

Welcoming Notes for Deputy Mayor Fawzai Peer, at UNHCR Refugee Day

20 June 2017, Durban Playhouse

Programme Director,

All protocol observed,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Sanibonani,

Today is the World Refugee Day, we commemorate the strength, courage and perseverance of millions of refugees. This year, World Refugee Day also marks a key moment for the public to show support for families forced to flee.

In a world where violence forces thousands of families to flee for their lives each day, the time is now to show that the global public stands with refugees.

To do this, the UN Refugee Agency launched the #WithRefugees petition in June 2016 to send a message to governments that they must work together and do their fair share for refugees.

South Africa remains one of the top ten countries to which individuals seeking asylum.

At its height around 2008, we were receiving up to one hundred and fifty thousand (150 000) applications per annum. This number has significantly decreased and stabilised around sixty thousand in recent years. However, this influx is still high and remains a challenge given the economic realities that South Africa faces as a developing nation.

It happens as we are still trying hard to overcome the legacy of apartheid and provide an equitable society to South African citizens especially black people who were historically and systematically subjugated.

Most asylum applications are received from nationals within the African continent notably from Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Burundi and Ghana.

At the same time, there has been an increase in applications from the Asian sub-continent especially from Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Our statistics indicate that the profile of asylum seekers remain largely males between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five years old. The Department of Home Affairs rejects close to ninety-five percent of the asylum applications because they are not genuine.

Most asylum seekers are actually economic migrants. When they get asylum permits they use these to work, study and operate businesses.

They know that they would not qualify for corresponding visas under the Immigration Act.

The Refugees Act of 1998 is also currently under review in Parliament and set to be amended. These amendments seek to primarily stop economic migrants from abusing the asylum system to regularize their stay in the country for work or business purposes.

We appreciate the understanding and tolerance of the South African people and the manner in which they have received many refugees who have been integrated into many communities.

Our government is taking action against illegal migration and that all the processes. The government process is transparent and it will be able to register genuine refugees and assist them, and send back those who are taking chances.

It is important that we are reminded that not all foreign nationals are in the country illegally, which is sometimes the view of some frustrated South Africans.

Many foreign nationals are most welcome in the country. They add to the cosmopolitan nature of our country. They bring much-needed skills that contribute to growing our economy.

Durban is a melting pot of all cultures. It is a city that is richly blessed with a fascinating mix of cultures and a unique history. We embrace our diversity and that what makes us unique as a city. We have always lived with foreigners and we do this because we are warm people. We are not only blessed with warm weather but with warm people of Ubuntu. People who understand the principles of Ubuntu and values of our constitution.

Program Director, with those few words, I would like to welcome you. We are one!