Europe / Migrants: “Let them die, this is a good deterrence” – UN human rights expert

GENEVA (30 October 2014) – Allowing people to die at Europe’s borders just because of their administrative status is a complete disregard for the value of human life, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, François Crépeau, said today urging the British authorities to reconsider its decision not support search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

The United Kingdom Government announced earlier this week they will not support any future search and rescue operations to prevent migrants and refugees drowning in the Mediterranean, stating that such operations can encourage more people to attempt the dangerous sea crossing to enter Europe.

“Governments that do not support the search and rescue efforts have reduced themselves to the same level as the smugglers,” the human rights expert stressed. “They are preying on the precariousness of the migrants and asylum seekers, robbing them of their dignity and playing with their lives.”

“Migrants are human beings and just like the rest of us they too have rights. They too have the right to live and thrive,” Mr. Crépeau said. “To bank on the rise in the number of dead migrants to act as deterrence for future migrants and asylum seekers is appalling. It’s like saying, let them die because this is a good deterrence.”

The UN estimates that more than 130,000 migrants and asylum seekers have arrived in Europe by sea so far this year, compared with 80,000 last year, and that over 800 people have died in the Mediterranean so far this year. Despite good initiatives like the increase in search and rescue operations which have saved many lives, the emphasis remains on restricting the entry of migrants rather than on creating new legal channels for migration.

“Sealing international borders is impossible, and migrants will continue arriving despite all efforts to stop them, at a terrible cost in lives and suffering,” the Special Rapporteur said reiterating his message on border management, stated in an Open Letter* to the EU published last month.

“If Europe is to witness a significant reduction of human suffering at borders, it must bank not on strict closure, but on regulated openness and mobility; otherwise the number of migrants risking their lives on unseaworthy vessels over perilous sea routes can only increase,” Mr. Crépeau noted.

He cautioned that the absence of regulated open migration channels for much needed low-wage migrants in several economic sectors (agriculture, construction, hospitality, to name a few) drives migration further underground, increases the precariousness of their situation, and entrenches smuggling mafias and exploitative employers, resulting in more deaths at sea and more human rights violations.

“It is paradoxical that, in the name of securing borders, European States are actually losing control over their borders, as mafias will often be ahead of that game. Moreover, the increasing number of persons fleeing from conflict, violence and oppression requires a new and concerted strategic
approach by European States towards asylum seekers,” he said.

The expert stressed the need to bring to justice unscrupulous smugglers for the suffering they inflict on migrants and asylum seekers, but warned that “Europe will find it difficult to defeat resourceful and adaptable mafias unless it destroys their business model, which was created when barriers were erected and which thrives at evading restrictive migration policies of many EU Member States.”

“The search and rescue programmes cannot be the sole responsibility of the frontline countries,” Mr. Crépeau. “I call for more concerted efforts by EU Member States to assist frontline countries such as Italy, Malta, Greece and Spain.”

(*) Check the Open Letter (29 September 2014):

ENDS

François Crépeau (Canada) was appointed Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants in 2011 by the UN Human Rights Council. As Special Rapporteur, he is independent from any government or organization and serves in his individual capacity. Mr. Crépeau is also Full Professor at the Faculty of Law of McGill University, in Montréal, where he holds the Hans and Tamar Oppenheimer Chair in Public International Law. Learn more, log on to:
http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Migration/SRMigrants/Pages/SRMigrantsIndex.aspx

In 2012, the Special Rapporteur undertook a one-year comprehensive study to examine the rights of migrants in the Euro-Mediterranean region, focusing in particular on the management of the external borders of the European Union. Starting with a visit to the EU authorities in Brussels, Mr. Crépeau also visited Turkey, Tunisia, Greece and Italy. (His reports can be found at:

Read the International Convention for the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families: http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CMW.aspx