

## **Embassies and Consulates Gathering Voluntary Return & Reintegration from Belgium December 2, 2016**

### **Speech Jean-Pierre Luxen General Director of Fedasil**

Dames en Heren,

Mesdames et Messieurs,

Ladies and Gentlemen, representatives of Embassies and Consulates,

Ladies and Gentlemen, representatives of organisations involved in the voluntary return programme – I would like to mention IOM, which, this year, is celebrating its 65th anniversary, and which is the joint organiser of this event, Caritas, our partner in the field, and the Immigration Office.

Dear Fedasil colleagues,

It is always a pleasure to welcome you to this event, which is celebrating its 4<sup>th</sup> edition.

Mrs Lies Verlinden represents here the Secretary of State, Mr Francken, who wanted to speak to you today in view of the importance which he accords to voluntary returns.

I will then hand over to Mrs Laura Palatini, the new representative of IOM, who will present the more general framework of IOM's activities and the voluntary return programme in particular.

As for me, there will be no slides, no PowerPoint, but simply a reminder of the context in which we have been working since our last meeting in December 2015.

In December 2015, we were in the throes of a major crisis in demand for reception throughout Europe, therefore, also in Belgium. Political intentions, legal frameworks, but also our ethical wishes and concerns for the welfare of others meant that our common goal was to "not leave anyone on the street". This challenge was met despite the "massive" numbers of people seeking protection. Massive and rapid arrivals. Within 6 months, we had to and succeeded in opening 6,000 reception places.



In December 2016, the tendency was radically reversed (temporarily) following the closure of the gateways to Europe, including the Balkan route, and Europe's agreements with Turkey.

We now have to reduce the reception capacity and close thousands of places. This is also a challenge.

However, we have continued to implement the voluntary return programme with the same level of attention as in the past – before the crisis – and without interfering with this programme, which continues to be of prime importance for the Belgian government and for Fedasil.

In 2015, there were 4,000 voluntary returns and, in 2016, about 4,200 voluntary returns to 50 different countries (Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan, West Africa), including disadvantaged groups returning to Eastern Europe. These returns were based on two realities:

- Many asylum seekers have changed the way they think;
- People staying illegally can contact us via the information desks set up in the provinces (a major objective of this programme).

At the risk of repeating myself, I would like to insist on the voluntary character of the return for people who have opted freely to make this return and build this journey.

Each organisation plays its role, here in Belgium and, of course, also in the country of the return and reintegration.

Once again, I would like to thank IOM and Caritas.

This programme is of prime importance for the Belgian government, represented by Mr Francken, and, in 2016, it benefited from additional funding – sadly I have to be brief and, therefore, can only provide you with the main aspects of this:

- Increase in the number of information sessions;
- Increase in the links with authorities, embassies and consulates;
- Increase in the programme's accessibility via a widening of the NGO network in Belgium and via the opening of five voluntary return desks in cities (Antwerp, Ghent, Brussels, Liège and, recently, Charleroi);
- Also, the creation of a toll-free telephone number;
- The voluntary return team which has tripled its numbers;
- The creation of a website for voluntary return.

In particular, I would like to thank the European Commission, which, via funding from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), provided us with the financial resources needed to develop this ambitious programme.



I will conclude by reading you an extract from the mission report of one of our colleagues who is working in Mongolia: "The success of the return programme is, above all, due to women who are the main players of it. This is the case all over the world because women are brave, intelligent and ambitious." I personally support this analysis.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you an enjoyable afternoon. I would also like to take the opportunity to offer you my very best wishes for the festive season. The Secretary of State and Fedasil will present you their wishes officially on 24 January 2017 at the New Year reception to which, naturally, you are all invited.

Jean-Pierre Luxen,

General Director of Fedasil

