

**SPEECH TO THE PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE ON IMMIGRATION,
INTEGRATION AND CROSS CULTURAL DIALOGUE: THE ROLE OF THE
OSCE**

**“ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION – EFFECTS ON SMALL COUNTRIES – THE CASE
OF MALTA”,**

SATURDAY, 18TH NOVEMBER, 2006

It is a great honour and a pleasure to be invited to talk to you this morning on “Illegal migration – its effects on small countries – the case of Malta.”

Migration is a world-wide phenomenon. It is 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** a desire to achieve a better economic standard and quality of life, will continue to displace millions from their homes.

Many of those who have been displaced will resort to illegal means of gaining access to states in their search for security. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that around a quarter of the world’s 15 million displaced persons are people of African origin who are either seeking to escape persecution or are looking for a better economic future in Europe. The problems touch us all in one way or another, whether it is sub-Saharan Africans trying to enter Europe or Mexicans trying to get into the United States.

They show no signs of abating. On the contrary, they appear to be on the increase.

For Malta, the smallest and most densely populated country in the European Union and one of the most densely and built up in the world – lying at the cross-roads of the Mediterranean between North Africa and southern Europe – irregular immigration poses challenges of the most serious magnitude.

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 and 205 into Germany. Since 2002 seven thousand irregular immigrants have landed in Malta. This is the equivalent over the same period of over one million reaching the United Kingdom or almost 1.5 million entering Germany.

These figures illustrate starkly the striking socio-economic challenges facing Malta as a direct consequence of this tragic and harrowing international phenomenon. It is, of course, a problem which confronts the whole of the European Union in one way or another, and to a greater or lesser extent. It is an issue which will face us all for years to come.

Geography has placed Malta at the southernmost tip of the European union. When it comes to dealing with the heavy northward migration of irregular immigrants from Africa through the central Mediterranean

we are inevitably in the front line. The geographical position is further exacerbated because – unlike virtually every other country in Europe – we have absolutely no hinterland.

The Maltese archipelago is only 316 square kilometres in size. Yet its population consists of over 400, 000 people, making it easily the most densely populated country in Europe. The second highest is the Netherlands at about quarter of our population density. The unparalleled density of Malta's population, its small size, its hitherto homogeneous 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 the new situation in a sensible manner and to adjust to it.

Malta recognises its international and moral responsibilities to provide asylum or protected humanitarian status to those who genuinely need it. It has been generous, just and humane in its response. Indeed, more than half of those irregular immigrants who have landed in Malta have been granted refugee or protected humanitarian status – the highest rate of acceptance in the European union and probably anywhere in the world.

But the potential strains on Malta's social fabric, on the labour market, on its health, employment and social services and on its internal security and public order cannot be gainsaid or under-estimated. The consequences for social and cultural cohesion if the present

pressures are not mitigated are, in our judgement, bleak. While we are prepared to shoulder our share of responsibility, we cannot do so effectively alone. **It should be** - indeed, **we hope** it is - a shared responsibility with the rest of our European Union friends.

I appreciate only too well that these are issues which many of you may also be having to grapple with. While the individual impact of this tragic international phenomenon on each of us may vary slightly according to our own circumstances, we are, I believe, united in our determination that it calls for a concerted response. We cannot on our own hope to deal with the causes and effects of a problem which affects millions in so many different countries and whose social, economic and historical causes are so deep-seated.

Malta's proposal is that a coordinated and unified approach should be adopted which addresses the **countries of origin** from which irregular immigrants **depart**, the countries of **transit through which** they pass and their **destination countries**. This is how the problem can be shared.

We would suggest that a holistic approach embracing five separate elements of the problem is the key to finding solutions to the way ahead. The five elements are broadly defined as follows:

- One.** The return, re-admission and re-integration of irregular immigrants to their countries of origin;

- Two.** The need for improvements to the efficiency and effectiveness of border management in countries of origin and transit countries;
- Three.** The elimination of human smuggling and trafficking;
- Four.** The need for improvements to the management of irregular immigrants by **transit** countries; and
- Five.** The better integration of migrants in destination countries.

While it is easy enough to define broadly these key areas for action, it is more difficult to decide what actions actually need to be taken in detail to produce real remedies on the ground. **And much more difficult still** to have them **implemented**.

But this is what - I would suggest – we now need to focus on urgently. We would like to see a number of specific actions under the five main headings I have just outlined as the necessary first steps in the process of adopting a shared, holistic and integrated approach.

Starting with the **return, re-admission and re-integration** of illegal immigrants to their **countries of origin**, we need actively to adopt the following actions:

- The establishment of a regular and constructive dialogue between countries of origin and destination countries to strengthen cooperation and to identify common solutions. This is of course largely being done on an ad hoc basis, but it needs to be intensified, coordinated and formalised.
- The generous allocation of development aid for the eradication of poverty in countries of origin – the issue which, of course, goes right to the heart of the problem - should, we feel, **be tied** to returns and re-admissions as an incentive to foster cooperation.
- Re-admission agreements with the countries of origin should be drawn up **based on commonly defined criteria**, as well as ensuring that those agreements already in place are made more effective.
- Comprehensive, practical assisted voluntary return and re-integration programmes between destination countries and the countries of origin need to be established.

Next, the vital business of **making improvements** to the efficiency and effectiveness of border management, in both the countries **of origin** and **of transit**. Actions here should include:

- Improvements to the specialization and training of border guards in countries of origin and transit countries
- The provision of specialist training and equipment and the regular exchange of operational information.
- Close maritime and air operational cooperation by destination countries with transit countries to prevent irregular immigration. You will all be aware here of our strong belief that effective EU joint maritime patrols on the territorial waters of Libya would do much to eradicate the scourge of human trafficking and human smuggling through the central Mediterranean from that country.

In this connection, **the need for the strenuous elimination of human smuggling and trafficking** dictates that:

- We must find ways of closer police cooperation between destination countries, transit countries and countries of origin, **to eradicate** these inhumane operations.
- And permanent contacts and liaison need to be established between police forces on organized crime and illegal immigration, including people smuggling and human trafficking. Where such contacts have already been established, they should be broadened and deepened. These are perhaps areas

where the OSCE with its wide security interests might feel able to play an active role.

Next, we must work for **improvements to the management** of irregular immigrants **by transit countries**. These should include:

- A programme of bilateral and multi-lateral projects aimed at promoting good migration management.
- Encouraging adherence by transit countries to the United Nations Convention on Human Rights on the treatment of irregular immigrants and asylum seekers.
- Introducing health checks, health care and other services in transit countries.

The last element of this holistic approach is that we must work for **the better integration of migrants in destination countries**, specifically through:

- The adoption - as is already happening in many cases - of **a long-term sustainable migration management** approach and **the planned integration of migrants** into destination countries.

- And through the establishment of a regular dialogue – as is now increasingly happening – on migration matters between the European Union and the countries of origin and transit countries most affected, and the continuing fostering of close cooperation on migration matters between the European Union and others.

Integration is a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants, as well as by us. A sense of tolerance, understanding, acceptance and respect among our citizens towards irregular immigrants needs actively to be fostered. But it also requires the immigrants themselves to be willing to integrate with our basic European values, to have a knowledge of our history, our language, religion and our institutions. To be prepared to assimilate in a country of equal opportunity on an equal basis and in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. You cannot have integration without cohesion and a willingness by asylum seekers to adapt to the new culture in which they have come to live.

In conclusion, while the problems posed by illegal immigration are not unique to Malta, they are uniquely serious here simply because of our size and geographic position. To underline our belief that **illegal migration can and must be treated** as a shared responsibility, I have tried to set out an approach to the problem embracing its three **component parts**: the countries of origin, the transit countries and the countries of destination. These elements are inseparable. They must be tackled internationally, holistically – in detail. **Specifically**, I

have highlighted those areas where I feel that **detailed action** increasingly needs to be taken in a determined and coordinated manner if constructive solutions are to be implemented.