

MALTA'S PARTICIPATION AT THE COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE IN GUERNSEY

A parliamentary delegation led by the Hon. David Agius and comprising the Hon. Chris Agius and the Hon. Roderick Galdes, has returned to Malta from Guernsey where they attended the 40th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference of the British Islands and Mediterranean Region.

The Conference brought together delegates from Alderney, Cyprus, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Guernsey, Isle of Man, Jersey, Malta, Northern Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales, Canada, India and Jamaica.

The main theme of the Conference was "The International Economic Downturn, its Impacts and the Responsibilities of Parliamentarians".

The Hon. David Agius chaired the workshop entitled "The Impact of the Crisis on Developing Countries and the Repercussions for the West", whilst the Hon. Chris Agius reported on Malta's activities for the past year during the Annual General Meeting of the Region.

Also during the Annual General Meeting the following Communiqué was presented by Malta and agreed to by all the delegates:

"ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CURRENT ECONOMIC DOWNTURN"

1. We, the 65 Parliamentarians representing 16 Parliaments of the Commonwealth, from the CPA British Islands and the Mediterranean Region, Canada, India and Jamaica met in St Peter Port, Guernsey, Channel Islands between the 15-19 June 2009 to discuss the international economic downturn, its impacts and the responsibilities of Parliamentarians during which time colleagues from Malta drew the attention of the Conference to illegal immigration in the context of the current economic downturn.

2. We recognise that during the global economic downturn; the impact of illegal immigration is more severe as more immigrants attempt to enter Europe illegally; the resources of countries to cope with the situation become more limited; unemployment in the destination countries rises; there is need for stronger and more coordinated approaches to illegal immigration.

3. We note and deplore that thousands of people embark on illegal and extremely dangerous journeys in their attempt to reach Europe from southern Mediterranean countries; hundreds lose their lives in the course of the treacherous sea-crossings from North Africa; others perish earlier on the illegal migration routes, especially during the journey across the Sahara; criminal networks organize illegal immigration to Europe and exploit and abuse migrants.

4. We recognise that the human tragedy of illegal immigration should be stopped as soon as possible by measures such as:

- Better and timelier information-sharing amongst countries of origin, transit and destination regarding the risks and dangers involved in illegal journeys across Africa towards Europe
- Raising awareness of the real circumstances and consequences of entering Europe illegally
- Countering more effectively the incorrect and misleading information circulated by smuggling and trafficking rings to lure unwary immigrants
- Improving work to combat organized criminal smuggling and trafficking networks
- The development and dissemination in countries of origin of information regarding legal entry to Europe in order to offer suitable alternatives to illegal immigration, for we believe that well-managed legal immigration:
 - o Contributes to development in home countries
 - o Prevents brain-drain
 - o Addresses labour-force gaps in origin countries
 - o Improves immigrants' own competencies

5. We note that managed immigration will be undermined as long as illegal immigration subsists and we understand that the presence of illegal immigrants may constitute a threat to a country's public order whilst at the same time rendering those immigrants vulnerable to continued exploitation and abuse in the illegal employment market.

6. We encourage parliamentary colleagues to hold their Executives to account in adhering to their international obligations to readmit their nationals and to respect readmission obligations undertaken within the context of international agreements, such as the Cotonou Agreement to which the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific States are parties for we believe that effective readmission arrangements would facilitate the return of illegal immigrants, thereby avoiding prolonging their illegal status. We consider that such action also would convey the message that illegal immigration is not a viable option and would help deter prospective illegal immigrants.

7. Furthermore, we consider that voluntary return should be given preference over forced return for we note that assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes also contribute to the development of the return country.

8. We encourage the countries of origin, transit and destination to work together to organize better assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes and take into account the economic status and needs of the country of origin.

9. We acknowledge that illegal immigration across the Mediterranean results in disproportionate pressures on Malta and Cyprus due to their geographic position and demographic circumstances, placing considerable strain on the financial, human and physical resources of those two countries and we support the need for enhanced co-operation in tackling illegal immigration especially during the current economic downturn.

10. In conclusion, we urge Parliamentarians to debate and scrutinise in our legislative bodies to encourage countries of origin and transit to: explore further legal immigration alternatives; secure the respect for existing readmission obligations while also pursuing the conclusion of further readmission agreements where these are still lacking; ensure that the needs of local economies and financial industries are taken into account.

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