

Remarks of Karen AbuZayd, Special Adviser for the High-Level Panel on the GA and US Presidential Summits on 19-20 September

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The General Assembly Summit on 19 September this year will be a unique opportunity for world leaders to commit to a concerted approach to 'Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants'. Currently, with the support of colleagues on this panel, and several other UN entities, we are preparing the Secretary-General's report that will provide a basis for discussion at the summit. The report will be launched in mid-May. Today, I am sharing some preliminary thoughts about what we hope to achieve in September.

Over the past several years we have witnessed large movements of refugees and migrants, and our response has fallen short of human rights standards and has been deficient in international cooperation. The result has been suffering and perishing of those in transit; an unequal sharing of responsibility and a disproportionate strain on a limited number of states and host communities, in addition to a rise in discrimination, exclusion and xenophobia, plus new tensions arising within and among states. Despite global commitments to the contrary, refugees and migrants are being 'left behind' on every measure of human rights and development. In an unequal, imperfect world there will always be a need for people to seek asylum and to migrate. We can do better in managing this challenge.

Solutions are close at hand. Over the last few years we have been engaging in fruitful discussion about how to fix our systems for addressing these large movements. Member States, civil society, academia, the private sector, and the United Nations have worked on numerous initiatives. Today's event is an example. We are here with a group of states, civil society and international organizations to make commitments to create more legal pathways for the admission of Syrian refugees, using resettlement and other channels.

In my discussions since becoming the Special Adviser for the September summit, I have observed a consensus emerging about how to respond to large movements of people more advantageously for both the moving and receiving populations.

The approach to these movements must be comprehensive, not piecemeal. The elements are known. We must invest more in prevention, addressing root causes of large movements and creating channels for safe and orderly migration so that people avoid recourse to smugglers and traveling on dangerous routes. We must do more to protect the safety, rights and dignity of people on the move. States must support each other in coping with large movements and engage effectively combining the efforts and energy of civil society and the private sector.

A comprehensive set of measures should apply to uphold the rights of those moving in large numbers, ensuring that they receive life-saving assistance, regardless of who they are and why they are moving. These are duties we owe one another as human beings, and the commitments we make between and among States.

We must also make plans to address the distinctive situations of refugees and migrants, as there are different legal regimes and institutional frameworks for the two groups.

For refugees, the 1951 Convention recognizes that a movement of refugees may place an undue burden on a hosting state and that the international community should cooperate to alleviate that burden. We have improved international cooperation over the last 65 years, but there are shortcomings that have been exposed with the growing number of refugees who have been displaced for protracted periods.

First, the current system does not deliver the required amount of protection and assistance at an early enough stage and with sufficient predictability. Secondly, the current system does not provide adequate solutions to refugees and host communities in terms of development or resettlement.

For this reason, we are proposing a new approach to sharing responsibility for refugees. We will recommend bringing in more states to support refugee-hosting states at an early stage of displacement and in a more predictable manner. Civil society, the private sector, faith-based organizations and the UN will play a role in assisting refugees and their hosts. Since displacement is frequently long-term, particularly in less well-off states, we must engage development actors at the beginning of a crisis, and work with them to mitigate the impact on host communities by allowing refugees to make a greater contribution to their environment. We will spell out good practices on local integration. More refugees will find solutions through resettlement and other pathways for admission to third countries. We will all share responsibility for refugees on an equitable basis.

We will find it easier to address large movements of migrants if systems governing international migration function better. Some States have led a number of processes to strengthen international cooperation in migration. It is time to endorse these efforts, to build on them, to strengthen cooperation on international migration under the auspices of the United Nations. We must promote a better understanding and recognition of the positive impact of migration on development, diversity and human prosperity, while mitigating risks and combating organised criminal networks that make a profit from human misery and the absence of legal channels for movements. We must protect the rights of all migrants through good governance of international migration.

It is time to transform our approach to international migration so that we meet the challenges associated with the large movements expected in the future. Many factors are at play here: global trade and communication, growing diasporas, rising inequality, climate change, natural disasters and demographic change. People will be on the move, and the international system must be re-tooled to govern this movement for the benefit of all.

We will be able to harness the benefits of human mobility only if our societies are open to the refugees and migrants who join us. This is becoming a growing concern. Many societies are becoming more fearful of the foreigner, the 'other'. The Summit is the moment for a change of mind and heart. It is the occasion for a clarion call to ask communities to accept, welcome and build relationships with the refugees and migrants in their midst.

States cannot address large movements of refugees and migrants standing alone. Nor should they have to. If today the crisis affects my neighbourhood, tomorrow it may affect yours. We will all benefit if we choose to share the responsibility and support one another in time of need. We have the tools at our disposal.

The GA Summit in September will be a time to commit to these solutions and to implement them.