



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

**Speech Laura Palatini
IOM Chief of Mission for Belgium and Luxembourg**

Your Excellency's,
Monsieur le Directeur Général,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

I am honoured to be present today in my position of new Chief of Mission of the International Organization for Migration Office (IOM) for Belgium and Luxembourg.

IOM counts nowadays 165 Member States (out of which 28 are represented today). 10,000 colleagues work for the Organization in some 500 duty stations on all five continents.

Some of you might be aware that on the 19th of September, IOM signed an historic agreement in New York bringing the leading global migration agency – IOM – into the United Nations. For the very first time in 71 years, the United Nations now has a “UN Migration Agency.” This is a singular honor for our Organization and for migrants in particular but also for IOM Member States.

Let me now reflect on some **recent migration-related trends**.

- We live in a world on the move – there have never been so many people in movement: today in the world, one in every seven of us is a migrant.
- Driving migration are of course many different factors like demography; man-made or natural disasters; and climate change threatens yet a further 75 million living just 1 m above sea level.
- We're facing, also, a series of unprecedented simultaneous, complex and protracted crises resulting with humanitarian emergencies in an "arc of instability," that stretches from Western Africa to the Himalayas.
- Widespread, growing anti-migrant sentiment and policies have led to the cruel irony that those fleeing terrorism and fleeing armed conflict are themselves now accused of terrorism and criminality in the public mind of many.
- IOM is convinced that migration is **inevitable** in this century owing to the drivers that I mentioned; **necessary** if our economies and societies are to flourish; and **highly desirable** if we have responsible and humane migration policies.

To do this, we have to change the **toxic public narrative on migration**, and learn to manage inexorably growing ethnic, cultural, social and religious diversity.

IOM is particularly concerned about the persistent racist and xenophobic discourse in Europe and world-wide concerning migration, migrants and refugees, and incidents targeting immigrants and others.

A welcoming approach and integration measures are crucial to effective and comprehensive migration-management. Migrants and refugees **can** and **will** contribute positively if given a fair chance.

In this light, I invite you all to have a look at the #Iamamigrant campaign aiming at changing the lens through which people view migration, by humanizing migrants' stories and showing how much migrants and migration, as a whole, can contribute positively on the long-term to the socio-economic development of our societies.

Sustained diplomatic and political efforts will be necessary to strengthen cooperation with third countries on all areas of migration governance. We encourage a forward-looking and longer-term approach to EU migration policy and programmatic response, based on enhanced monitoring and regular assessment of the different aspects of migration flows. A renewed EU development policy is needed to ensure that efforts towards enforcing effective policies on return and readmission do not undermine efforts to address underlying drivers of irregular migration or detract from the importance of broader migration governance objectives.

Much greater emphasis should be placed on **improving legal avenues** to the EU to ensure credible options for safe and regular migration. This should include humanitarian protection measures such as resettlement, as well as improved labour migration avenues and schemes for workers at all skill levels. Opening more legal channels to Europe will contribute to reducing the chances that migrants and refugees will resort to

attempting dangerous sea and border crossings, and will as such undermine the business model of migrant smugglers.

Furthermore, EU Member States should be encouraged to make full use of current family reunification measures and to avoid implementing stricter interpretations of such legislation.

This leads me to present a few **latest Assisted Voluntary Return trends from Europe and Belgium** in particular.

In 2015, IOM assisted the voluntary return of **55,851** migrants from countries in the EEA region. By comparison, from January to October 2016, IOM had already assisted **71,327** voluntary returns from the same region, which indicates a *significant increase over last year*.

IOM truly believes that AVRR is a more sustainable and humane measure geared towards giving returnees a new start and contributing to origin countries' economic stability and rehabilitation.

IOM supports informed decisions by migrants who approach IOM for voluntary return assistance by fully informing them about the options available and the assistance to be provided.

IOM voluntary returns and reintegration programmes should be part of a more comprehensive response needed, going hand in hand in complementary fashion with development aid and a wider range of tools.

The Belgian AVRR programme is known as an historical programme in Europe since its inception in 1984, after the first AVR programme launched in Germany in 1979. Belgium is looked at as a pioneer country in the field of AVR and I take this opportunity to thank the Government of Belgium (as one of the IOM founder States in 1951), Fedasil and all partners in Belgium, among which diplomatic representations, for their **outstanding** support over the past 32 years.

Since 2006 (inclusion of the structural reintegration approach in Belgium), IOM has been able to provide additional reintegration support to 8689 returnees in 102 different countries. 54 monitoring missions have taken place with Fedasil in 31 different countries of origin.

Since 2015, IOM Belgium is putting in place several new reintegration initiatives including country specific (Congo/Morocco/Afghanistan) and job placement projects (Armenia, Georgia, Russian Federation, Kazakhstan). Over the past few years, IOM Belgium has enhanced its assistance towards vulnerable cases by offering tailor-made reintegration projects to persons having particular needs (unaccompanied minors, medical cases, victims of trafficking, etc.).

Within this framework, IOM reiterates its full commitment to pursue the **excellent collaboration with Embassies and Consulates**. For many migrants, their return would not be possible without your intervention and collaboration in obtaining valid documents to travel back home. I thank you for your support!

I would like to end by inviting you all to the **‘Global Migration Film Festival’** screening in Brussels on 16 December which IOM is organizing with the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and in partnership with Myria and Unia, in celebration of the International Migrants’ Day on 18 December and the 65th Anniversary of IOM’s assistance towards migrants on 5 December.

The festival is an opportunity for the world to celebrate the diversity and unique contributions of migrants to the communities and countries where they live. The Film Festival is part of the UN's “Together” global campaign to promote diversity and inclusion.

Let me conclude by thanking Fedasil for hosting this event today. Thank you all for your attention. I wish you fruitful exchanges during this afternoon reception.