

“The Humanitarian Response to the Middle East Refugee Crisis”: Statement of
Most Reverend Nicholas DiMarzio, Diocese of Brooklyn, at Side Event to the 2013
High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development

The violence in Syria has contributed to the mass displacement of the civilian population of that country. In the two years since the conflict began, at least two million persons and possibly a far larger number have been forced to flee to surrounding nations in search of safety and another 4.5 million have been displaced internally. The internally displaced are particularly vulnerable, given that they are stuck in the midst of the conflict and at the mercy of combatants on both sides. While international aid organizations remain active in parts of Syria, providing to resources to displaced populations is an immense challenge.

Persons who successfully escape Syria and find shelter in a refugee camp or in a local community confront distinct sets of problems. As the number of refugees grows in the areas surrounding Syria, the ability to provide for their needs has become increasingly difficult. Access to necessities such as food, clothing, and sanitation is limited. Basic services, including health care and educational opportunities for children, are unpredictable and erratic. Meeting the basic needs of refugees demands the active commitment and engagement of the international community.

While protecting all displaced persons is imperative, particularly vulnerable populations require special consideration. A large portion of the refugee flow is made up of women and children, as many of the men remain in Syria to protect their property or participate in the conflict. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that the crisis has led to the flight of more than one million children

from Syria and the internal displacement of an additional two million children. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and other forms of exploitation.

Religious minorities are also at great peril. A Catholic bishop who recently visited the region reported stories of Christians being told to leave Syria upon threat of death, and of reports of a popular theme among rebel groups: “Alawites to their coffins, Christians to Lebanon.” This kind of religious persecution is all too familiar. We have seen similar persecution in Iraq, as religious minorities are driven from their homes, long standing Christian-Muslim and Sunni-Shiite tensions ignite, and countless families lose loved ones and needlessly suffer.

What should the international community do to address these issues? It is imperative that states increase their contributions of humanitarian aid to alleviate the suffering of innocent civilians who have been displaced by the conflict. It is encouraging that the United States has committed nearly \$900 million to help populations affected by the Syrian civil war, but more must be done. UNHCR, which is responsible for responding to crises of this kind, has reported that this year alone it needs nearly \$3 billion dollars to respond to the needs of Syrian refugees. If the civil war in Syria continues, the crisis confronting the international community will only worsen as more people will be displaced from their homes and forced to flee to surrounding countries for protection. Providing more focused, humanitarian support now will help to prevent even worse problems from emerging later.

Furthermore, the refugee flows out of Syria are creating an economic and social burden on host nations, including Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt. Having provided haven to Iraqi refugees in the aftermath of the US invasion, many of these countries are

stretched to their limit. Without continued international support, host nations might eventually refuse to accept further admissions of refugees, thus exacerbating the dire situation even further.

To alleviate some of the pressures confronting these host countries, and in addition to providing continued humanitarian aid, the United States and other countries should consider resettlement for the most vulnerable persons, including women with children, religious minorities, and unaccompanied minors. Particular attention should also be given to Iraqi refugees who have been uprooted once again, particularly those who had already been referred by UNHCR to third countries. The numbers of those resettled must increase exponentially in response to a crisis that UNHCR Commissioner Antonio Guterres has called “the great tragedy of this century.”

Moreover, the U.S. government must re-examine its law regarding terrorism-related bars to admissibility, which would impact many Syrian refugees who may have helped those involved in the fighting, even in emergency or duress situations. The definition of terrorist group in U.S. law is so broad that even a Syrian mother who fed a son who was recruited into the rebel forces could be barred from entry into the United States. Someone who provided rest or food to a combatant at gun point could also be barred. This must change and mitigating circumstances must be taken into account.

While all of these measures are important, the long-term solution to this crisis is a cease-fire and a negotiated peace that will end the conflict between government and rebel forces in Syria. A negotiated peace will help to stabilize the region and establish the preconditions necessary to provide durable solutions to the refugee and related humanitarian crises afflicting the region. The Catholic bishops in the United States are

pleased that an agreement to eliminate Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons has halted U.S. military intervention in the conflict. We urge all parties to seize upon this momentum and enter into broader peace talks that will end the conflict.

Pope Francis has appealed to the world to pray for an end to the Syrian conflict and the human suffering caused by it. The Holy Father prayed for peace on Easter Sunday, when he said "for dear Syria, for its people torn by conflict and for the many refugees who await help and comfort. How much blood has been shed! And how much suffering must there still be before a political solution to the crisis will be found?" We should all strive to make this hope a reality. Thank you.