugees – A Great Challenge” in the Atrium of the Federal Foreign Office

2017-01-26

-- Translation of advance text --

Ladies and gentlemen,

Herlinde Koelbl,

I well remember the last time we met in May 2014, when we jointly opened your exhibition “Targets” at the German Historical Museum, just a few steps away from here.

On that occasion we talked about a wonderful idea for another exhibition. You told me that you wanted to draw those who view your works into the role of Europeans who reflect on their continent. At that time we could not, of course, envisage the dramatic escalation of the refugee crisis that we have seen in the last two years.

We all know that the power of images was a major factor in changing policy and societal debate on the refugee issue. We can all recall the picture of the dead Syrian refugee boy Aylan on the beach at Bodrum. And the harrowing photo of the blood

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covered Omran from Aleppo. These images shocked us, they made us both speechless and furious.

And the photographs by Herlinde Koelbl that we are presenting today here in the Atrium of the Federal Foreign Office are also an important catalyst for the debate on forced displacement and migration. Herlinde Koelbl’s pictures challenge us to reflect on our attitude and shared responsibility towards people in acute need – and thus also provide a catalyst for reflection on the future of Europe.

The photos Herlinde Koelbl shares with us focus on individuals. She is not concerned with abstract figures and statistics but wants to give the many individual stories a face and a voice. Her photographs and videos are a sign of hope. Hope of a better life without terrorism and war. Hope of a life characterised by peace, dignity and self

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determination.

The photographs, which were taken in Greece, Italy and Germany, speak of Europe as a longed

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for destination. However, they also tell of exhaustion following a long journey full of hardships, in some cases also of desperation, concern and grief for friends and family members. The pictures are an appeal for humanity.

I was particularly moved by one picture from the Greek island of Lesbos. We see a large pile of discarded life jackets. And the longer we study this picture, the more we realise that each one of these life jackets, with its fluorescent orange colour, represents a specific individual fate, a very personal story of people being compelled to leave their homes.

A photo can only ever be a momentary snapshot. Yet we have to imagine what happened before and after the moment that has been captured. But let’s try this little thought experiment together.

Perhaps the life jackets saved the lives of refugees arriving in Europe after a successful crossing. Yet we are also aware that far too many people paid for the attempt to sail to Europe with their lives.

That is one of our most urgent priorities – to prevent such tragedies from happening in the first place. That is why the

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-Turkey statement was and is an important element of our policy. The agreement is a great humanitarian act by the

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, because it helps save lives and make the situation of refugees more bearable. I therefore don’t understand why it is being described as a “dirty deal”.

Yes, much remains to be done. In the past year since these photos were taken, we have made some progress. The number of irregular arrivals in Greece fell significantly over the course of 2016 - and with them also the number of people risking, and far too often losing, their lives in the eastern Aegean.

But one question remains: what drove each person to entrust one of these life jackets with their lives? What – and above all – who did they have to leave behind when they fled? Perhaps their relatives are still living in the civil war region in the most desperate circumstances. Perhaps they were able to flee with a few basic essentials to a neighbouring country.

We are continuing to devote particular attention to Syria and its neighbours. The priority for diplomacy is to create and preserve peace – persistently and patiently, despite all setbacks. It obliges us to ensure that communication does not break down, either with our partners – or, more importantly, with those with quite different views from our own.

Through our engagement we want to create stable prospects for the future and social cohesion. Where steps towards peace are taken, people must quickly be able to feel their impact. Together with our partners we are working to prevent the emergence of a “lost generation”. And we are seeing some progress: in cooperation with the Civil Peace Service we are, for example, intensively promoting social cohesion and strengthening local government.

Not only in Syria but in all places where people are in need of protection and support, humanitarian assistance is a key factor in helping them to live and survive in dignity and safety. Whether in a conflict region or along migration routes, Germany, together with its partners – United Nations organisations, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and non

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governmental organisations – is working to alleviate the suffering of those who are unable to escape their situation through their own efforts.

Moreover, assistance in the region of origin has a two

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fold effect. For the vast majority of displaced persons and refugees do not willingly embark on the long and dangerous journey to unknown areas of the world. They would rather return to their former home as soon as possible.

That is why it is so important that we do what we can to ensure that displaced persons and refugees find protection, a roof over their heads, food, medical care, schooling for their children and jobs as close to their homeland as possible. That is the primary aim of our humanitarian assistance.

And yet it must also be clear that refugees, regardless of where they end up, must receive the protection and help they require. We, like most countries in this world incidentally, have

committed ourselves to this goal in the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Last but not least, this conviction is an integral part of our European system of values. And we stand by it.

The European Union has also responded to the humanitarian emergency. Together with all other

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Member States and the

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itself, we have made available three billion euros for Syrian refugees in Turkey. This includes, for example, the Emergency Social Safety Net in cooperation with the World Food Programme – the most comprehensive humanitarian assistance programme that has ever been established by the

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To return to my question: what has become of the people who reached Europe with one of these life jackets in a rickety boat? Maybe they have since travelled on to Germany and are hoping to soon be able to send for their families.

Many colleagues at the Federal Foreign Office and our missions abroad are working intensively to allow family members of recognised refugees to travel to Germany to join them. We are aware that the waiting times are still longer than we would all like.

However, thanks to more staff, simplified procedures and close cooperation with non

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governmental organisations and the International Organization for Migration, we have managed to improve the situation with regard to family reunification: since 2015 we have tripled the number of visas granted in the Syria/Iraq region.

But perhaps the life jacket belonged to someone who is still in Greece. There are currently around 63,000 refugees in Greece, over 15,000 of whom are on the eastern Aegean islands. Continued support and solidarity from all Europeans is needed: both for the refugees and for the Greek authorities.

Or is the person who once wore this life jacket maybe waiting on the Greek mainland to enter another

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Member State? The

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Member States have pledged to shoulder the task alongside Greece and Italy and distribute the people arriving within Europe. As a result, more than 10,000 refugees have already been brought to another European country, and 1000 of these have come to Germany. We are still trailing a long way behind our intended goal – and I make no secret of how unhappy I am about this.

But I also see that another 22,000 accommodation places are now available – over 5000 of which are in Germany. Many

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Member States also significantly increased their offers of resettlement in the course of 2016. A sign of Europe's desire to show solidarity!

We will have to continue to conduct critical discussion on solidarity in future – not only among my fellow Ministers for Europe. No one should forget that solidarity is always a two

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way street.

Ms Koelbl,

Your photographs also show us that the journey is not over at the point of arrival on a Greek or Italian island, with the removal of the life jacket. You also accompanied refugees' first steps in their host country. Refugees are confronted with red tape, language courses, the search for employment, and a completely new cultural environment.

Your pictures depict the desire to learn shown by those who have come to us. They portray the outstanding engagement of thousands of volunteers throughout Germany, in my home in northern Hesse as well as in Berlin, Hamburg and Bavaria. Together with authorities and aid organisations, they have often pushed themselves to the limit to make the refugees' arrival easier and help integration work.

Today I can only cite a few examples of our widespread efforts to alleviate suffering, and can share just a few thoughts that have come to mind while looking at the photographs in this exhibition. I don't want to deny that there are still many problems. But the solutions on which we are working are also varied – nationally, at European level and in cooperation with international partners.

And something else moved me while I was viewing the images: what kind of an impact can photography, can art have on our co

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existence in Europe and the world?

The French photographer and co

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founder of the photo agency Magnum, Henri Cartier

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Bresson, once described photography as “a way of shouting”. Now, I’m not a photographer, I’m a politician. I value the importance of a dialogue characterised by respect, fairness and objectivity. And I’m no loudmouth.

Yet we are living in an age dominated by increasing nationalism and populism, an age in which all too often it is the one who shouts the loudest, who has the supposedly simple answers, who is heard and who initially gets their way.

Against this backdrop, art – and this applies particularly to photography – provides a counterweight. It speaks to people without using grand words, directly and immediately, and reaches the heart of society. It is works like yours, Ms Koelbl, which give a face and a voice to those who so often remain unheard.

They challenge us to look more closely and identify common ground, inviting us to engage in a fair discussion. This fosters exchange and diversity. It also cultivates appreciation and understanding.

The creation of communicative spaces is all the more important in a world that can no longer be sure of its own order. For the struggle to establish a new order is always also the struggle for a new narrative, for a discourse to justify its very existence.

I am certain that the overwhelming majority of Europeans still want to live in an open and diverse society. Notwithstanding the need for security, we want to embrace our diversity without fear, hatred or violence, we want to not let our freedom be curbed and to grant protection for those who need it. And we are working on a value

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oriented and humanitarian refugee and migration policy. However, it must remain controllable and be accepted by society. That is my dream for Europe – and that is what we are working

for. And, dear Ms Koelbl, when I look at your pictures, I am sure that we are working to realise the same dream!

Overview "Newsroom"

Source : https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/170126-stm-r-ausstellung-fluechtlinge-287576