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High-level Meeting to Address Unsafe Mixed Migration by Sea
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Statement of ILO Deputy Director-General, Gilbert Houngbo

Mr Assistant Secretary-General Winbow, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentleman,

I would first like to thank Mr Secretary-General Sekimizu for hosting this timely meeting, and for reaching out to many of our agencies personally to heighten attention and call for concerted action to address this pressing topic.

Conflicts, disasters, economic crises and lack of decent work are resulting in the growth of complex mixed movements of refugees, migrants and displaced persons and other vulnerable groups. The number of those displaced today, over 55 million, are higher than any time since World War II.

Their desperation and vulnerability is increasingly brought home to us by the tragedies occurring in the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Aden and elsewhere. Just three weeks ago, over 300 migrants were feared drowned in the Mediterranean.

More than 207,000 people risked their lives fleeing instability in Africa and the Middle East in 2014 by crossing the Mediterranean on small, overcrowded, and unseaworthy ships, of which over 3,300 migrants lost their lives compared with an estimated 700 in 2013. Globally, an estimated 4,077 migrants died in 2014, and at least 40,000 since the year 2000.

The urgency of this issue is what led, the ILO, as Chair in 2014 of the Global Migration Group (GMG), which is a platform comprising 17 UN agencies and
the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to dedicate its meeting of Principals last November to this and other crisis-related migration issues.

We discussed the growing diversity in activities and responses by different parts of the international system to these crises which, I’m afraid, too often, are uncoordinated. The Principals agreed that GMG would, as a priority, conduct a stocktaking of all existing initiatives concerning crisis-related migration and protection of migrants at sea, in collaboration with non-GMG institutions such as the IMO, with a view to considering development of a more comprehensive strategy.

The proposal of the Open-Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) contains a number of migration-related targets. In a separate communiqué to the UN Secretary-General, the GMG Principals highlighted the importance of retaining migration in the post-2015 UN development agenda, including to ensure the prevention of causes leading to displacement (natural and man-made) and durable solutions for refugees and displaced persons – a position reiterated by the Secretary-General in his synthesis report on post-2015.

For the ILO, the incidents occurring at sea raise a number of concerns: migrant workers moving in an unsafe and irregular manner, refugees seeking work, and persons who may be trafficked for forced labour.

We are also concerned for the seafarers involved in rescuing migrants, and their conditions of work. The burden of rescuing thousands from drowning at sea each and every month is becoming enormous. Though seafarers are not trained for such large-magnitude rescue operations and their shipping vessels do not always have such additional capacity, they rescue lives because of their humanitarian concern and historic duty. Yet the challenges posed by the tens of thousands needing rescue are compounded by the lack of adequate official response, which has clearly shifted the burden onto seafarers and the shipping industry for these operations. This is neither fair nor sustainable.

In considering how to address this problem, ILO believes that interventions and technical assistance by the international community must be part of a comprehensive approach which is: (1) directed at the whole migration process; (2) seeks to ensure protection of migrants and their rights; and (3)
involves greater cooperation between countries of origin, transit and destination.

The drivers of perilous migration are directly linked to the governance and sustainable development challenges in all the countries concerned (including those dealing with fragility). The ILO has long viewed decent work as an enabler of peace and social justice, since its creation in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I. The promotion of peace and social justice through employment-based recovery and reconstruction is critical.

ILO’s approach is to focus first on **making decent work a reality in origin countries so that migration is a choice and not a necessity**. We are actively helping states recovering from conflict, fragility and disasters, in collaboration with representative workers’ and employers’ organizations – to create better enabling environments that can foster decent work opportunities. The Philippines and Ethiopia are examples of countries where the ILO has been working in response to different potential migration-related crisis. For example, after Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines in November 2013, ILO emergency employment programmes were in place by December in the areas that were hardest hit.

This focus on creating decent work in countries of origin can also help migrants to return and reintegrate into the labour market. For example, in Ethiopia this past year we provided emergency loans for over 160,000 Ethiopian migrant domestic workers who were forcibly returned from Saudi Arabia, and are now working with the Ministry of Labour to facilitate policies and programmes for their reintegration into the labour market.

But even recognizing that much can be done in countries of origin, we know migration is going to be a continued reality for many years to come, especially considering the growing inequality and wealth gaps between origin and destination countries. Demand in **destination countries**, including in Europe, will remain an enormous pull factor for these migrants. **And the barriers that are narrowing regular channels of migration, may drive migrants further underground** – into the informal economy. This can result in segmented or dual labour markets. **None of this is positive for economic and social growth.**
The segmentation of migrants contributes to the high sensitivity of migration and misperceptions that too often inhibit positive public dialogue.

- Xenophobic attitudes and misperception of migrants taking the jobs of national workers only clouds the reality that there is a significant mismatch between jobs and workers, local skills and talent which reduces economic productivity and growth, and may increase social tensions. In a new study, ILO has identified between 25-45 per cent of the labour force in Europe is affected by poor skills matching. Migrants are even more at risk.
- More efficient labour markets could identify real labour shortages and gain public trust to open-channels of migration, including for crisis-affected countries.
- The challenge is that migration policies have tended to be made largely on the basis of security concerns, ignoring or underestimating labour market needs. Turning this around and involving workers and employers will be key in helping to ensure coherence between migration and employment policies.

Integration of migrants in destination countries is also a key element of increased productivity and social cohesion. The ILO is assisting governments in addressing the employment impacts and labour force integration of migrants, refugees or displaced persons in various humanitarian contexts. Effective integration can help to preclude onward movements, including across the sea. For example, we have implemented impact assessments of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, analyzing the employment profile of refugees and the potential impact of their labour market participation on host communities’ livelihoods.

A comprehensive strategy also requires stronger cooperation on governing the recruitment process and eliminating human trafficking for forced labour. The governance challenges attached to the recruitment process start in countries of origin and pervade across the migration journey.

Let me also turn specifically to ILO’s constituents directly affected by movements at sea. The ILO works with the shipping industry and representatives of seafarers to ensure decent working and living conditions on
board large and small vessels, in accordance with international labour standards.

The principal instrument guiding ILO’s interventions at sea is the ILO’s Maritime Labour Convention, 2006, which reflects an international consensus on the minimum requirements for working and living conditions of seafarers, consolidating a range of existing standards. This Convention, therefore, also speaks to the occupational safety and health challenges attached to search and rescue operations, which frequently expose seafarers to traumatic experiences for which they may have not received adequate training and preparation. The inability to disembark rescued and unscheduled passengers in a timely fashion affects seafarers’ living quarters (due to overcrowding) and their provisioning of food. These have implications for their rest hours, nutrition and health.

Another relevant ILO instrument, the Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188) similarly provides a global standard that is relevant to all fishers, whether on large vessels on the high seas or in smaller boats operating in coastal waters close to shore.

In conclusion, ILO views the need to address unsafe mixed migration at sea as one that must involve a more comprehensive approach across the whole migration spectrum – and should incorporate potential interventions in countries of origin (including for migrants who return home), in transit and destination countries, and during the journey (including at sea). Decent work opportunities at home can contribute significantly to reducing the number of migrants who may be enticed to undertake dangerous, live-threatening journeys to realize their dreams.

The ILO stands ready to work with the IMO and its GMG partners to address this most pressing issue. I believe that together, equipped with our distinct yet complementary mandates and tools, we can help affected stakeholders face this increasingly growing challenge.

I wish to thank again the IMO Secretary-General for providing us with the opportunity to move forward on a constructive and collaborative approach to addressing unsafe mixed migration by sea.