



**Quaker
Council for
European
Affairs**



The rights of migrants

**INTERVENTION AT THE OSCE HDIM MEETING
Warsaw, Poland • 18 September 2018**

This intervention is on behalf of the Quaker Council for European Affairs, which advocates for peace and human rights in Europe and its institutions on behalf of tens of thousands of Quakers across the continent.

For hundreds of years, Quakers have been at the forefront of efforts to build tolerant, peaceful societies which offer sanctuary to those who need it most. Indeed, Quakers won the 1947 Nobel Peace Prize for this work. The question of migrant rights is therefore of great importance to us, and much of our work in Brussels is currently devoted to this matter.

As such, the Quaker Council for European Affairs regrets the continuing demonisation of migrants and refugees, not to mention the denigration of their fundamental rights, which currently characterises so much of European discourse and policymaking.

An important example of this is the continuing detention of children, simply because of their migration status. Across Europe, hundreds of young people are held in secure facilities – either with or without their parents – which are no place for a child. Here in Poland, almost fifty migrant children are detained as we speak.

Behind barbed wire, a child's capacity for intellectual and social development is severely curtailed, and they are at grave risk of both physical and sexual violence. Exposure to these difficult conditions – which we would not accept even in our prisons – can have life-long emotional consequences, which could be avoided if we cease the needless criminalisation of children who have committed no offence.

Such treatment is not just immoral, but illegal. Indeed, international law is very clear on this matter. The European Court of Human Rights, to which many countries represented here are party, has ruled that states have an obligation to consider the best interests of child migrants, and that the vulnerability of a child takes

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precedence over their immigration status. If these young people are not “vulnerable”, then who is?

Sadly, the inexcusable caging of children is just one example of the creeping securitisation of Europe at the expense of its values, a trend being fuelled by populism and xenophobia. The European Union’s forthcoming budget for the next seven years is a worrying testament to this.

It foresees billions of euros of additional spending for external border controls, many of which will be implemented at the national level with very little scope for oversight or safeguarding, by either civil society or the EU itself. The budget also includes worrying proposals to train and equip armies in Africa, without the need to seek consent from the European Parliament. The EU claims that these measures will reduce instability in Africa, thereby “addressing the root causes of migration.”

But by arming questionable regimes in the name of a quick fix, Europe actually risks compounding the very oppression and violence which drives people to flee their home countries – only for them to be met by a securitised border if and when they survive the journey to Europe’s shores, or for their boats to be simply turned away. And if these refugees do manage to reach a safe haven, their children are at risk of separation and internment.

To those representatives of EU member states present here today, I ask this: how can you reconcile these policies with international refugee conventions, with the founding values of the European Union, with common decency? Migrant rights are human rights, and as such, respect for the rights of migrants today is the litmus test for Europe’s human rights framework tomorrow. If we fail to live up to our principles now, we may all regret it later.

The Quaker Council for European Affairs calls on European governments to have the political and moral courage to end the detention of child migrants, and to humanise Europe’s borders, as a matter of urgency and in the name of human rights.

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I previously made reference to the European Court of Human Rights – a vitally important institution, now more than ever, yet increasingly the target of criticism by those who seek to sow fear and hatred among us. I’d like to finish by addressing these criticisms.

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The fundamental rights standards which the governments of Europe established after the Second World War were a response to some of the most heinous crimes perpetrated in human history. These crimes ended with persecution and genocide on a massive scale, but they began with precisely the fear-mongering and demonisation of the “other” which we witness once again, today, this time targeted against people – against human beings – coming to Europe in search of peace and prosperity.

Anybody with an internet connection and a social media profile will have seen examples of this “hate speech” against migrants and refugees in recent years. I’m not talking about legitimate criticism of globalisation, or current migration policy – rather, dehumanising and violent language, without compassion or nuance, which calls for the sinking of refugee boats or the gassing of migrants.

Here in Europe, these angry, fearful attitudes are nothing new – they have been dusted off time and again in the service of demagogues and dictators. And words such as these have terrible consequences. They are the spark which ignited a thousand pogroms. They are paving stones on the path to Auschwitz. Hatred is the fire in which freedoms are burned, and hatred begins with words.

It is, therefore, a source of great sadness to see such words on the pages of Facebook and Twitter – modern tools of openness and dialogue in the service of tired old prejudice. But it is sadder still to hear these words in the mouths of some of Europe’s politicians – men whose power rests on flags and crosses, on barbed wire and rubber bullets.

These men are not here today, but their representatives are. I will not appeal to their commitment to the ideal of human rights – I know they do not share the sentiment. Instead, I say this: even when it is maintained by fear, power is fleeting, but the judgement of history is eternal. Those who peddle hatred and division are never remembered as great – only as cowardly. So I ask you: how do you wish to be remembered?

The Quaker Council for European Affairs calls on Europe’s policymakers to resist hate speech and fear-mongering towards migrants and refugees, to consider the consequences of their words, and to reflect on the lessons of history.

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*For more information about QCEA
and its work on migration, visit
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