

Dimitris AVRAMOPOULOS

Member of the European Commission

Brussels, 16. 11. 2015
Ares(2015)

Dear Ms McKelvie,

Thank you for your letter of 16 October regarding the refugee crisis in the EU, and for sharing the transcript of the Scottish Parliament's European and External Relations Committee's evidence session on the matter. Please also accept our apologies for the delayed reply.

Addressing the current unprecedented refugee crisis, human hardship and suffering of migrants is a major preoccupation and challenge for the European Union and its citizens. I am well aware of the particular difficulties faced in the Greek islands, having recently visited Kos and Lesbos, and share your committee's concern regarding the situation both there and in Europe as a whole. Since January 2015 over 540,000 irregular migrants have reached Greece, 95% of whom arrive at the five Eastern Aegean islands.

In response to your request for further information on specific points:

Resettlement of people in need of international protection directly from third countries both responds to the EU's humanitarian obligations, and provides a safe alternative for refugees as compared to taking the perilous journey to Europe themselves. At a recent Relocation and Resettlement Forum, Member States confirmed the commitments made in July to welcome over 20,000 refugees in the next two years in this way, and we are developing practical solutions to ensure the effective application of the resettlement mechanism, which has already begun to take place. Of course, this remains very modest in comparison to the Herculean efforts undertaken by Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, who are hosting over 4 million Syrian refugees. I am encouraged that some Member States are showing their willingness to significantly step up our European resettlement efforts. This will allow us very soon to come forward with a structured system to pool European resettlement efforts more systematically.

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Humanitarian support at the point of arrival is a priority focus for the Migration Management Support Teams deployed in 'hotspot' areas in Italy and Greece. The teams are being coordinated by European Regional Task Forces with the participation of the EU agencies Frontex, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), Europol, and Eurojust. However, the agencies' work relies on the support of Member States.

Frontex and EASO have both launched calls for contributions to request human resources and technical equipment from Member States. In both cases, these calls constitute unprecedented numbers when compared to requests made by the Agencies in the past, reflecting the exceptional nature of the challenges currently faced by the most affected Member States: it is essential that other Member States respond positively, concretely and quickly to these calls.

The Commission has also committed to an increase of the funding for Humanitarian Aid of €500 million (€200 million in 2015 and €300 million in 2016) to help refugees directly, notably through UNHCR, the World Food Programme and other relevant organisations to help refugees' essential needs, like food and shelter. The European Commission is working together with the Greek Authorities to optimise the use of EU budget resources.

The EU has tripled the financial resources available for joint operations in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean coordinated and co-financed by the Frontex Agency. Over 208 000 lives have been saved. Every life lost is one too many, but many more have been rescued that would have been lost otherwise. It should be noted that in the Central Mediterranean most of the rescue interventions to which the assets deployed by Frontex contribute, are taking place far away from EU shores, close to the territorial waters of Libya. 29 Member States and Schengen Associated countries are participating in the joint operations coordinated by Frontex in Italy, Greece. Unprecedented number of assets (patrol vessels, aircrafts, thermo-vision vehicles etc.) and guest have been mobilised and deployed – that is a first measure of European solidarity in action, even though more will have to be done.

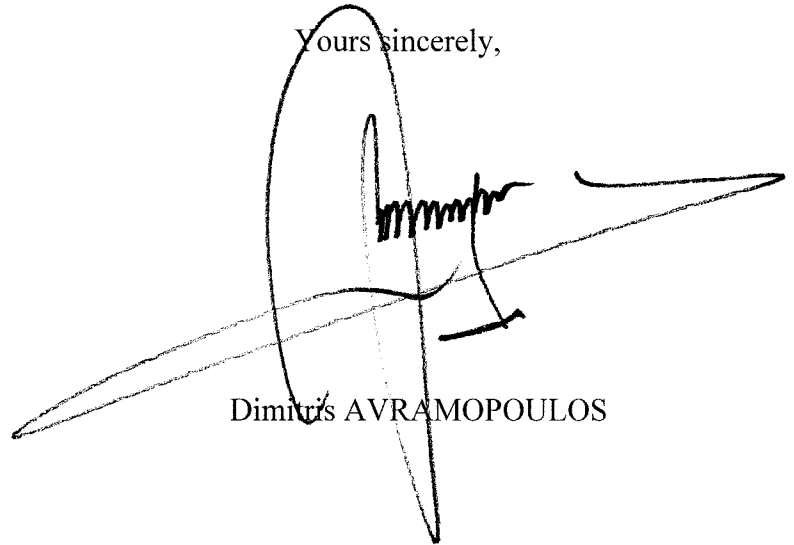
We have redoubled our efforts to tackle smugglers and dismantle human trafficker groups. Cheap ships are now harder to come by, leading to less people putting their lives in peril in rickety, unseaworthy boats. On 7 October, the EU military operation in the Southern Mediterranean – EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia – moved to its second phase in international waters, after having successfully fulfilled the objectives of phase 1 (surveillance and assessment of smuggling and trafficking networks), and contributing to the rescue of more than 3,000 people. It will now be able to conduct boarding, search, seizure and diversion, on the high seas, of vessels suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking, and will contribute to bringing suspected smugglers to justice. This represents a key development in disrupting the business model of traffickers/smugglers and received an important political endorsement from UN Security Council Resolution 2240 adopted on 9 October.

We also need to increase our efforts to address the situation in the Balkans. In this regard, the Commission is playing an active role in fostering cooperation between States. The Western Balkan Route Leaders' summit on 25 October was specifically geared towards addressing the shift of the crisis towards the Balkans route. The 17-point action plan that was agreed by Leaders is now being rolled out.

The Commission will continue to work in close cooperation with the European Parliament, the Council, the 28 EU Member States and the Schengen Associated States to push for swift progress in the operational implementation of our joint decisions so that we can make a difference on the ground as soon as possible.

For more information on EU initiatives in the field of migration, please consult our website (http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/index_en.htm).

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, sweeping loop on the left and a series of smaller, connected loops on the right, ending in a long horizontal stroke.

Dimitris AVRAMOPOULOS