

Rising to the challenge

Dear guests,

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address this meeting. Ólöf Nordal, Minister of the Interior of Iceland, sends her best regards and regrets that she was unable to speak to you today.

I would also like to extend my sincerest gratitude to the regional office of UNHCR in Stockholm for their relentless interest and assistance to Iceland through the complicated work that refugee status determination is.

The title of this project, “Rising to the challenge” is fitting. Europe is facing numbers of asylum seekers and refugees that have not been seen since the end of World War II, and worldwide more than 60 million persons have been forcibly displaced. The need to rise to the challenge has therefore seldom been greater or more compelling.

As we have seen in the past few years the situation can change overnight and the systems that are in place have to be adaptive and creative to meet the ever increasing numbers of applicants. At the waiting line are persons in dire need of help and recognition and the speed and quality of the decision making process is even more important now than ever before.

Close co-operation, both at the international and local level, is extremely important to the organizations concerned. The UNHCR has proven to be not only the important independent scrutinizer of our system but has also provided ideas for improvement. At local level, here in Iceland, the Icelandic Red Cross has been a worthy advocate for the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, helping with placement and assimilation into society. The Red Cross has also been relentless in addressing the darker sides of migration such as xenophobia and intolerance for immigrants.

The co-operation with UNHCR and the Red Cross would be much less proficient if we weren't willing to listen, discuss and act upon the recommendations for improving our system. Therefore an initiative such as this is extremely important for the government and its organizations. The willingness to build a better system, is fundamental for all government organizations. This requires organizations to be open to critique as well as being critical of their own work. The open and honest dialogue between government organizations, NGO's and international organizations is the driving force behind changes for the better.

A system for handling applications for international protection, needs to be both fair and efficient; that is to work both fast and with quality. Those two main principles must go hand in hand, quality may never be sacrificed for speed and efficiency. Therefore it is to be applauded that the focus of this project was not only on efficiency but also, quality and fairness.

I would therefore like to extend my gratitude to the staff of the Directorate of Immigration for having the courage to rise to the challenge and make the necessary changes to improve, though their journey is no-where near the end.

As our world changes so must we adapt to it and face new challenges with the principles, that all government actions are fair and efficient. We must face these challenges with the best interests and needs of refugees and asylum seekers in mind. This is a system for people in need of protection and the objective is to give a helping hand where needed.

Finally, I would like again to express thanks to both UNHCR and the Directorate for their tireless work and encourage them to continue their fruitful dialogue for making our system for international protection a better system, one that I hope may, in the not so distant future, be an example of best practice for others.

Ragnhildur Hjaltadóttir,

Permanent secretary of the Ministry of the Interior