

Address of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Justice and Home Affairs of the Republic of Malta, Tonio Borg at the 5+5 Conference of Ministers on Migration

Algiers, Algeria 15-16th September, 2004.

Mr Chairman,

Fellow Minister,

Distinguished guests,

First of all a word of thanks should go to the Government and people of Algeria for hosting this meeting. The issue of migration is one which affects all the countries bordering on the Mediterranean and it was fit and proper that a meeting like the one we are attending, so graciously and efficiently hosted by you Mr Chairman and your government should take place in Algeria.

Is migration a problem, a source of energy, an inevitable human phenomenon, a source of tension? Coming from an island of modest size, which has recently found its proper place as member of the new European

Union, mixed feelings run amongst our people as to this phenomenon; on the one hand, our people in their chequered history have come into contact with different foreign rulers and invaders; they are used to different people coming to our shores for different purposes; up to 2002 however the problem of illegal migration was relatively small. It is only in the past two-three years that the problem has assumed gigantic proportions for a country like ours; most immigrants leaving the North African coast for pastures new in Europe pass through the Central Mediterranean or the Straits of Gibraltar; Malta happens to lie in the geometrical centre of the Mediterranean; our position has exposed us to an influx of part of these irregular migrants who crossing over to Sicily land on the Maltese coast; most of them without any purpose of coming to Malta and this for a variety of reasons, such as fuel shortage, inclement weather, or because they are in distress.

Since 2002 more than have illegally entered Malta; some are repatriated others are granted some kind of status (refugee or humanitarian); most of them are not from North Africa but have entered this region from other sub-Saharan countries mostly Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Chad and Liberia.

So it is not unexpected that public opinion in Malta has become extremely wary of accepting irregular migrants. Government on the other hand, while fulfilling its international and local obligations relating to the protection of refugees and others deserving humanitarian protection cannot afford to

protect as well those who do not deserve protection since local market and other circumstances do not allow it.

With this in mind, the embryonic proposal supported by some EU members, including Italy and Germany whereby centres would open in some North African countries with the scope of filling employment quotas to be determined by each EU country is a step in the right direction. With EU assistance such centres could serve as a legal opening towards employment in Europe without the perils of a dangerous journey across the seas. The idea even though in a very initial stage should serve as an impetus to finding proper solutions to this phenomenon. The danger of ignoring unregulated irregular migration is that of fomenting right wing backlashes amongst public opinion as is happening in some countries, mine included.

The European Union has rejected the fortress mentality; the opening of Schengen eliminating internal orders for all citizens lawfully in the EU, and the directive issued last year ensuring certain important rights to migrants lawfully in EU territory for at least five years ate ample proof of this.

More should be made of the European Refugee Funds and the Argo programme for joint actions in this field. The Declaration which will be presented to us towards the end of this meeting recommends the

commencement of campaigns to raise the awareness of migration as well as the risks and dangers of illegal migration and encourage the enrichment of initiatives to combat illegal migration and trafficking of human beings. In particular Malta welcomes the proposal to involve sub-Saharan countries in the debate on illegal migration and for a combined gathering with these countries in this region.

In this context our aims should be directed towards programmes of assistance; as long as there is too much divergence in wealth between one region and the other, migration will just be a spontaneous unregulated matter; we should therefore be more creative in this respect. Burden sharing is neither a one way courser of action. The burden has to be shared each according to his means and needs. This of course is as easier said than done but unless we use meetings such as the one we are attending to put forward ideas which soften the consequences of unregulated migration, our gatherings will be void of real meaning. What is worse is that such unregulated migration will create even more tension whose effect will be damaging even on regular migrants who are already enjoying certain rights within European continent. This may be considered to be a pessimistic or apocalyptical and I hope that I will be proved wrong; but as things stand today unless this problem is tackled seriously by all those concerned on the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, migration in its present form shall only be a cause of tension not a source of energy.

