

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

STATEMENT OF THE FIRST DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER
OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA IVICA DAČIĆ AT
THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY HIGH LEVEL MEETING ON
ADDRESSING LARGE MOVEMENTS OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS, NEW
YORK, 19 SEPTEMBER 2016

Mr. President of the General Assembly,

Mr. Secretary-General,

Your Excellencies,

At the outset, I would like to thank the Presidents of the 70th and 71st sessions of the General Assembly of the United Nations for co-hosting this very important meeting. We agree with the Secretary-General's view that this High Level Meeting presents an excellent opportunity to search for an innovative approach in addressing the refugee and migrant problem. This morning, we adopted with unanimity a Declaration whereby we undertook a political commitment to work together to resolve the complex issue of resettlement and migration in the world.

We are in the midst of a very serious refugee and migrant crisis, the largest such crisis since the end of World War II, which is not subsiding but is, on the contrary, intensifying in terms of scope and magnitude. Nine months after the decision was reached to convene this Meeting, the

situation is even worse and more complex, with no comprehensive solution in sight. We are witnessing massive movements of refugees and migrants who often lose their lives. According to the Secretary-General's report approximately 50,000 of them have died in pursuit of better and safer living conditions elsewhere. Despite serious efforts to address these and other growing challenges, the international community has failed so far to adopt an adequate approach to the resolution of this problem. It is clear that we need to find a solution for the main root-causes of the crisis and to put an end to wars and conflicts that have produced the largest number of refugees. The need for stopping the human catastrophe in Syria and for enabling humanitarian aid is obvious and urgent. In his report, the Secretary-General speaks of rising xenophobia, intolerance and racism and of insufficient funds for tackling this problem. In the 21st century when the world has never been richer, these phenomena are unacceptable.

My country, the Republic of Serbia, is located along one of the major routes for the movement of refugees, the so-called Western Balkans route. Over the past year and a half more than 700,000 refugees and migrants transited through our country. We demonstrated our solidarity and humanity, for which Serbia frequently receives praise from migrants themselves, but also from UN agencies and the international community. We have organized reception centers, accommodation and transport. We have provided food, clothing, healthcare and special care for women, girls and children, as well as for the elderly and sick. It is a great satisfaction and confirmation that we have been doing the right thing when one of the participants from the refugee team at the recent Rio Olympics, a young Syrian swimmer Yusra Mardini said that she would never forget the hospitality given to her and her sister in Serbia, which helped her sustain her life during the couple of days she spent in our country heading for Germany.

Our empathy for refugees and migrants and essential understanding of their suffering and predicament stems from the fact that we have been faced with the problem of refugees and IDPs for more than two decades. Our country is even today home to a total of 250,000 refugees and IDPs living in protracted displacement, the largest number in Europe. We have been making tremendous efforts to find durable, just solutions for refugees from the region and for IDPs on our territory who are in protracted displacement. The reduction in the number of refugees in the territory of the former Yugoslavia was largely the result of their integration in the Republic of Serbia, which involved over 300,000 people. In this way, Serbia bore the largest burden of a durable solution for the refugee problem. Regrettably, out of 200,000 IDPs, only 4,000 of them or 1.9% of the persons expelled 17 years ago from our province of Kosovo and Metohija have returned to their homes. At this rate of return we will not be able to reach the common goal of reducing the number of IDPs by 50% until 2030.

A number of our partners from the European Union have opened their doors and taken in refugees and migrants, while the others have a more restrictive policy. The migrants coming to Serbia arrive from EU countries and strive to reach northern EU members. When northern sections of the route are closed, there is a risk that Serbia becomes a bottleneck for several thousand migrants stranded in Serbia, which is already the case. Currently, there are more than 7,000 migrants and asylum-seekers in Serbia. Most of them intend to continue their journey to the north, as reflected in the comparatively low number of asylum applications in the Republic of Serbia. In coordination with the neighbors along the Western Balkans route we have undertaken measures to prevent irregular migration and suppress the activities of criminal groups. Although the influx of refugees and migrants has somewhat decreased since March of this year, due to the active involvement of criminal groups smuggling migrants, the Western Balkans route is far

from closed. Taking into account the security aspect of the refugee and migrant crisis, as well as the vulnerability of refugees and migrants who often fall prey to criminal groups, we have tightened border controls in order to direct refugee and migrant flows to official border crossing points. We do not want to erect walls and we are ready to show solidarity and bear our share of the burden of the crisis. However, as a country with the problem of protracted displacement for more than twenty years, we do not have a capacity to be a long-term, mass shelter for migrants. Therefore, we urge for a comprehensive European and global solution and equitable burden-sharing. Recognizing the need for global burden-sharing in the provision of assistance to war-affected populations, the Republic of Serbia made a pledge at the London Conference on Syria in February 2016 and donated EUR 500,000 to UNICEF for the education of children in Syria.

Today's adoption of the Declaration has put in place a political framework for addressing issues of refugees and migrants. What is needed now is that our jointly mobilized political will be translated into action. The Republic of Serbia is ready to work together on the implementation of goals set out in the Declaration and on achieving consensus on issues of refugees and migration till 2018.