

Ambassador Mamet Op-Ed on World Refugee Day (TELAM - June 20)

June 20 is World Refugee Day. It is a day for us to reflect upon the plight of the millions of people worldwide who have been forced to flee their homes as a result of conflict and persecution. The Syrian conflict is the largest and most complex humanitarian emergency of our time, with more than two-thirds of Syria's pre-war population—17 million people—in need of humanitarian assistance.

Our consciousness is seared with the terrifying images of overloaded boats capsizing and spilling their human cargo into the sea as well as the shocking photo of a lifeless Syrian child washed up on a beach.

As Pope Francis poignantly said in his address before the U.S. Congress last September, “we must not be taken aback by their numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation.”

I would like to share some of the initiatives our two great nations, who share a common heritage as countries built by immigrants, are undertaking to respond to this humanitarian crisis.

Last month Foreign Minister Susana Malcorra supervised the deployment of Argentina's “White Helmets” Commission to provide humanitarian relief to Syrian refugees encamped in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.

For over 20 years Argentina's White Helmets, a multi-disciplinary team of experts and humanitarian specialists, civil servants and volunteers, have provided relief to refugees and victims of natural disasters.

In Lebanon, the White Helmets provided tenting for families, sanitation assistance, medical aid station, supplies, and “train-the-trainer” instruction to refugee volunteers. Experts in social services conducted assessments to help reduce gender violence and provide traumatic stress counselling. We also commend the Argentine government for accepting Syrian refugees to resettle here in Argentina.

In the United States, President Obama is galvanizing significant new global commitments that will culminate in a high-level summit on refugees he will host at the United Nations General Assembly in September.

The United States is seeking new and significant humanitarian funding commitments, increased opportunities for refugee resettlement and admission, and more opportunities for refugees to find legal employment and education opportunities around the world.

It is a comprehensive effort not just for the millions of Syrian refugees, but for millions of others fleeing intense strife and persecution in all places. In addition to seeking the commitments from governments, we will also continue to foster partnerships with business, education, and religious communities to generate substantial and innovative contributions toward our goals and encourage partner nations to do the same.

Recently, Secretary of State John Kerry announced our commitment of USD 601 million in additional life-saving humanitarian assistance for those affected by the war in Syria.

This new funding brings U.S. humanitarian assistance in response to this conflict to more than USD 5.1 billion since the start of the crisis.

Important efforts such as these are only a start. The humanitarian crises around the world have made painfully clear that all nations must do more.

We must put aside our prejudices and exercise compassion for those who make a long and perilous journey to escape violence and find a better life for themselves and their children. We must not succumb to fear. President Obama said “our nations can welcome refugees who are desperately seeking safety and ensure our own security. We can and must do both.”

The United States and Argentina are nations that were founded by immigrants searching for a better life, for the freedom to worship freely, and to live in a democracy with tolerance. Therefore we are especially suited to be leaders in the effort to alleviate the suffering of Syrian refugees.

On this World Refugee Day, let us recall our common humanity, and open our hearts to their call for help.