Speech by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier on International Migrants Day in honour of volunteers who work with refugees

2014-12-18

Ladies and gentlemen,

Guests,

And above all, volunteers,

I bid you all a very warm welcome to the Federal Foreign Office.

2014 has nearly come to an end, and what a year it has been. In all my time as a politician, I for one can’t remember any period in which there were so many international crises, or when the crises were so diverse and complex in nature, and what’s more hitting all at once, as there have been this year.

- the crisis in Ukraine,

- the terrible civil war in Syria,

- the barbaric terror inflicted by ISIS,

- the Ebola epidemic,

- the conflict in the Middle East,

I’ll break off my list there but unfortunately we all know that I could go on for much longer.

The images from the crisis zones that reach Germany’s living rooms every evening are shocking. Yet if you only watch the evening news, it can be tempting to console oneself by thinking: at least these conflicts are far away...

Ladies and gentlemen, all of you here know that that is not the case. You all know that the crises are moving towards us. You know that Germany is closely interconnected with the world – and that we cannot be indifferent to the crises and human suffering which they inflict.

Nowhere can this suffering be as directly felt as when one meets refugees who come here to Germany from the crisis zones.

Whilst our work in foreign policy – summits and all-night negotiations – may sometimes feel abstract and distant, you work to improve refugees' destinies in a very direct and concrete manner. You collect clothes or bicycles for families, you help them to learn German or you pick up children from refugee homes which are out of the way and take them to schools in town centres. That is only a small selection of the initiatives which I've encountered and that is why on behalf of the German Government Aydan Özoguz and all of us would like to sincerely thank you and express our great respect for your work.

There is no area of politics in which domestic and foreign policy are as closely linked as they are in refugee policy. In a world with more refugees than ever before, we need both domestic and foreign policy responses.

In terms of foreign policy, that means we must use the full range of our diplomatic toolbox with courage and without a blinkered attitude in order to make a contribution, however small, to de-escalating conflicts and thus to tackling the root causes of flight.

That is particularly important when it comes to Syria. The civil war has been raging for nearly four years. To date, it has claimed 250,000 lives. 12 million people have fled their homes. You all know these figures – and yet the scale of the human tragedy, the humanitarian catastrophe, is simply beyond belief. That is why we urgently need steps towards a political solution. We are currently working towards this together with United Nations Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura and in talks with Syria's Arab neighbours, Russia and the United States.

Yet Syria's neighbours need our support as well. Countries such as Lebanon or Jordan are not just groaning under the strain of the influx of refugees. Their public systems – schools, healthcare, the supply of food and water – are completely overwhelmed and on the brink of complete collapse. This could turn the crisis in Syria into a crisis of the whole region, causing yet more waves of refugees. If you imagine the proportions for even just a second – over 1.5 million Syrian refugees in a country such as Lebanon, with just 4.5 million inhabitants of its own – and apply those proportions to Germany, then we would be dealing with 20 million refugees from only one crisis zone! If we do not act now then the neighbouring countries will also fall apart. That is why two months ago I hosted an international conference for Syria and its neighbours in an effort to mobilise broad-based international support. Germany has earmarked 500 million euros for the next three years. Moreover, just a few steps away we are currently holding meetings with the United Nations and

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High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres to discuss how the international funds can be best put to use within the framework of the United Nations.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

That constitutes the foreign and development policy part of the response. Yet there is also a domestic policy aspect which I have to comment on, because at the moment on a few public squares utterly dumb slogans and completely false recipes are being cooked up: Let’s pull up the drawbridge! Let’s put up fences and barbed wire! These days, some of my international partners have frowned and asked me: Is that a movement in Germany?

Fully convinced, I say: No it is not. That is not the Germany that I know. The Germany that I know is an open country. And it is a rich country. And why is our country rich? Precisely because we’re connected with the world. We benefit economically from being connected to the world, but much more, we benefit on a human, cultural and societal level.

And so we know that putting up fences will resolve neither our own problems nor the misery in our world.

The overwhelming majority of people in this country hold the same view. A recent study carried out by the Robert Bosch Stiftung shows that nearly 90 percent say that people should be able to find refuge in Germany if there is a civil war in their country. Two thirds of people can envisage helping asylum seekers. There has been a clear rise, and not fall, in these numbers since the beginning of the 90s.

So the truth is that our country has become more open.

And as that is the case we can discuss the challenges that we face openly. We can openly say that taking in refugees costs money. That it entails an extra strain on the finances and infrastructure of some communities, something which we must deal with.

Yet we can discuss all of this in a candid manner because there is a basic consensus that we are an open, modern society, and this open society is something that we want to hold on to, we will not allow it to be destroyed by rabble-rousers.

To all those who are concerned or anxious and have the feeling that too much is changing at too rapid a pace and that the world, with all the crises that we have just discussed, is looming far too closely – to all of those people, I say: Be careful who you let yourself be used by. Do you want to solve problems and take our society forward or do you want to bawl and shout alongside those who have something very different in mind, people who have no desire to solve problems but who simply want to cause a scandal because they take issue with the very notion of an open society.

The Germany that I know is not a nation paralysed with fear, it is a nation which rolls up its sleeves and gets down to work. You and your commitment to volunteering are the best proof

we could have of this. Thank you for coming to this event today.

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