

Statement on the occasion of the World Refugee Day, 20 June 2021 (published June 18 2021)

A bridge across the moat for a welcoming Europe, not one of 'Fortresses' and siege

18 June 2021, Brussels – As we mark 20 years of World Refugee Day and the 70th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention, Caritas Europa calls on policy makers to protect the right to asylum and the dignity of people on the move, and to facilitate human mobility instead of building walls.

We are concerned that despite [82.4 million](#) people now living forcibly displaced from their homes worldwide, asylum is under threat in Europe – the place where, war-torn, destroyed, with millions of its own refugees and displaced, these protections were created in the first place, for the survivors of Europe's great war. Yet European countries are increasingly closing access to their territories, including through illegal pushbacks and acute violence towards people seeking protection and a better life in Europe.

The "Balkan Route" is a case in point: people on the move have experienced terrible conditions and human rights violations for years while trying to reach safety in the EU. The [documentary](#) "The Game: Fortress of Europe", produced by the Slovenian national broadcaster with the support of Caritas Slovenia, features shocking and heart-breaking stories of people, including families and children, who have been violently and repeatedly pushed back by police and border forces between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The film documents systematic violence and humiliation to prevent border crossings, including stripping migrants naked and abandoning them in the woods, beatings and torture, dog attacks, destruction and theft, such as of cell phones and money. Thousands of migrants in desperate situations are sleeping rough in abandoned buildings, in the woods or on the streets of Bosnia and Herzegovina. They even risk death from unexploded ordnance, left from the 1990s' conflict from which Bosnia and Herzegovina is still reeling from the consequences.

“Bosnia and Herzegovina does its best to welcome migrants. After all, we know what it is like to flee war. Caritas leads laundry services, brings food, clothes, and provides different services and support so people can keep their dignity and satisfy their basic needs; however, still we need much more. We need solidarity from our European neighbours above all to support and help people coming into the country.

Msgr Tomo Knežević
Director of Caritas Bosnia and Herzegovina

The 'Balkan Route' is not an isolated case unfortunately. Every day, people – including toddlers and babies – die before our eyes in relative indifference while trying to reach Europe. In 2021, more than 800 people have already disappeared in the Mediterranean waters, and more than 13,000 have been intercepted and returned to Libya, where terrible suffering is known to await them. Despite vast evidence on the dramatic situation for migrants in Libya, European countries continue to cooperate with the country to prevent people's arrival in Europe.

more information

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about caritas

Caritas Europa is a network of 49 member organisations in 46 European countries and one of the 7 regions of Caritas Internationalis. Our members assist and provide services to millions of people in need.

Caritas Europa aims at lifting people out of poverty by empowering them and by influencing unjust structures and unfair policies that keep people trapped in positions of disempowerment.

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“ As Pope Francis rightly stresses: the globalisation of indifference must cease, and European countries must respect the rights and dignity of people on the move. Concrete action must replace mere intentions in order to end pushbacks and violence and to respect and uphold the Refugee Convention as well as the values on which the EU is founded

Maria Nyman
Secretary General of Caritas Europa

Global solidarity with refugees and the countries hosting them is also deeply needed. Developed countries only host 15 per cent of the world's refugees, while those countries have the capacity to be more welcoming instead of trying to externalise their asylum responsibilities to third countries. UNHCR identified 1.4 million refugees as particularly vulnerable and in need of resettlement, yet only 22,800 refugees were resettled in 2020. Europe must wake up and step-up resettlement and other admission pathways in the years ahead.

Knowing that migration can positively contribute to Europe's socio-economic development, demographic concerns, and enrich our communities, Caritas Europa calls for policies that facilitate human mobility in a safe and organised manner.

On this World Refugee Day, Caritas Europa urges European policy makers to rethink their indifference, which results in those trying to reach Europe being caught in a lethal 'game,' to instead apply a more human-centred approach, respecting EU values and legal commitments. In this regard, we reiterate the need to protect, promote, welcome and integrate people on the move.

Notes to editor

- Caritas organisations around Europe are promoting the launch of the [documentary](#) 'The Game: Fortress of Europe', which sheds light on the terrible conditions and human rights violations that people on the move experience along the Balkan road and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), while trying to reach safety in the EU. This documentary, financed by the 'Active citizens fund Slovenia', is the fruit of a partnership between Caritas Slovenia and the Slovenian national TV. As a continuation of the Caritas [MIND](#) project on migration and development, Caritas is using the documentary to advocate for more humane and welcoming European migration policies, including expanded safe and regular pathways.
- Numerous investigation and reports have documented the systematic use of pushbacks and violence against migrants at Europe's border. According to an analysis published in [The Guardian](#) on 5 May 2021, based on reports released by UN agencies, combined with a database of incidents collected by NGOs, EU Member States have been accused of using illegal operations to push at least 40,000 asylum seekers back from Europe's borders during the pandemic, applying methods linked to the deaths of more than 2,000 people. Between January and April 2021, civil society organisations in six different countries collected evidence of [2,162 cases of pushbacks](#), including chain pushbacks over multiple countries.
- On June 23, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, Felipe González Morales, will present the [Report](#) on means to address the human rights impact of pushbacks of migrants on land and at sea' to the United Nations Human Rights Council. On 10 June, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatovic, [called on](#) all Council of Europe member states to implement the report's recommendations.
- In a press release on 19 May, UNHCR [warned against 'exporting' asylum](#) and called for responsibility sharing for refugees, not so-called burden shifting. On 28 January 2021, UNHCR [warned that asylum was under attack](#) at Europe's borders, and urged to end pushbacks and violence against refugees.
- [IOM's Missing Migrants Project](#) tracks known migrant deaths in the Mediterranean. [IOM Libya](#) tracks returns from Libya to countries of origin or third countries as well.
- According to the [UNHCR 2020 Global Trends report](#), 82.4 million people had been forced from their homes due to persecution, conflict, and human rights violations. According to [UNHCR Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2021](#), 1.4 million refugees are in need of resettlement in 2021. Only [22,800 refugees](#) were resettled through UNHCR in 2020.

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