

Speech
by the Federal Minister of the Interior,
Dr Thomas de Maizière, Member of the German Bundestag
at the WCC High-Level Conference
on Migration and the European Refugee Crisis
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Geneva

*“The necessity for cohesive collaboration
in the responses to the refugee crisis
and to migration itself.”*

Check against delivery!
[Ladies and gentlemen,]

I speak to you today as Germany’s Federal Minister of the Interior, as a German politician in Europe, as a European, but also as a Protestant Christian.

Managing the global refugee crisis is not the task of government policy-makers alone. Nor is it only the task of the governments in the European countries receiving refugees.

The extraordinary political, social and humanitarian challenges raised by the refugee crisis clearly show that government, civil society, businesses and also churches all have a shared responsibility.

The refugee crisis asks of us all:

What responsibility do the countries of Europe, especially Germany, have in the world and for the world? What is the responsibility of Europe as a whole? And this crisis asks of the world’s churches: How can they help?

Although I am well aware that you and I cannot provide any final answers to these questions today, I would like to express some thoughts on them.

In the past, the major conflicts and crises in the world did not seem to affect Europe.

That was long ago. For some time now, these conflicts and crises have affected us directly and immediately. Perhaps especially last year.

Syria is one example. But the list of crisis regions and unstable states could go on: Libya, South Sudan, Eritrea ...

Migration is increasing dramatically all over the world, with serious effect for all of Europe. In Germany, the best indicator is the growth in the number of asylum applications: By the end of November, more people had applied for asylum in 2015 than in the three previous years combined. From 2012 to 2014, a total of 407,508 asylum applications were lodged; in 2015 alone, this number was 425,035.

No other country in the world has received as many asylum applications in the past two years as Germany.

The real number of asylum seekers in Germany was even higher: around 1.1 million last year.

These different numbers are due to German administrative procedures. Here, the initial registration of a refugee and the asylum application are two different steps.

Everywhere in Europe, government and society are facing a serious dilemma.

The countries of Europe do not have unlimited resources to take on the seemingly unlimited need and despair in many parts of the world, especially Africa and the Middle East. Europe's capacity to take in and integrate refugees and migrants is limited.

Even though we as Christians would like to help every person in need, we know that we cannot offer unlimited charity – at least in the form of taking in everyone seeking protection here – without sacrificing ourselves and our society.

We are faced with difficult equations between competing values, interests and duties. And we all act within different spheres and levels of responsibility.

We must live with this dilemma and try to make ethical, balanced decisions which are fair both to our citizens and to those in need.

This includes drawing a distinction between victims of political persecution and refugees from war-torn regions on the one hand, and those fleeing poverty on the other.

And it is crucial to quickly process the cases of those who have no claim to protection as refugees in Europe.

Given the enormous numbers of potential migrants in Africa and Asia, I believe it is simply not feasible to accept all those in search for a better life in Europe.

I believe we also need a common European asylum system. But such a system will work only if all member states accept their shared responsibility.

The principle of solidarity is what makes the EU tick, in all dossiers. I find it unthinkable that the biggest political challenge facing the EU to-date - the migration issue - should be one where solidarity is withheld.

Ensuring protection for people who need it is our conviction and part of our identity as Europeans and as a community based on the Christian tradition.

This is why we need shared European solutions for dealing with refugees.

But we all know there is no single answer, no “magic bullet”, that will end the crisis. We need many different measures at various levels.

Given the dimension of the refugee crisis, Germany's options for acting alone are limited. The influx of refugees and migrants to the European Union requires a joint European response.

Right now, many EU member states are simply ignoring the existing European rules and regulations on responsibility and the admission of refugees. That is unacceptable, as all member states will agree.

What solutions are there?

The large and unmanageable influx of refugees into the EU is what started eroding compliance with the rules. So the first step in returning to consistent European refugee policy in the spirit of joint European responsibility is containing the flow of refugees.

One instrument for limiting the uncontrolled flow of refugees into the EU could be a humanitarian admission programme for refugees currently in Turkey.

Simply put, Europe could agree with Turkey to admit certain numbers of refugees, while Turkey agrees to reduce irregular migration to the EU. This would let us manage the situation, fight human smuggling and prevent dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea.

We will have a chance to discuss this in detail on January 22nd, at the German-Turkish government consultations.

We are seeking the EU-wide, temporary humanitarian admission of a certain contingent of refugees.

Another European instrument for containing the uncontrolled influx of refugees is stronger protection for the EU's external borders. This includes preventing irregular secondary migration within the Schengen area, that is: Keeping asylum seekers from travelling around Europe and applying for asylum in different countries.

The second step is working with each other, not against each other, in close and trusting cooperation.

One example is the conference on the Western Balkans last October, which focused on managing the uncontrolled flow of refugees.

At this conference, the heads of state and government of the countries along the Western Balkan route agreed on a plan intended to better control migration along this route, to improve communication and to provide more assistance to the countries concerned, especially with registering and accommodating refugees.

This plan is now being carried out. The countries along this route are now working closely together to achieve the goals agreed on. This reflects the spirit of shared responsibility. We cannot act in splendid isolation.

In dealing with the flows of refugees, we depend on each other; we cannot ask Saint Florian to protect us alone and leave the problem to others. This also applies to limiting migration.

In the coming months we shall have to create the capacity to admit 50,000 refugees in Greece and 50,000 more along the route supply and the necessary funding.

Germany has already provided an additional 500,000 euros to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for humanitarian aid along the transit route. Greece will receive 80 million euros from the EU budget.

The third step: We need rules that work. In my view, this means revising the Common European Asylum System (CEAS).

The Dublin procedure is currently defunct, due to the large numbers of those seeking protection, to differences in the practice of recognizing refugee claims, and to unsatisfactory reception conditions in some member states.

We must improve the EU's asylum system. Germany will play an active role in reforming the Dublin system. If the problem is excessive differences between member states in the way they handle refugees, the solution will be standardizing the process.

Because of the shortcomings of the Common European Asylum System, the Commission must now present its guidelines for reception standards announced in its migration agenda.

The member states must apply equivalent reception standards based on the relevant European rules.

This could also take into account the different economic conditions in the various member states.

The current shortcomings of the Common European Asylum System have serious practical impacts:

At the moment, only a few EU member states, above all Germany, are taking in the great majority of refugees arriving in Europe. Other member states are looking on, ignoring that it is the EU that is confronted with the global migration and that we need to respond both jointly and in the spirit of solidarity.

In recent weeks and months, we have seen what happens when we fail to work together at European level: It was necessary to reintroduce (temporary) border controls within the Schengen area.

Because of the large numbers of people, Germany too had to introduce border control measures in mid-September, which we have since extended.

That would be the opposite of a common European approach. Over the long term, the unchecked entry of people into the EU and refugees' complete freedom of movement within Europe are not compatible with the major achievement of borderless travel within the Schengen area.

Germany's agenda for upcoming talks with our European partners is clear:

- First, we must all agree that refugee policy is a shared European responsibility. There can be no responsibility à la carte. Europe is currently divided over this issue. That must stop.

- Second, I am convinced it will stop only if we succeed in reducing migration. To do so, we must intensify the protection of the EU's external borders, anchored in a strong role for Frontex, the European border protection agency.

Europe must take even more decisive action against human smugglers, on the overland routes as well as across the Mediterranean Sea.

So the European Union made the right decision to expand its ongoing operations in the Mediterranean from rescuing refugees at sea to actively combating human smuggling.

- Third, we must work with each other and not against each other. This applies to how we deal with migrants along the route, and to the centres for identifying, registering and initially receiving refugees and migrants ("hotspots") which will soon go into operation in those member states where the most refugees are trying to enter across the external borders.
- Fourth, we must reform the dysfunctional European asylum system so that obeying the jointly agreed rules is not a matter of national discretion. We have seen the results: If a dysfunctional national asylum system results in few refugees seeking protection in that country, then there is little incentive to improve.

Others have called this a "race to the bottom". Europe cannot afford such a race. I believe that the answer is greater European responsibility in handling asylum and acceptance procedures.

- Fifth, and last: Improving living conditions in their home countries and in crisis regions themselves is still the most effective way to help those in need.

Also, it is crucial to provide refugees with decent options for protection and shelter close to their national home. It is a tragedy that people embark on dangerous journeys of thousands of miles because the international community falls short of providing support in local refugee shelters and camps.

Support provided locally in the regions concerned reaches far more people. Such local support will be a central element of our policy in the coming years. That will take a lot of work, but nothing else is more important.

[Ladies and gentlemen,]

What role can the churches play in all these issues?

Above all an active role. In the past, the churches have always been active in major policy developments.

For example, the churches in Germany have always spoken out and been involved in urgent issues:

- in the peace movement and in the opposition in the German Democratic Republic;
- as the core of an environmental movement and on issues of genetic engineering;
- in the debates over assisted suicide and artificial insemination.

And today, where thousands of people are fleeing poverty and war, many devout Christians are making them feel welcome, by donating their time and money or making other gestures of friendship.

As the backbone of civil society, church congregations are often the ones providing assistance.

And yet even more is needed. The overlap between church and government is greater than ever these days. The two Christian churches cannot afford not to take a political stance. Church is more than religious communication to give life meaning.

The pastor of the Protestant St Nicholas Church in Leipzig, Christian Führer, was known for his support of the Monday demonstrations that helped end the East German regime. As he rightly said,

“Not getting involved is also a highly political act.”

We need shared responses to a global question.

None of us wants the countries of the Middle East to be depopulated. We cannot stand by and watch while Christians who have no hope of survival there flee the region that was the cradle of Christianity.

All of us, and especially the WCC's member churches, should concentrate on finding ways to help more people stay in their home regions and their familiar culture and surroundings.

I am also counting on the efforts of the churches.

[Ladies and gentlemen,]

We will help those who find permanent and legal protection in Germany and Europe become rapidly and successfully integrated.

Integration is a two-way street. For the receiving society, this means demonstrating openness and acceptance of immigrants.

And we expect immigrants to take advantage of opportunities available to them and to work to make Germany their home. This means that immigrants must want to become integrated in the receiving society and must actively work to understand and respect the values of an open society and obey its rules.

Immigrants must respect the system of rights and values in our free and democratic society, regardless of their religion or national origin.

This includes respect for other lifestyles and religions they may find here. In addition to learning the language and finding a job, the fastest track to integration is to get to know and understand each other.

This requires great commitment on the part of civil society. This too can be a special opportunity and task for the churches, which are already intensively involved in looking after refugees.

I would like to see all churches take up this task as an opportunity to live and demonstrate Christian values, especially compassion for others.

In view of the growing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, we must take seriously the public's worries and fears. Migration also has its dark side: It can lead to conflicts, and having to confront the unfamiliar can feel threatening.

We must be realistic about our society's capacity to help the way we would like. Receiving refugees and asylum seekers and meeting our humanitarian obligations entail great burdens, both on site and for society as a whole.

You know that from the local activities of your congregations. Many congregations are helping refugees in their neighbourhoods, so that they do not feel lost or helpless in their new surroundings. I ask you to keep up these efforts and to show that, with compassion, people from cultures unlike ours can also become successfully integrated.

We need this support from the churches especially when problems arise: a lack of integration on the one hand or resistance and violence on the other.

Nothing can justify violence against refugees or attacks on asylum facilities. We – as politicians, as a society and as Christians – will deal decisively with anyone who attacks refugees or asylum facilities.

Public acceptance for rapid and effective protection for victims of political persecution, wars and conflicts is essential for us to continue meeting our humanitarian obligations.

Despite enormous hardships, many in our society are still willing to welcome those who come to us because they truly need protection.

The compassion and willingness of the public and those in authority to help people in need give me the confidence to face the great challenges ahead.

The efforts of the WCC and its member churches send an important and visible signal in this regard.

Thank you for all you are doing.