

PEOPLE AND EVENTS

Conference

“Migration in the 21st Century: thoughts and prospects 2050”: May 17th 2016

Egmont Palace, Brussels

Opening speech of Vice Prime Minister

and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Didier Reynders.

Excellencies and Dear Colleagues,

Allow me to enter directly to the heart of the matter of today. The arrival in 2015 of migrants to Europe from The Middle East and Africa was unprecedented in scale. Quite rightly, we are talking about the worst migration crisis which our continent has confronted since the 2nd world war. It is a sobering thought. In facing this challenge, we can't merely be content with some immediate measures regarding the welcome, the protection and the settlement of hundreds of thousands of people. We must think beyond, in as far as it is true that migration is as old as humanity itself and it is through this that continents, including our own, are populated and continue to exist.

Our gathering today is also an opportunity to celebrate the 65th anniversary of the creation of the International Organisation for Migration that Belgium - through its dynamic permanent representation in Geneva – is pleased to head this year.

The result of a joint initiative between Belgium and the United States in 1951, The IOM (International Organization for Migration) has to its credit not less than 65 years of practical experience in the care, transfer and integration of people looking for resettlement. For this reason exactly, for its knowledge of what motivates migrants to move and of the part they play in contemporary society, it is the partner of choice to accompany us in our thoughts about migration for the bigger and longer-term perspective. So allow me to seize this opportunity to pay tribute to the actions and devotion in many regards, of this exemplary organization. I'd like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the presence amongst us of its general manager, the ambassador Bill Swing. Furthermore, among our international VIPs, I also welcome the presence of Sir Peter Sutherland, Special Representative for Migration, of the General Secretary of United Nations. Migration has always been in all times a continuous element of human activity. Today, now that we have stepped firmly into the 21st century, we know that big migratory movements will continue and will grow for a multitude of reasons such as violent conflicts, poverty, corruption, bad government, social and economic inequality, natural disasters, climate change, overpopulation.

In 2015, according to the latest statistics, the number of international migrants reached 244 million, this being an increase of about 40% in comparison with the year 2000. About half of those migrants are women and a third between the ages of 15 and 34.

Given the magnitude of humanitarian crises, no state alone can provide a solution. For all these people, men, women and children who have no other alternative than to flee their home land to escape war and persecution, international protection is essential.

Others are merely driven by misery or the hope of a better life. That is why only a global approach can respond to a global issue. An asylum and migration policy must rely on a partnership between responsibility and solidarity. Indeed, states must be able to guarantee humane treatment and proper support for migrants but it is also important that states show solidarity. We cannot reasonably lay all the responsibility on states located on the front line.

In facing the migration challenge, it is advisable to think of short terms priorities as well as long terms ones. The policy of withdrawal or the building of walls has never constituted a credible answer in this matter. For the short term, we must deal with the actual humanitarian crisis in accordance with international law and our European values. It is imperative that we tackle those who get rich from the poverty and despair of millions of human beings and we must make every effort to fight against people smugglers and traffickers because this highly lucrative trade (low risk –high profit) brings in its wake new forms of trafficking and exploitation of human beings.

For the middle and long term there cannot be a durable solution without tackling the underlying causes of the migration phenomenon. The EU, of which Belgium is a member, is already employing considerable means to improve the situation in the poorest countries on the planet through its policy of aid for development. In addition, political solutions must be found to allow fleeing populations to live in peace. A sustainable response to the migration issue will automatically depend on the stabilisation of areas in conflict.

On the economic front our governments and public opinion have for too long underestimated the positive impact of migration on the economic growth of our economies. Well-managed migration and concern for respecting international standards regarding international protection must absolutely promote legal, organized ways of access into our countries. It must be agreed upon at all costs that people needing to migrate should not have to resort to the help of smugglers, nor have to undertake a perilous journey, becoming thereby the victims of other human beings. Revision of the Blue Card system by the Commission, educational grants being given to students and mobility plans for qualified workers are all measures we need to support.

There are shared interests among countries of origin, transit points and reception countries. I would now like to highlight the remarkable turning point that the summit of La Valette represents with its new approach to the link between development and migration. This new Euro-African migratory partnership has paved the way to an approach based on dialogue, ownership and a share of the responsibilities in the search for the deep rooted causes of migration. A trust fund of 1.8 billion euro has been agreed upon. Belgium contributes 10 million euros and is the second most important contributor.

As already mentioned, the La Valette summit and more particularly its action plan, contribute towards a new approach to relations between Europe and Africa. Negotiations have often been difficult and complex regarding the stakes between the two continents. From either side of the Mediterranean respective governments have

realised that the well-being of migrants requires a much higher degree of cooperation from leaders than has been the case so far. I wish to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the architect of the summit of La Valette, the ambassador Pierre Vimont. From the first meetings of the Friends of Presidency at Juste Lipse through meetings of Senior Officials in Rabat and Sharm El Sheikh to the final negotiations at La Valette before the summit of Heads of State and government, it is mainly thanks to the persistence, the wisdom and the art of compromise from ambassador Vimont that the action plan of La Valette and the resulting trust fund have come into being.

I would not like end my speech this morning without a call for vigilance. We must be careful to avoid mixing immigration with the scourge of terrorism, particularly with oversimplified discussion. More than ever we must stick by the European values that form the base of our future and our *raison-d'être*.

Having offered my congratulations already on the quality of contributors and stakeholders, I hope that all the topics I have mentioned are dealt with thoroughly and become the base of rich debate and exchange throughout the day. Last but not least, I obviously want to thank Ambassador Vardakis and his team from the bottom of my heart, as well as our Permanent Representation in Geneva for organizing this important event and it will of course be with great pleasure that I will see you again at the end of the day.