

## **WELCOME THE STRANGER: WORLD REFUGEE DAY (20/06/09) WITH WEALTH AND POWER COMES RESPONSIBILITY**

On 20 June, World Refugee Day, JRS Europe calls on all EU governments to honour their human rights obligations and create an environment conducive to the integration of refugees and migrants within their borders.

“EU Member States must not forget that the European Convention on Human Rights is not a haphazard agreement to be modified to suit their own national interests”, states Michael Schöpf, Director JRS Europe, “it is an internationally binding treaty that all signatories are required to uphold”.

The recent removal of more than 500 men, women, and children to Libya by Italian authorities marked a watershed for European asylum policies. **Access to territory where vulnerable persons can seek international protection should be the cornerstone upon which any viable asylum system is built.** Denying such basic access sends out a clear message to our brothers and sisters in the developing world – that we, among the richest states in the world, will not welcome or protect those most in need if it encroaches on our own wealth, prosperity, and interests.

European governments must also be reminded that *welcoming* the stranger does not end upon first arrival. Stories of rejected asylum seekers who cannot return to their homeland, struggling in their daily lives and with little prospect for change, continue to come from all corners of the continent. Reports of the widespread detention of asylum seekers in disgraceful living conditions persist in many Member States – **inhuman conditions that constitute a violation of the human rights of detainees who have committed no crime.**

A decade has passed since the Tampere European Council\* and the Amsterdam Treaty. A decade since we embarked on the path towards a Common European Asylum System. In that time, many legal instruments have been adopted, but they are instruments that need to be improved upon.

EU policy-makers now have the opportunity to make the next five years a period that is marked by progress and development. The legacy of the Stockholm Programme\*\* need not be one of authoritarian undertones, but one of social inclusion; minimum standards that safeguard the welfare of the vulnerable, and the proper transposition and protection of EU Directives.

"If we, as European citizens, close our eyes and shut out refugees, we compromise the very principles of justice and solidarity upon which all free societies are built, upon which the European Union is proudly built", says Michael Schöpf.

**Political pronouncements and careless media reportage on migration issues should be recognised for what they are – propaganda and manipulation.** Our views and values should be not be dictated by irrational fear and hatred of the unknown. It will not require a miracle to open our hearts to the suffering of our brothers and sisters and to welcome the stranger seeking refuge among us.

\* In October 1999 the Tampere European Council adopted a comprehensive approach to put into practice the new political framework established by the Treaty of Amsterdam in the area of Justice and Home Affairs. The European Council set ambitious objectives and deadlines for action in all relevant areas, including asylum and immigration, police and justice cooperation and fight against crime .

\*\*The "Stockholm Programme" (2010-2014), the next 5-year plan for Justice and Home Affairs, is expected to be adopted in autumn 2009. An initial proposal will be put forward by the European Commission on which the European Parliament will be consulted. The European Council (27 Prime Ministers meeting) will have the final say as to its content.

### **Note**

The Jesuit Refugee Service Europe is a network of 14 offices working in Europe with and for refugees and other forced migrants. It is part of the global JRS network and a project of the Conference of the Jesuit Provincials in Europe.