

Opening Speech by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Justice and Home Affairs at the Final Conference on the Pilot initiative to foster assisted voluntary return in Malta organised by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) an Activity Funded by the European Refugee Fund held at the Phoenicia Hotel, Monday 18th December 2006

It is a great honour for me to open this conference on the occasion of World Migration Day. It is a particular pleasure to be able to welcome His Excellency Ambassador Brunson Mc Kinley, the Director General of the International Organisation for Migration, and his Chief of Mission in Italy, Mr Peter Schatzer.

Since becoming a member of the IOM three years ago, my country has developed a very close working relationship with the IOM office in Rome. Today's conference marks an important land-mark in the development of our cooperation together, which will be further consolidated later through the formal signature of a cooperation agreement between us. Malta places great value on this kind of practical support and assistance aimed at putting in place a more coherent and effective strategy to address the huge challenges posed by migration.

May I also say what a pleasure it is to note such a broad cross-section of representatives from other international organisations, including of course the European Union, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and speakers from historically our very staunch allies and friends, Italy. The presence of all of you here today is in itself a reflection of our multi-faceted international approach to migration and our philosophy and conviction that no country can hope to address this extraordinary phenomenon alone. Migration today requires a holistic approach, underlining the need for shared responsibilities and new commitments and policy orientations.

We all recognise that migration is a world-wide phenomenon. It is of course a human tragedy on a global scale. Human rights violations, uncertainty and instability brought about by fragile economies, inequitable distribution of wealth and resources, religious extremism, political repression, violent conflicts and natural disasters, as well as, overwhelmingly, a desire to achieve a better economic standard and quality of life, will continue to displace millions from their home.

Migration poses one of the key challenges of the twenty-first century. Its global economic and social repercussions affect the countries from which migrants migrate, the countries to which they migrate and, of course, the migrants themselves. For Malta it is, I dare say, probably the most important social and cultural challenge it has had to confront for a very long time.

Malta itself faced the opportunities and challenges of migration in the middle decades of the last century. We are not unfamiliar with migration. And neither are we unsympathetic to it. We benefited directly from the economic and social advantages that flowed from such emigration – not only in easing unemployment in our own country, but also from the influx of sums of money sent back.

The Maltese diaspora as a result of those two or three decades of emigration is now to be found in countries as far afield as Australia, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and elsewhere, contributing culturally, economically and socially in a positive way to the life of their country of adoption.

We are understandably proud of the contribution we have made to those countries to which our migrants went – legally, not irregularly, and

in a controlled and well managed manner. That is of course the prime difference between then and now.

Today, however, Malta is confronted by the new and often harrowing reality of irregular – sometimes illegal – immigration. The socio-economic impact on this small island placed at the southern-most tip of Europe and at the cross-roads of migratory routes from Africa through the central Mediterranean cannot be ignored or under-estimated by any responsible government. Neither are there any easy answers – any quick fixes.

The Maltese archipelago is only 316 square kilometres in size. Yet its population consists of over 400,000 people, making it the most densely populated country in Europe and one of the most densely populated in the world. The Netherlands, second in the European batting order, is four times less densely populated.

The arrival of just one irregular immigrant into Malta is equivalent relative to Malta's population size to, for example, the arrival of 140 irregular immigrants into Italy, 150 irregular immigrants into the United Kingdom or France, 100 into Spain and 205 into Germany.

Since 2002 almost eight thousand irregular immigrants have landed in Malta. This is the equivalent in almost five years of 800,000 to Spain, 1.1 million to Italy, 1.2 million to the United Kingdom and France, and 1.7 million to Germany. These figures illustrate starkly the formidable challenges facing us.

The unparalleled density of Malta's population, its small size, its hitherto homogenous national make-up and, unlike most of our European partners, its inexperience of a multi-cultural or a multi-racial society, add

a special dimension to the problem which requires the most careful handling.

Time and care are needed to absorb this situation in a sensible manner and to adjust to it. These factors of small size, density of population, limited resources, lack of hinterland (by which I mean that the Canary Islands or Lampedusa, for example, have the rest of Spain or Italy where they can be dispersed. Malta has none of this – once here, they are stuck here). Add to this, inexperience of a multi-cultural or multi-racial society – all these factors influence fundamentally how the government deals with the massive influx of irregular immigrants which have reached our shores these last four or five years and the magnitude of the problems facing us.

What are our policy objectives? How do we deal with the realities raised by domestic concerns? How do we balance the need for humanity and compassion with the genuine worries of our own people? These are the issues that confront government – any government, as current events in every country in Europe have shown.

The government's policy is driven by five over-riding objectives. First, to ensure that the ultimate national interest is safeguarded, including enhanced security measures and border control. Second, that there is fair, just and humane treatment of irregular immigrants. Third, that standard procedures and practices are established for dealing with asylum seekers. Fourth, that we encourage the social inclusion of asylum seekers and the subsequent integration of those eligible for refugee status. And fifth, that the orderly removal of irregular immigrants who are ineligible for refugee or protected humanitarian status is implemented expeditiously, effectively and in a humane manner.

It is against this back-drop that today's most welcome conference should be viewed. It is for this reason that my government welcomes the initiative which the IOM has taken to pilot this imaginative project on assisted voluntary return and to discuss with us during the course of the conference the important lessons learnt.

This initiative underlines our firm belief that a coordinated and unified approach should be adopted internationally which addresses the countries of origin from which irregular immigrants depart, the countries of transit through which they pass (in our case chiefly Libya) and their destination countries. The voluntary return programme should be seen as one of a number of different options available to us for mitigating the problems of irregular immigration. Those not having the right to stay here will be given the opportunity to take up the possibility of voluntary return to their country of origin – safely and in a dignified manner – with the unconditional aim of giving them a new opportunity to start afresh in their home-land in a humane manner and with full respect for their human rights and self-respect. This is repatriation with a human face.

Voluntary return programmes should thus become an integral part of effective migration management alongside strong border management, timely and fair asylum processes and the protection of those deserving of it.

The Voluntary Return Programme should be seen in the context of a host of other initiatives, such as the EU Programme on Migration and Development in Africa, and greater burden-sharing and resettlement initiatives. While still at its inceptions stage – and we recognise that experience in other countries point to a long process in establishing such programmes – the voluntary return programme is a noble

endeavour which deserves to succeed. I am confident that all of you present today will use your ingenuity and experience to help us ensure that it does succeed.

May I wish you all a most successful and productive meeting.

Thank you.