

Speech by Salam Aldeen, Founder of Danish NGO team Humanity

Thank you for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to tell my story.

Remember Alan Kurdi? Three years ago, his lifeless body washed up on a Turkish shore. The three-year-old Syrian refugee had died trying to reach safety in Greece. This photo changed my life.

I saw this picture in the news on the 3rd of September 2015. Back then, I was just an ordinary guy; I had a job, a home, family and friends... what more could a person want? The picture of Aylan Kurdi played on my mind for days, and left me thinking how could the world so easily dismiss his death? The death of an innocent child... he had committed no crime other than having a family that wanted to give him a better chance at life, and to avoid growing up in a war zone. Coming from a refugee background myself, I could relate to Alan. I was born in Moldava to an Iraqi father and Moldavian mother. When I was 9 years old, we had to flee Moldava because of the civil war. We had a long and rough journey through many countries before we reached our final destination, Denmark, where we received refugee status. Alan's photo pricked my conscience and became a call to action. We cannot longer afford to stand by and do nothing. If we ignore what is happening, blood is on our hands as well.

I had to do something. So, 2 days after I saw the picture, on my birthday, the 5th of September, I went to Greece for 1 week to help. 3 hours after I landed on Lesvos airport, I was already swimming to refugee boats that were stuck a few hundreds meters away from the coast and rescuing men, women, children and small newborn baby's.

I didn't understand what was happening, I was in shock; I didn't see Big Organizations, just a few volunteers giving water and bananas. I was confused, Where is the Greek government? Where is the UN or Red Cross? Where is the police? That week changed my life completely. I didn't sleep the whole week. I returned to Denmark, spoke with friends and 3 days later almost 30 people in 3 vans where on the way to Lesvos island for the sake of humanity. This is how we founded our NGO.

And so we began to save lives... we put our lives on hold so that we could ensure that these refugees could keep theirs. We worked tirelessly around the clock, patrolling the coast day and night in the hope we might be able to save lives.

Some of you may be thinking why would these people need help? Violent rapids, freezing temperatures and men, women, children and elderly cramped in dinghy boats, far too small and unstable for open rough waters ... these boats weren't fit for traveling the sea long miles.

Nonetheless, we persisted with our work, saving lives, every day... to the best of our ability. But sometimes this wasn't enough. I have held dying people in my arms as their bodies turned cold. And it's a harsh reality to know that some of the last words they said were to me! These

words were often: "Will I die?" or "please help me". Or when the family asked me if their loved ones will survive.

I held the dead bodies of innocent babies and children in my arms. I have lost count of all the children that died in the sea and washed ashore. My team and I would spend over 6 hours digging graves and burying the ones who died crossing the sea on this dangerous journey to Lesbos. I have to live with that. But that's not why I'm here. This reality is common in the humanitarian field... the problem only begins here.

In our struggles to save people we decided to buy a boat by collecting donations through Gofund, so that we could limit the amount of lost human lives, as boats were sinking far out at sea and not even making it to the coast. We followed all the standard channels of approval and registered our boat with the port authorities.

Now I request you all to re-live this moment with me...

It was the early hours of 14th January... around 2 am.

I was in my car patrolling when I got notified by one of the Volunteer groups, that a boat was sinking at the south coast. However, no coordinates were provided. This meant that the situation had just shifted from bad to worse: we knew people were in trouble but we didn't know where exactly... These people might only have minutes to live... believe me it's not a pleasant experience to watch someone drown in front of you... let alone thinking what it's like to experience drowning.

Me and 4 other lifeguards immediately got ourselves ready, drove to the harbor, and went into the rescue boat and sailed off for search and rescue. We notified the Hellenic Coast Guard, who told me to contact them if we found the boat or its location. As I was sailing around, trying to find the sinking boat, suddenly a big military ship came towards us with high speed. It stopped us, and we were arrested.

The boat we were in at the time was the very same boat that we used 15 hours earlier to save 51 lives from drowning, with permission from the authorities... I'm afraid to think about the fate of those people, if we didn't have the boat to begin with.

We were sitting at the port authorities for around 5 hours without any explanation. We asked to speak with our embassies, but they refused it. At 9 am me and the other Danish volunteer were asked to go to the interrogation room, the officers in that room couldn't speak any English. The interrogator was typing something for 10 min and then asked me to explain what happened. I was talking and he was typing, but the only problem was that he didn't understand English, so what was he typing on the computer? After I finished, he brought me a paper and told me to sign it. I answered that I don't sign anything before my lawyer comes. So they gave it to the other Danish volunteer to sign and when I told him not to sign if he wants to see his wife and children again, I was pushed out of the room to the others. I also told them not to sign anything, before talking with our embassy or a lawyer. So, after the failed attempt of the port authorities, they had to contact our embassies and then we got a lawyer. And from what I

understood, the paper they wanted us to sign stated that we were in Turkey smuggling people to Greece and we had refugees in our boat.

I was falsely accused of human smuggling without any evidence proving it. I was in Greek waters, without any refugees on board of my boat. But the authorities were quick to overlook this. I spent 48 hours in jail; it makes my stomach turn to think about the 8 refugees who died that day because we were sitting in jail and there was no other rescue boat in the sea. How the authorities could have better used their power to save lives rather than attempting to ruin them.

After spending 48 hours in jail, we each had to pay bail in order to be released. My bail was set at 10.000 euros. After my release, I was not allowed to leave Greece for one year and 8 months. In the meantime, I continued my humanitarian efforts on a variety of projects, providing displaced persons with food, clothing, shelter, and other humanitarian aid.

I didn't have my boat anymore, because it was confiscated. This time, I rescued people by swimming sometimes 300-400m and then swim back with the boat.

After the boats stopped reaching Greek islands in large numbers because of the EU-Turkey deal, I went all around Greece, initiating and implementing projects to help refugees.

And then on the 10 of August 2017, after 1 year and 8 months, I could leave Greece and return to my family. But the issue still remained that I would be facing my trial 9 months later, on the 7th of May 2018. Despite their preposterous claims, for 9 long months, my life was on hold because of the possibility that I will be facing lifetime in jail. I lost everything, from my apartment to my fiancée. And who would employ me with a lifelong sentence above my head? Lifetime in jail for what? Saving lives, saving children from drowning?

Migration is a common phenomenon for the MENA(Middle-East/North Africa)-EU region. The Mediterranean Sea was and still is a corridor for migration. Perceptions of it have always changed along with time, given the economic and social realities. The EU-MENA is a region in which diversity has always been the norm; Migration is significantly contributing to coexistence in the region. Today, Europe is struggling with an aging population and needs migrants, but the inability of Europe as a whole to manage the strong pressure from the refugee flows from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and other conflicts, makes it very difficult to find the needed balances and manage a growing political xenophobia.

Civil society has always been the first responder to humanitarian emergencies. For decades, fishermen, lawyers and people living across the south European coast have been rescuing and supporting refugees and migrants, replacing the often non-existent government structure. I continue witnessing every day that Greece is incapable of handling the crisis on its own. Alarming developments such as the arrest of three volunteers on Lesbos last month indicate that a strain is placed on civil society, painting a bleak picture for human rights protection. These humanitarians are facing serious accusations, amongst them suspicion of human trafficking and espionage. One of them is Sarah Mardini, who you might remember as the Syrian refugee who almost drowned back in 2015 after she boarded a dinghy that was meant to carry not more than 6 people with 20 others. As the boat started to sink, Sarah and her sister Yusra jumped into the cold sea and kept the boat on course, swimming for more than three hours to Lesvos. Everyone in the boat survived, thanks to them. Her friend and colleague Sean Binder is a fresh London School of Economics graduate who dedicated months of his life to helping people in need. His father was a Vietnamese refugee who fled to Germany after the Vietnam War. Sean's aspiration in life was 'to make the world a better place, to do his bit.'

Ladies and gentlemen, I see the world around us crying for help... and if others won't respond to the cries then I implore you to help humanitarians like Sarah and Sean. I believe in humanity and I believe there is a lot of humanity in this room here today, which is why I urge you to put yourself in our position and think... what would you do if you were being accused of something that completely goes against what you stand for... what if someone said that everyone in this room represented evil, dishonesty and deceit? Well, this is how I felt when I was told that I could be facing life in jail for trying to do the right thing and help people.

I was cleared of charges and did not spend the rest of my days behind bars over a fictitious claim, but the fact remains that people are still facing serious accusations merely for helping people in need. It's an international obligation to exempt humanitarian assistance from punishment. In order to ensure fundamental human rights, the emphasis in law and policy should be placed on rescuing people in distress at sea and improving reception conditions, and NGOs and independent volunteers should be protected from penalization.

The EU needs to reform its existing legislation and enact a comprehensive asylum and immigration policy. But that doesn't happen overnight, and turning a blind eye to those drowning in the meantime is not an appropriate response. In fact, that would be illegal: under international law, any boat within reach of another in distress has an obligation to help, regardless of that boat's flag or where it is sinking. Failure to do so is a crime of omission. A permanent solution is needed, a reform, which includes ensuring that solidarity is not a crime and undocumented refugees and migrants are ensured their basic rights.

Ladies and gentlemen ... I humble myself as I stand before you here today and I ask you to please help humanitarians that are facing charges merely for having ideals and wanting to help... for the sake of humanity.

I want to thank every single volunteer who made sacrifices for the sake of others. Without them an even bigger collapse would have happened in Europe.

Thank you