

8 September 2015

**PEN calls on all European Union member states to create common, humane asylum laws and procedures**

**Refugee Crisis - PEN Statement**

In April 2015, moved by the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean, a delegation of PEN members met with the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, to present [a petition](#) signed by over a thousand writers asking European member states to meet their humanitarian obligations to protect refugees through common, humane asylum laws. The proposals of the delegation - led by PEN International president John Ralston Saul, [German PEN](#) president Josef Haslinger and [English PEN](#) director Jo Glanville – were warmly welcomed by Schultz. Since April however, Europe has witnessed the greatest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War as hundreds of thousands of people fleeing persecution and war have risked their lives in an attempt to reach safety and protection. More than 300,000 people have risked their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea so far this year. Over 2,600 didn't survive the dangerous crossing, including three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, whose photo stirred the hearts of the world public and became a symbol for an outpouring of condemnation of Europe to provide protection.

In recent weeks the people of Europe have demonstrated extraordinary solidarity with asylum seeking families as they make their journeys across the continent. Yet European institutions and governments have remained divided and chaotic in their response to this humanitarian crisis.

*'The biggest displacement of people since 1945 is a test of European and democratic values,'* said **John Ralston Saul, PEN International President.**

*'There are moments when civilizations throw away the ethical value of that word, civilization. This has happened before in Europe with the disastrous consequences for humanity. The European Union member states must ensure that this does not happen again.'*

PEN welcomes the leadership of Germany and Austria in signalling their readiness to take more Syrian refugees. On 7 September 2015, Germany and France issued a bilateral proposal calling on the EU to force member countries to take obligatory quotas of refugees and asylum seekers which will be considered by the council of European interior ministers on 14 September. The only way to solve this problem is for all member states of the European Union to implement a common strategy, based on legal responsibility, solidarity and trust.

*'The lack of legal routes to find safety in Europe is at the heart of this problem,' said Josef Haslinger. 'Thousands of refugee parents are risking the lives of their children on unsafe smuggling boats primarily because they have no other choice. European countries – as well as governments in other regions, especially North America and the Gulf States – must make some fundamental changes to allow for larger resettlement and humanitarian admission quotas.'*

PEN's expanding programme of protection work with writers at risk demonstrates the need for expanded visa and sponsorship programmes, scholarships and other ways to enter their territory legally. Furthermore, family reunification must become an accessible option for many more people than is currently the case.

The refugees from civil wars such as those in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan clearly need protection; and European countries can provide it only if they share the task. This is a defining moment for the European Union, and it now has no other choice but to mobilize fully around this crisis.

PEN reiterates our call to European member states:

**We demand that the nations of Europe create common, humane laws of asylum that are not driven by national interests, but instead by a spirit of solidarity and a sense of responsibility. The obligation to provide protection to persecuted people must apply without reservation.**

- Europe should come to the aid of people in desperate straits and provide them with routes of escape. People who are in immediate danger should be able to establish direct contact with the embassies of European nations in their country of origin, so that they can apply for humanitarian visas.
- Refugees should no longer have to risk their lives to come to Europe. If they do seek asylum, they should not be treated like criminals.
- The EU must be ready, with the consent and in support of the concerned governments – mainly Greece and Hungary, but also Italy – to put in place immediate and adequate emergency reception, assistance and registration capacity. The European Commission should mobilise the EU asylum, migration and civil protection agencies and mechanisms for this purpose, including the resources of member states and with the support of UNHCR, IOM and civil society. It is essential that refugee families that disembark in Europe after having lost everything are welcomed into a safe and caring environment.
- Asylum seekers should be given the same basic standards of humane treatment in all EU member states and they must have the same access to a fair asylum process.
- In order to ensure the equal treatment of refugees in all EU countries, the financial costs should be distributed fairly between member states. We propose the creation of a European refugee fund, paid for by member countries according to their means. This fund would ensure that the fate of refugees is independent of regional prejudice or changing attitudes towards immigrants. The European Union must be recognised as a common protective area for refugees.

European border security installations should be recognised as necessary for national security, but should not put the lives of refugees in danger. The deaths of refugees should not be legitimised or tolerated in the name of protecting borders. The protection of human life must have the highest priority.