

Lord Carey: Britain has a duty to rescue Syria's Christians

George Carey, Daily Telegraph (London)

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Accepting refugees from UN camps won't help this persecuted group, which has been driven into hiding

The dramatic and disturbing developments of the past few days have introduced a new, heart-rending dimension to this refugee crisis. Undoubtedly, the most disturbing aspect is just how impotent Europe is proving itself to be. If the EU is not resilient in the face of this disaster, it could be torn apart.

I can't help thinking of Corporal Jones's catchphrase – "Don't panic!" But even the Germans are panicking as Angela Merkel, in a desperate attempt to cajole her fellow European leaders into accepting binding quotas, has declared open season for up to 800,000 Syrians to come to Germany.

Isn't it a bit rich for the Germans to criticise other nations, including Britain, for failing to accept refugees? For years, our warm-hearted land has consistently accepted more asylum-seekers than Germany.

Besides, it would be a mistake to give way to bullying calls to immediately open our doors to tens of thousands of refugees. We are a small island and recent immigration figures are highly disturbing. Last year, a net figure of 330,000 people settled among us – more than the population of Sunderland. Imagine this continuing, year after year.

Lord Carey: 'I welcome David Cameron's announcement to allow thousands more to enter Britain' Photo: Andrew Crowley/The Telegraph

Alas, the signal that Germany is opening its doors to this influx will make Europe into an even more attractive magnet for those who are genuine refugees – but also to floods of economic migrants, most of whom are young men travelling alone. We don't even know how many of these have been combatants in the civil war.

If some of what I say sounds harsh or, heaven forbid, a touch unchristian, let me make it clear that I welcome David Cameron's announcement to allow thousands more to enter Britain through refugee camps in Syria's neighbouring countries. In the long term, this strategy will cut out the traffickers and reduce the risk of the sea and land journeys.

But the frustration for those of us who have been calling for compassion for Syrian victims for many months is that the Christian community is yet again left at the bottom of the heap.

According to the Barnabas Fund, a charity which recently resettled some 50 Syrian Christian families in Poland, Mr Cameron's policy inadvertently discriminates against the very Christian communities most victimised by the inhuman butchers of the so-called Islamic State. Christians are not to be found in the UN camps, because they have been attacked and targeted by Islamists and driven from them. They are seeking refuge in private homes, church buildings and with neighbours and family.

They are the most vulnerable and repeatedly targeted victims of this conflict. Indeed, a hundred years after the Armenian and Assyrian genocide, in which over a million Christians are estimated to have been killed by Ottoman Muslims, the same is happening today in the form of an ethnic cleansing of Christians in the region. Christians have been crucified, beheaded, raped, and subjected to forced conversion. The so-called Islamic State and other radical groups are openly glorifying the slaughter of Christians.

Britain should make Syrian Christians a priority because they are a particularly vulnerable group. Furthermore, we are a Christian nation with an established Church so Syrian Christians will find no challenge to integration. The churches are already well-prepared and eager to offer support and accommodation to those escaping the conflict.

Some will not like me saying this, but in recent years, there has been too much Muslim mass immigration to Europe. This has resulted in ghettos of Muslim communities living parallel lives to mainstream society, following their own customs and even their own laws. Isn't it high-time instead for the oil-rich Gulf States to open their doors to the many Muslims who are fleeing conflict? Surely if they are concerned for fellow Muslims who prefer to live in Muslim-majority countries, then they have a moral responsibility to intervene.

It is, of course, quite right that Europe has woken to the sheer scale of human suffering in Syria. It is equally right that our compassionate instincts will drive us to fund-raise and campaign for the innocent victims of the conflict. But that compassion must be realistic and clear-headed.

As a European Union, we should be prepared to close the doors to large numbers of economic migrants and return them to their countries. A proper process of registration must be conducted, ideally in refugee camps on the borders of Europe. And if the numbers get too large, we should be prepared to admit refugees on a provisional and temporary basis, reviewing their status periodically until they can return home.

It's not enough to send aid to refugee camps in the Middle East. There must be renewed military and diplomatic efforts to crush the twin menaces of Islamic State and al-Qaeda once and for all. Make no mistake: this may mean air strikes and other British military assistance to create secure and safe enclaves in Syria.

Lord Carey is a former archbishop of Canterbury