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Press release

Switzerland must assume its humanitarian responsibility: HEKS/EPER and SFH call for safe and legal access routes for 10,000 refugees

Never before have so many people been forced to flee their country to escape warfare, violence and persecution. Many of them are compelled to attempt the perilous journey to Europe. With its long-standing humanitarian tradition, Switzerland bears special responsibility to offer protection to more refugees than it has up to now. HEKS/EPER, the aid organization of the Swiss Protestant Churches, and the Swiss Refugee Council (SFH) are therefore submitting a joint petition to the Federal Council calling for the creation of legal access routes as well as an increase in refugee quotas to 10,000 people per year.

Of the world's almost 66 million refugees, 84 per cent live in developing countries, mostly in countries neighbouring the crisis regions. But these countries are completely overwhelmed and unable to create even reasonably acceptable living conditions for these people. Many therefore see no other escape than fleeing to Europe via illegal and often extremely perilous routes. In 2016/17 alone, more than 8,000 people tragically drowned while fleeing across the Mediterranean in unseaworthy boats. For the majority of those seeking protection today, however, the journey ends at the sealed, outer borders of the EU. This makes it virtually impossible for them to gain access to an asylum procedure in a European city.

Yet again, this dire situation is particularly dramatic for the weakest – women with small children, unaccompanied minors, the elderly and the sick. In the view of HEKS/EPER Director Peter Merz, this is unacceptable: «Providing protection for refugees is a **humanitarian duty**. Switzerland in particular should be a role model in this regard, as we can still do much more for refugees.»

HEKS/EPER and SFH today therefore launched a joint petition **«for safe and legal escape routes»**. In it they call on the Federal Council to create legal access routes to enable people in need of protection to travel safely and unharmed to Switzerland. At the same time, the refugee quotas should be increased to 10,000 people per year. They can be admitted, for example under the Confederation's **Resettlement Programme**, under which a determination is made of **refugees' need for protection** in the crisis regions themselves and along the refugee routes. Thereafter, those with a proven need for protection are brought directly to Switzerland. SFH Director Miriam Behrens is in no doubt: «Switzerland needs a **decisive resettlement strategy** in which all players

Swiss Interchurch Aid

Headquarters
Seminarstrasse 28
P.O. Box
8042 Zürich

Tel. 044 360 88 00
info@heks.ch
www.heks.ch
PC 80-1115-1





participate. The Federal Council and cantons should be leading the way with long-term commitments and higher quotas. It is the simplest, safest and most economical way of protecting people.

In addition, refugees should be admitted under a **private sponsorship programme** in cooperation with UNHCR and civil society organizations, through an **extended family reunification programme** or under **scholarship programmes** for young students.

Beyond this, HEKS/EPER and SFH are calling for the creation of a more enabling legal environment in which civil society and church initiatives can play a larger role in the accommodation, day-to-day accompaniment and education of refugees in Switzerland. Lastly, the Confederation should step up its support in the future for **integration programmes** run by cantons, NGOs and the private sector.

The petition «for safe and legal refugee routes» is also supported by numerous other civil society organizations.

Further information: www.zuflucht.jetzt

Photo material for download: www.zuflucht.jetzt/bildmaterial

Contact HEKS/EPER: Dieter Wüthrich, Director of Media and Information, Tel. 044 360 88 66,
dieter.wuethrich@heks.ch

Contact SFH: Michael Flückiger, Head of Communications, Tel. 031 370 75 60,
michael.flueckiger@fluechtlingshilfe.ch