

It's time to take a stand to support refugees

Cork Evening Echo
Friday June 17 2016

Jennifer DeWan, Campaign and Communications Manager for Nasc Ireland, says World Refugee Day next Monday is a chance to appreciate the plight of millions.

World Refugee Day falls annually on 20th June. Each year, we acknowledge the courage, strength and determination of people who are forced to flee their homeland under threat of persecution, conflict and violence.

This year, in recognition of the unprecedented numbers of people on the move in search of safety, Nasc are hosting a silent solidarity walk through the streets of Cork City on Sunday 19th June 2016. The walk will begin at 3PM at the gates of Bishop Lucey Park on Grand Parade.

All are welcome to attend and show their support for displaced peoples around the globe. We are asking participants to bring an old pair of shoes to carry with them on the walk, to symbolise the millions of people on the move worldwide.

At the end of the walk, we will lay the shoes down in front of the gates of Bishop Lucey Park and have a moment of silence, to remember the thousands who have died – hundreds of them children – trying to reach safety in Europe.

Members of the Syrian community who live in Ireland have agreed to speak on the day, about their journeys to Ireland and their efforts to bring loved ones to safety. These are incredibly difficult, personal and tragic stories and we commend the courage of those willing to speak out, sometimes at risk to themselves, to seek the support that is their fundamental human right.

It is an opportunity, even if only for an hour, to begin to imagine what it must be like to be forced to leave your home, and everything you have ever known, and flee for safety. Of course we who live in peace cannot ever really know what it must be like to experience that desperation, to have to make choices about what – or maybe even who – you may have to leave behind.

But if we use our imaginations and increase our empathy, if we remember our own histories and the stories of our ancestors, we will certainly come to realise that there is considerably more we could be doing to support refugees, asylum seekers and migrants who have given up everything in search of a safer and better life for themselves and their families.

The reality of crisis

There are 161 nations worldwide, and there is currently some form of conflict in 155 of those nations. Over 60 million men, women and children are currently 'displaced' worldwide. That is the equivalent of 1 in every 122 human beings on the planet. It is the most significant humanitarian crisis we have

witnessed since the end of World War II – the war that brought about our international agreements to protect human rights and provide protection for refugees fleeing persecution and violence.

Over a million people have come to Europe seeking safety in the last few years, and thousands of those have died trying to make that journey. Almost 3,000 have died since the beginning of 2016 alone. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, on average, two children have drowned every day crossing the Mediterranean since September 2015.

Two children, every day. Risking death to flee death – a horrific choice.

But those who have come to Europe are only the tip of the iceberg. Of the 4.6 million Syrian refugees who have fled the conflict there, less than 10% are now in Europe. The majority are forced to wait in refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq for years on end while Europe handpicks a few at a time for resettlement.

It is difficult to wrap our heads around the scale of this global crisis. In the case of Syria alone, it would be as if the entire population of Ireland were suddenly and catastrophically forced to leave the country and seek shelter in the UK.

And then imagine that the citizens of the UK didn't want us there. Instead they force us to live in makeshift tents while they devise a plan to ship us *en masse* to France. When we arrive in France, the French close their borders and we are stuck behind a barbed wire fence in Calais. We cannot go forward and we cannot go back. Our children are starving and the clothes are falling off our backs. We plead to Europe to recognise our humanity, our right to protection, but our pleas fall on deaf ears. Europe says it has no place for us: 'we have our own problems', 'go back to where you came from'.

But there is nothing left of the Ireland we knew.

This is the stark reality of the crisis in our midst and the European and Irish response to date. We cannot turn our backs on people seeking safety. 100 years on from our nation's first violent steps to freedom, are we living up to the ideals enshrined in the Proclamation of 1916?

Above and beyond our moral and ethical obligations to help our fellow human beings, we simply do not have the right to refuse protection. It is every human being's fundamental right – a right we recognised and agreed to protect when we signed up to the Geneva Convention in 1951.

Nasc's 'Walk In Their Shoes' event on Sunday will not change this stark reality, but it can serve as a wake up call to the Irish government that Irish people know we must be doing more to support those seeking safety and protection. Please join us in supporting those on the move, remembering those who have died, and calling for more action for those who unfortunately have been left behind.

For more information about the event, visit Nasc's website at www.nascireland.org or email events@nascireland.org.