Joint Statement on Protection at Sea in the Twenty-First Century

We are deeply concerned about the loss of life, injury, trauma and serious human rights violations affecting migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees traveling by sea. The situation is stretching rescue and reception infrastructure, as well as coast guard and navy resources, and affecting international shipping.

The high frequency of incidents involving death in the Mediterranean has captured international attention. However, these tragedies are not only occurring in the Mediterranean, but in many locations around the globe. Behind the statistics of those rescued or lost at sea are individual stories of human tragedy and human rights violations throughout the migration process.

The time-honored tradition of rescue at sea enshrined in international law is in jeopardy. Important conventions establish the obligation of a ship’s captain to render assistance to people in distress at sea and of States to coordinate and cooperate to deliver those rescued at sea to a place of safety within a reasonable time. These obligations apply regardless of the migration status of the persons in distress at sea.

Much media and public attention has focused on the irregular or criminal nature of this maritime migration. We wish to stress that the people undertaking these journeys are not criminals. Those who exploit their need for protection or hope for a better future, putting lives at risk and violating human rights for profit, are the criminals.

We are convinced that concerted action from the international community is needed to address all aspects of this issue. Closer cooperation between States of origin, transit and destination, and other relevant actors, is critical to reducing loss of life at sea, addressing the drivers of dangerous sea journeys, as well as ensuring that responses by States upon arrival and disembarkation uphold human rights and dignity, and address specific needs for protection of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees. Such cooperation is also critical to identifying, prosecuting and punishing the criminal gangs who are responsible for human rights abuses and for arranging sea transportation in breach of all safety regulations.

Robust action to combat criminal networks is crucial, but tackling migrant smuggling and the associated corruption is only part of the equation. The real root causes of irregular maritime migration, which include lack of access to safe and regular migration channels, must also be rigorously tackled. Without credible alternative options to escape desperation, people will continue to place their lives and those of their families at risk by making unsafe boat journeys.

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