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Item 3: General Debate


In the past twenty years, at least 15,000 people have died trying to reach Europe's shores from Africa and the Middle East. Many of those who died were refugees and asylum seekers, women and children, human beings fleeing wars, abject chaos and despair.

The Mediterranean Sea crossing is the world’s most deadly, with 3,500 deaths recorded just last year. In one recent incident, more than 300 people drowned with another 29 dying of hypothermia as their rescuers took them to Lampedusa.

Such tragedy was widely predicted a few months ago when Europe failed to pick up its share of the budget and mission of Italy’s important Mare Nostrum search and rescue operation. Though Mare Nostrum by itself was not a comprehensive response to the increasing crisis in the Mediterranean, Operation Triton, its replacement, was actually launched with a much smaller mandate and resources.

The International Catholic Migration Commission and Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII, within the group of 125 civil society organizations listed on both sides of this statement, ask the European Union and others to urgently effect a real change in migration policies.

The Mediterranean is not only “Mare Nostrum” (our sea); these are “Fratres Nostri”: our brothers and sisters in these boats and dying. So many deaths can be prevented if Europe would continue Italy’s priority to save lives first—i.e., with real search and rescue. Border enforcement approaches that lack this priority neither protect the fundamental human right to life nor respect international and regional treaties that require protection: for those fleeing persecution, serious human rights violations and torture; for those abused by human traffickers or smugglers; and for children.

Alongside efforts at political solutions and development that address root causes of this migration, wider resettlement, labour migration and humanitarian channels are needed so that people fleeing for survival do not have to seek help from human traffickers and smugglers, suffer so much, and die.

States, international agencies and civil society have collaborated on this before: it is time to re-animate cooperation that offered so much relief a generation ago to boat people in Southeast Asia, including robust resettlement and visas for safe, orderly migration within a Comprehensive Plan of Action. It is also time to fix the Dublin Regulation for greater solidarity, humanity and consistency in providing asylum across Europe. Among other things, asylum seekers should no longer be forced back to the country of first access to ask for asylum.