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Our ref:
25 November 2015

Dear Christina,

Thank you for your letter of 15 October, following the European and External Relations Committee's roundtable evidence session on the refugee crisis in the European Union. I apologise for the delay in replying.

You raised a number of highly pertinent issues in your letter, which I will respond to in the order you raised them.

I agree with the Committee that many refugees arriving in Europe are facing appalling conditions and are in desperate need of support. I saw this for myself at the beginning of October, when I visited Lesbos to see the relief operation at first hand and meet British Red Cross and Mercy Corps staff and others helping to support refugees there. The Scottish Government was pleased to be able to provide £300,000 to support humanitarian activity in southern Europe, but we recognise that far more needs to be done by the international community.

The Scottish Government welcomed the UK Government's decision to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees from countries neighbouring Syria by 2020. However, Scottish Ministers have repeatedly urged UK Government Ministers to take more immediate action to help those refugees who have already reached Europe. We have pressed the UK Government to do more to increase the number of refugees it will take from amongst those fleeing to Europe, as well as those in countries neighbouring Syria. We believe that the refugee crisis requires multilateral and collective action by the EU. In the wake of the attacks in Paris, it is more important than ever that the UK Government participates fully in a co-ordinated European response to the humanitarian crisis in Europe.

As the Committee will be aware, asylum is a matter reserved to the UK Government. Scottish Ministers have pressed the UK Government to go further than the 20,000 refugees it has already committed to take. We have made it clear that Scotland remains happy to take, as a minimum, it's fair and proportionate share of the total number of Syrian refugees that come to the UK. As the Committee will know, Syrian refugees are already arriving in Scotland, and we expect to receive around one third of the 1,000 due to arrive in the UK before Christmas.

The response from local authorities in Scotland has been tremendous. Both the Scottish Government and COSLA are conscious that many of the local authorities taking refugees under the Syrian Refugee Programme are doing so for the first time. COSLA has undertaken a considerable amount of preparatory work to share best practice, learning and experience among local authorities, and I have been extremely impressed with the preparations that have been put in place by local authorities. This work will continue over the coming weeks and months, as more local authorities take part in the resettlement programme.

We will continue to monitor the process of refugee resettlement, along with COSLA, the Home Office and the Refugee Taskforce, so that we can learn from our early experiences and put in place any improvements that are needed.

I hope that this information is helpful and note the Committee's continued interest in developments.

Best Wishes,

H. Yousof

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