

CCME Press Release:

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Deaths at European Borders – there are alternatives

Churches advocate for “Safe Passage”

Deaths at European external borders can and must be ended, alternatives are available and need to be implemented. This message was highlighted by speakers and participants throughout the conference “Deaths at European Borders – there are alternatives” held in Rome 23-24 February 2015. Politicians and representatives of churches and non-governmental organisations talked about the need for a “toolbox”, because – as Stefan Keßler of the Jesuit Refugee Service Europe highlighted – “not one instrument fits all situations.”

“I am proud to be part of a government which initiated the Mare Nostrum Operation to rescue migrants in distress at sea”, Italian Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Lapo Pistelli stated in his address to the conference in the Senate of Italy. The Mare Nostrum Operation, with which the Italian navy undertook proactive search and rescue in the year 2014 was highlighted as a positive example to reduce loss of lives of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Vice Minister Pistelli underlined the fundamental value of mobility in the European Union and the initiatives of cooperation with third countries regarding migration and development.

Speakers from churches and non-governmental organisations argued for measures which would make the crossing of external borders safe and legal for migrants, among them a high percentage of refugees. Possible instruments such as increased refugee resettlement, more family reunification possibilities, humanitarian visas or, in cases of mass flight like Syria, lifting of visa requirements would need political will to be implemented, and they could certainly reduce the number of casualties.

Several speakers pointed out that search and rescue at sea in the Mediterranean should become a joint European task and not be left to Italy or Greece alone as was the case in 2014. The increase of new arrivals at the beginning of 2015 compared to 2014, therefore after the Mare Nostrum operation was ended, shows that the situation in the Middle East and North Africa is so dramatic that people rather take high risks.

On the second day of the conference participants took stock of the diverse situations at borders. The experience of the project Mediterranean Hope of the Federation of Protestant Churches was shared, which was initiated in response to the tragedies at the shores of Lampedusa. The proximity of Greece to the Syrian conflict, but also historic ties, bring many refugees to Greece. Migrants associations, churches and non-governmental organisations hope that announcements by the new Greek government to look for alternatives to detention and improve conditions will be realised soon. Regarding Spain, ever higher fences around the Spanish exclaves in Morocco and the shooting of migrants swimming to reach Spanish territory were deplored. The proposed new security legislation

and its consequences for migrants, more particularly refugees in need of protections, may put at risk fundamental values and rights guaranteed in international law. These measures could have far-reaching consequences, participants heard.

The conference marked the opening of the "Safe passage" project, initiated by the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), bringing together delegates from churches from across Europe. Participants discussed future activities of churches from across Europe to complement and combine actions such as monitoring the situation at the borders in Southern Europe, raising public awareness, and advocacy to achieve safe passage for migrants into Europe.

"Facing the war and conflict situations and the many persons displaced, we cannot close our eyes to the plight of people. Restoring the dignity of persons and providing protection and opportunities for refugees to take charge and restart their lives is at the heart of the churches' work in this field", Doris Peschke, General Secretary of CCME stated. "It is challenging and demanding, but possible. More places for resettlement, relocation and other forms of admission are needed as a first step. If European states followed the example of Italy with Mare Nostrum, no longer shifted responsibility to others, but took up and shared their responsibility to provide protection, many lives could be saved. And we would perhaps be amazed by encouraging new beginnings."

The conference was jointly organised by the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe CCME and the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, FCEI.

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The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) is the ecumenical agency on migration and integration, asylum and refugees, and against racism and discrimination in Europe. Members are Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant Churches and Councils of Churches as well as church-related agencies in presently 18 European countries. CCME cooperates with the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches.