# **AWARE Campaign**

# Nicosia, 21 March 2018

# Remarks by Mr. Damtew Dessalegne, UNHCR Representative**C:\Users\dessaled\Desktop\UNHCR-Cyprus_Vertical_blue.png**

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# It is my pleasure to speak again at an “AWARE” event. I had the privilege to attend the launch of the campaign last year. A campaign to raise the awareness of the Cypriot public about who the refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants living in their midst are, why they came here, and how the two sides can learn from each other, accommodate each other and live peacefully together.

# I am particularly pleased that today’s gathering is dedicated to the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which is commemorated every year on 21 March by a decision of the General Assembly of the United Nations. On that day in 1960, police opened fire and brutally murdered 69 anti-apartheid peaceful demonstrators in Sharpeville, South Africa.

# This year’s theme for the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is “**promoting tolerance, inclusion, unity and respect for diversity**.” It is a theme that is of particular importance to my organization – UNHCR - and the people we serve.

# Every day, thousands of men, women and children make one of the most difficult decisions in life - to leave behind all that is dear to them and walk away to an uncertain and often frightening future elsewhere because they have no other choice. They are forced from their homes and countries by conflict, violence and persecution. Many are propelled into long and dangerous journeys, in the hands of smugglers and traffickers. Behind each of these refugees, there is a tragic individual story. A story of loss and suffering. Of family separation. Many of them have seen their homes destroyed, members of their family killed or raped, their communities bombarded.

# Refugees are created by intolerance. It is usually some sort of political, social, religious or ethnic intolerance that forces them to flee their own country for fear of persecution or violations of their human rights. Unfortunately, all too often they are greeted with intolerance in asylum countries as well.

# Intolerance has many faces, and comes in subtle and not so subtle forms. It impacts border control measures, refugee status decisions, reception systems and integration programmes. Unprovoked and lethal attacks against foreign communities including asylum-seekers is one example. More subtly, intolerance takes the form of laws which, for example, denies certain types of refugees the right to enjoy family life or laws which restrict in a significant way the right of asylum-seekers to employment or to an adequate standard of living.

# In many countries, this has gone hand in hand with a widespread re-characterization of asylum-seekers and refugees. There are many distinctions made today. We have illegal asylum-seekers, bogus asylum-seekers, economic asylum-seekers, rejected asylum-seekers, not to mention the pervasive illegal migrant. The vocabulary may be various, chosen to suit the national priorities and mood, but it adds up to a single image – that of a marginal, dishonest and therefore unwelcome person.

# And a new terminology has been in use in Cyprus to explain why refugees come to this beautiful island: “welfare tourism.” There is something quite farcical with the suggestion that these refugees, who in their majority are Syrians fleeing one of the deadliest wars of the 21st century, are coming to Cyprus because of the country’s generous welfare system. Let’s not forget that asylum-seekers who cannot sustain themselves do not receive the Minimum Guaranteed Income (MGI) that Cypriots are entitled to, but a special subsistence support provided in vouchers and equivalent to less than half of MGI allowance.

# It is legitimate for Cyprus to worry about the cost of asylum. But distortion, exaggeration and inflammatory rhetoric are no way to approach an issue that, at root, is about the protection of human rights. It should be remembered that protecting refugees is a legal obligation enshrined in international law, not an act of charity. Cyprus, along with 144 other nations, has signed the 1951 United Nations *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees*. Ensuring fair treatment and reasonable sustenance to needy refugees and asylum-seekers is a legal requirement under the Convention and the humane thing to do. And the burden is relatively small for Cyprus in global comparison. The brunt of the effort is borne by some of the poorest and least equipped developing countries.

# Let me also add that it is easier, it seems, to scapegoat the asylum-seekers than it is to admit that the management of the national asylum system has been at fault. If, for example, the concern is that better reception conditions and integration support would act as a pull factor, the solution is not to lower the standard of treatment but rapid processing of asylum applications. Where applications are decided quickly and the justly refused applicants returned to their home countries promptly, there would be little incentive for non-refugees to leave their country, families, possessions and connections with their local community and come to Cyprus to frivolously apply for asylum.

# Likewise, the best way to minimize reception costs is to allow asylum-seekers to work at the earliest possible stage and in as many sectors as possible based on the economics of demand and supply. The earlier asylum-seekers have access to the labour market, the quicker they become independent of State welfare and lead an autonomous life. At present asylum-seekers are only allowed to work after six months from the time they have submitted their asylum application and then only in certain economic sectors that are at the lower end of the pay scale, e.g. agriculture, forage production, garbage collection, car wash and the like.

# Our efforts globally to combat the intolerant attitudes that threaten the well-being and safety of asylum-seekers and refugees have not been that systematic and forceful, though I recognize that there are quite many such efforts in this country especially at the grass-roots level.

# There is a lot each of us can do more to overcome indifference or fear and to counter irrational suspicions and the clamour for exclusion. It is important to engage with everyone and to demonstrate that refugees and asylum-seekers are not people who are going to take anything away from us.

# To the contrary, they bring, or are eager to acquire, valuable skills to be able to support themselves and their families by hard work. And, if given the chance and if we ensure that proper integration programmes are put in place, each can make a positive contribution to the host society, economically, socially and culturally. Let’s encourage them and support them. In doing so, we also demonstrate that we stand for inclusion, for respect, for tolerance and for diversity.

Thank you.