

Konferanse i Aten 18.4.2016: Statsråd Listhaugs innlegg

Thank you so much for the invitation.

As you all know, Europe experienced a major irregular influx of migrants last year. Many European countries have been affected, but some more than others.

In addition to being affected by the financial crisis and the euro-crisis, Greece is also one of the countries that have been heavily affected by the migration crisis. Most migrants who cross the border into Europe through Greece, seem to view Greece as a transit country, and have other European countries, like Norway, as their preferred country of destination. However, the closing of the borders along the Western Balkans, has made it difficult, if

not impossible, for migrants to travel further into Europe from Greece.

Norway, as well as a few other European countries, mainly other preferred destination countries, was also heavily affected by last year's influx. In Norway, we experienced an extraordinary pressure on registration and reception facilities, and are currently experiencing challenges related to processing the many asylum cases. Last autumn, a "new" route to Europe and Norway was also put into use, from Russia and over the Schengen border "Storskog" up north in Norway. This put an extra toll on the Norwegian asylum system.

The large-scale irregular influx of migrants and asylum seekers last year was not sustainable, neither for Greece nor for Norway.

and other European countries. We have to do our best to prevent similar influxes this year and in the future. We need robust and efficient procedures for registration, both at the Schengen borders, and in the European countries in general. We also need to fight cynical migrant smugglers, who exploit vulnerable people and make huge profits by making people take dangerous journeys, by sea and by land, to an uncertain future in Europe.

However, no country can stand alone in the situation that we are in. We need common solutions and we need to assist those countries that are most heavily affected and in need of support.

Norway has spent a sufficient amount of EEA-grants over the past few years, also before the major influx last year, on projects relating to migration and building up a functioning asylum system

in Greece. During the current period, a total 24,1 million euros of the EEA-grants will be spent on several different projects in Greece, relating to migration.

The EEA-grants give us a unique opportunity to develop the bilateral cooperation between the donor states, like Norway, and Greece. In the present mechanism, the cooperation within the field of migration has been particularly useful. We hope to continue and expand this cooperation in the next financing period, and we are looking forward to discuss this in the coming MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) negotiations.

The joint plan of action agreed between the EU Heads of State or Government and Turkey may also have a preventive effect on migration to Europe in the future, if implemented properly.

A crucial element is the return of all new irregular migrants crossing the sea from Turkey to the Greek islands. As that shall be implemented in line with refugee protection safeguards, case handling and decision making capacity in Greece must be strengthened considerably, both when it comes to first instance case handling and the processing of appeals. The admissibility procedure must be efficient, and returns, relocations or transfer to regular asylum procedure has to be carried out within reasonable time. If not, the EU/Turkey agreement may not have the intended effect and we may soon see a sufficient lack of reception capacity on the Greek islands. I hope that contributions from EU agencies and member states will suffice.

Norway is not a party to the EU Turkey joint plan of action. Still, we may contribute to its implementation.

We offer to resettle Syrian refugees from Turkey. This may contribute to the 1:1 scheme, “paying off” Turkey’s willingness to readmit Syrian nationals from the Greek islands.

We also contribute with personell through Frontex, and have done so for a while. We have contributed with the rescue vessel “Peter Henry von Koss” since July 2015. By 12 April, 3 307 migrants have been rescued by the vessel.

In the beginning of April, 10 officials from the Norwegian police were sent to Chios to assist with returns of migrants from the Greek islands to Turkey. Soon Norway will have a total of 17 officials from the Norwegian police and 3 persons from the Norwegian Society for Sea Rescue to the Norwegian Government working for Frontex in Greece.

Norway has not yet contributed with personell through EASO to the Greek islands, as Norwegian experts are not trained to process cases in accordance with the EU Asylum Procedure Directive. However, we do contribute with five experts on mainland Greece. One of these experts is Mr. Ioannis Tavridis, who is present here today, and who is assisting Greek authorities with the work on EEA-grants. The other four experts work in camps in the north of Greece and with preparing for relocation of asylum seekers to other European countries.

Speaking of relocation, I am glad we have come to an agreement with Greece on relocation of asylum seekers to Norway. We, including the UDI, are currently preparing for the first pledge in May.

Europe needs a better system for handling asylum seekers, and we need a more leveled distribution. We cannot accept that the migrants, supported by smugglers, simply choose in which member state they want to apply. It is also not sustainable if only a few countries take responsibility for most of the asylum seekers, with all the challenges that may come with this.

As most attention is given to the situation on the Greek islands and the follow-up on the EU/Turkey agreement, it is important to also remember the mainland Greece. Almost 50 000 migrants are currently on the mainland Greece, of which 11 000 in the Idomeni area. It is important with efficient asylum procedures, sufficient reception facilities and swift relocation procedures also on the mainland. I believe this is important in order to prevent new routes and secondary movements, to get more migrants in to the

asylum – and relocation procedures and to help reduce the frustration, and maybe even desperation, amongst the migrants.

Norway will continue our support to Greece, and I look forward to continue the bilateral cooperation with Greece.

And with this, I wish you a successful conference,