

## CCME to GRF 2023: welcoming the stranger and upholding refugee rights is in our 'Christian DNA'

*By Joy Eva Bohol*

AS PART of this year's Global Refugee Forum (GRF) held in Geneva, Switzerland on 13-15 December, the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) had engaged in the side events, affirming the churches' continued commitment to uphold refugee and asylum protection, and to offer as safe sanctuaries to refugees, forcibly displaced people, and people on the move.

Held once every four years since 2019, the GRF was established in the follow-up of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). It brought together over 4,000 representatives of governments, UN and other international bodies, civil society, academia, including over 300 refugee delegates. Around 10,000 participants followed online.<sup>1</sup>

"(GRF) is such an important week in terms of enabling different actors, stakeholders to network with one another... and to be honest, it is in the side events where most progresses are made.," said CCME Moderator Ms. Fiona Kendall.

CCME joined religious leaders from different countries in a GRF-related side event on 12 December, organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and Religions for Peace. Religious leaders released a joint statement for the Global Refugee Forum, "We have come to the Global Refugee Forum, held in Geneva this week from 13-15 December 2023, to pledge our collective support to refugees, share the responsibility with those who host them and work together and inter-religiously where possible to improve the lives of refugees regardless of their nationality, race, religious beliefs, class, or political opinions..." excerpt from the religious leaders' joint statement, released on 12 December at the Ecumenical Center in Geneva, Switzerland.<sup>2</sup>

The joint statement, which was hand overed to UNHCR and presented to the GRF plenary on 14 December, was also a recommitment of the 2012 Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders.

CCME General Secretary Dr. Torsten Moritz said in a WCC interview that welcoming the stranger, protecting the dignity and the life of those desperately need it (arriving) is in our "Christian DNA" as well as other faiths. He added that more and more, religion is used as a reason "not to protect," emphasizing the recent migration trends of using religion, like Muslim background, to exclude people or to push them away.

Dr. Moritz expressed hope that religious leaders would together refute any effort to exclude refugees from protection based on their religion.

CCME and partners in September 2023 had supported the UNHCR goal of 44,000 and 48,000 resettlement places for 2024 and 2025 respectively.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The GRF 2023 was co-convened by five States – Colombia, France, Japan, Jordan and Uganda, and co-hosted by the Government of Switzerland and UNHCR.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-religious-leaders-unite-for-climate-peace-in-solidarity-with-refugees>

<sup>3</sup> [https://ccme.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/JS\\_7-priorities-to-expand-resettlement-and-safe-pathways-to-Europe\\_FINAL\\_signatories\\_3.pdf](https://ccme.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/JS_7-priorities-to-expand-resettlement-and-safe-pathways-to-Europe_FINAL_signatories_3.pdf)

The UNHCR reported over 114 million people have been forcibly displaced, are refugees, and/or seeking asylum all over the world. These past years has seen a constant rise in the number of displaced people, due to more conflicts and oppression of people in different parts of the world, poverty, violence, climate change, among others.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi, in his speech to the religious leaders present at the GRF Multi-Faith Candle Lighting Ceremony on 14 December, said, “It is the role of the religious sector in our efforts to respond to the growing crisis of refugees, displaced people, people on the move... your role is to ensure that the way the world speaks about the people who had to leave everything they love and they know because of war, because of persecution, because of violence, and many other causes like poverty, climate change... You are helping us transform the way we see these people from negative to positive... from talking about them only as numbers and at worse as enemies, instead talk about them as a big contribution to communities that open their doors... you (religious leaders) are the most powerful antidote in this world full of violence, conflict, hate speech...”

Among the over 1,600 pledges presented at the GRF, the European government mainly pledged to engage in refugee support activities outside, not inside, Europe. While the support of the EU to UNHCR and its operations is laudable, the pledge on resettlement on humanitarian admission is particularly disappointing.<sup>4</sup> The figure of 61.000 places for two years 2024-25 (i.e. 30.500 per year) in both resettlement and humanitarian admission taken together is rather small against the 30.000 places for resettlement alone which the EU had promised at the last GRF for 2020.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, none of the European Union (EU) member states and EU representatives mentioned its role in addressing the arrivals to its borders, in terms of the pushbacks, violence, and violations of refugee rights at the borders.

“What we're seeing (in terms of migration trends) since the last GRF in 2019 is that in many countries, positions have hardened. A lot of countries we see in these discussions ask, 'Should we get rid of these refugees?' particularly in the industrialized countries... I very much hope that the Global Refugee Forum in general will reconfirm that the principles, and the thoughts, and the mechanisms of the International Refugee Protection regime based on the Geneva Refugee Convention are still valid and need to be upheld,” Dr. Moritz explained.

Ms. Kendall hopes that the GRF 2023 will result to real change. “We don’t need empty words, and we don't need people to simply confirm what they're already doing,” she said. “We’re looking for something more.”

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<sup>4</sup> [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/2023-global-refugee-forum-eu-announces-resettlement-pledges-2023-12-15\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/2023-global-refugee-forum-eu-announces-resettlement-pledges-2023-12-15_en)

<sup>5</sup> [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/resettlement-eu-member-states-pledges-exceed-30000-places-2020-2019-12-18\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/resettlement-eu-member-states-pledges-exceed-30000-places-2020-2019-12-18_en)