

Refugees and the EU: Human dignity is at stake

An open letter to EU citizens and politicians

Between May 22 and 25, 2014, EU citizens will elect new members to the European Parliament.

We are researchers who have come together through an EU-funded COST Action project on ethical issues in disasters (<http://disasterbioethics.eu>). We work in the fields of disaster medicine and ethics. As EU citizens, we believe that the EU response to the global refugee crisis violates human dignity. We urge our fellow EU voters to ensure that the candidates they support have shown clearly their adherence to the visionary and humane principles upon which the European Union was founded.

The number of refugees and internally displaced people in the world is at crisis point. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) states that 23,000 people were forced to leave their homes every day in 2012. Over 45 million forcibly displaced people search for safety. The numbers for 2013 are not available yet, but trends showed the situation deteriorating, with Syria worst hit. Around 40% of its population, 9 million people, half of them children, have been uprooted from their homes.

Refugees around the world flee for their lives. Neighbouring countries are overwhelmed and conditions in refugee camps are horrible. While millions are in need, some EU countries accept a few thousand refugees; many are unwilling to accept any. We sadly conclude that the visionary values of the EU are not being upheld: *“The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights”* (Treaty on European Union).

Instead of trying to fulfil treaty commitments, barbed wire is being erected around our EU borders. Our *“respect for human dignity”* seems only to apply to those inside the fence. People fleeing for their lives are forced to seek dangerous ways to reach EU safe havens. The bodies of drowned refugees wash up on the shores of the Mediterranean. The poet John Donne wrote, “any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” Do we care about people dying in search of safety?

We who write this letter have witnessed and worked in disasters worldwide and do research in the area. We are citizens from fifteen EU countries, doctors, humanitarian workers, and professors representing medicine, ethics, philosophy, social sciences and law. Colleagues from nine countries outside the

EU support our appeal. Most countries have a history of poverty and conflict. We have ancestors who had to leave home or arrived on foreign shores. We know the distress caused by being forced to move. Other parts of the world welcomed our people when they fled. We cannot keep quiet with what we witness today. We have a moral and professional responsibility to speak out.

We are all part of the same humanity as those who find themselves refugees; only circumstances make one a refugee and another a comfortable EU citizen.

We urge the EU to take action, not because of laws and regulations but out of “*respect for human dignity*”. This month we who are EU citizens have the right to vote for the future of our European Union. We urge voters to ensure that the candidates chosen have expressed concern over how refugees are treated at our borders and are ready to actively do something to improve the lives of these men, women and children.

We believe in the principles upon which the EU was founded, but these must be acted upon or they are worthless. We write this letter to encourage action that will prevent our generation from being judged as inhumane and uncaring. We want an EU that proudly boasts that it stood up for “*respect for human dignity*” and did what it could to care for refugees. We want to be part of the choir that sings Beethoven’s ninth symphony, the anthem of the EU, “Alle menschen werden Brüder” [All men will become brothers].

Respectfully submitted

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