



ccme

churches' commission for migrants in europe

beyond borders

since 1964

2 October 2014

One year after the tragedy off Lampedusa

Remembering persons who have lost their lives calls for a commitment to prevent such catastrophes, to protect and assist refugees and show concrete solidarity

Remember

One year after the tragedy in which at least 366 persons lost their lives at the shore off Lampedusa, the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe calls on members and people in Europe to remember those who have died in this incident. At the same time, we urge not to forget the many other tragic incidents that happened and still happen in Greek, Italian, Spanish, Cypriot or Maltese waters.

When we commemorate these tragedies, we keep in mind the people fleeing war and conflict, cruelty and destruction in the Middle East, particularly from Syria and Iraq. Churches in the Middle East are urging us in Europe - and other parts of the world - to assist in resolving the conflict and help restore moral values and human principles. At the same time humanitarian assistance to unprecedented numbers of refugees need to be stepped up – support to the neighbouring countries hosting close to 3 million refugees - and to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to fulfill the mandate to protect.

Act

Following the tragedy on 3 October 2013, the Italian government has launched the Operation „Mare Nostrum“ with a wide scope to save and rescue persons in distress at sea. Italy has shown courage and determination to save lives, and our organisations, together with many others across Europe, wish to thank the Italian government for this initiative. We believe this operation ought to continue in its original wide scope, and we call on other European countries and the EU institutions to support the extension of this operation, e.g. by contributing from their respective share in the Internal Security Fund-Visa and Borders. Italy has acted on behalf of Europe and should not be left alone; Italy has also shown that far more action is possible than previously thought to save lives in the Mediterranean Sea.

Safe Passage

As the crises and violence in the Middle East continues, numbers of refugees seeking protection for themselves and their families increase. In the absence of legal avenues many turn to smugglers hoping to find a way – and yet ever too often risking their lives. We have observed tragedies, loss of lives, and trauma among the survivors. Therefore, alternatives need to be put in place as a matter of urgency, opening humanitarian corridors or safe passage and easier, faster and safer management of protection procedures. We believe the EU cannot only call on neighbouring countries to the conflict to keep their borders open, the EU itself has to open its borders for refugees rather than closing them off. As an immediate measure – also to reduce smuggling - temporary lifting of visa requirements for Syrian and Iraqi refugees would provide them taking safe passages to Europe. In addition, emergency resettlement of persons with medical needs should be increased from the neighbouring countries to alleviate some of the burden and share the responsibility to protect and assist.

Mediterranean Hope

Currently, the Southern European countries with huge economic difficulties are facing the biggest challenge of refugees arriving. Churches seek to contribute to identifying solutions and assisting refugees in a variety of ways. The Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy has established a monitoring service in Lampedusa and a first reception accommodation in Scicli as part of a wider project „Mediterranean Hope“. The concrete actions are combined with an ecumenical strategy aiming to plea to churches and policy-makers in Europe to step up their efforts to provide protection and facilitate reception. The project also points to shortcomings in the current reception and protection system in Italy which for many years had been neglected by the government and is therefore not equipped to deal with the current increase of refugees and asylum applicants. The churches wish to send a sign of hope and encouragement to others to receive refugees in their midst.

Solidarity in Europe

As Italy and the Southern European countries, potentially also the Eastern EU Member States, carry the brunt of arrivals, and only few EU Member States, including Sweden and Germany, have received the highest numbers so far, it appears of utmost importance to share the responsibility for the protection of refugees among EU Member States in a better way. We believe two areas need to be addressed quickly: EU Member States should agree to recognise the protection status granted by another EU Member State so that persons can move on to another country, e.g. to take up employment. Secondly, a distribution system of refugees, perhaps also asylum applicants, could help share the responsibility, we would favour a system in which the desires and personal situation of the persons could be considered as a priority.

**Let us take the commemoration of persons who lost their lives to renew the commitment to save and protect persons and follow the biblical example „For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me.“
Matthew 25,35**