

Migration Interview with IRRA

Interview

Series with NGOs

Interview with Selim Vatandaş

from International Refugee Rights Association [IRRA]

Forced migration may unfortunately increase in the close future...

The turmoil of forced migration in the global system is increasing. According to the UN, 70 million people are at risk of en the next 30 years. As a matter of fact, Turkey is one of the key points of international migration flow. We talked to Selim V from the International Refugee Rights Association about the situation of migration in the world and current data in Turkey

*** **

Mr. Selim, how has 2022 been for IRRA?

Like every year, we in IRRA had many challenges with the migration flow. Let's remember the Edirne crisis in February. Edirne is a very important place for migration flow. Many - especially Afghan - refugees wanted to go Europe and the critical point is on the Greece border. They wanted to pass the Meriç river, but the Greek side didn't allow them and pushed back all of the refugees to Turkey. Unfortunately, because of the "Greek push back" some of them died there as these people could not swim.

Almost every month as I know, approximately 20 Afghan refugees die in the Meriç river. I have spoken with the villagers there. We are still following the crisis in Edirne; this is one of the crises that we follow because this is still going on and no solution has been found yet on this issue. The Greek side is very choleric and rude. There are many different kinds of violations on the Greece side of the border.

The Afghan refugees still want to reach Europe. When I spoke with the Afghan refugees, I always told them "Don't pass through by Greek routes," because it is very dangerous. The Greek authorities and the Greek police hit below the belt against particularly Afghan refugees. As I know they do this to the Afghans, Syrians, Iraqis, Iranians, and the people that come from the Eastern side of the world. But the Turkish refugees don't face the same thing there.

We are also working to ensure better facilities in detention centers. Right now, there are 30 different detention centers in Turkey. Some of them are in very good condition but some are not. We are preparing a report to give an understanding about the situation there and to provide recommendations to the Turkish authorities. And we also write academic reports to raise awareness specifically to the Turkish public. The report is in Turkish and English. We are also publishing many posts against the rising Xenophobia issue in Turkey on social media. We have also touched on political decision-makers in Ankara to build better migration management in Turkey as well.

We have visited the Syrian camps in Azaz and Idlib to understand what's happening on the field and to know what we can do for them. We have consulted the refugees to help them become more integrated into the Turkish foreign law system in Turkey. We have handled more than 4,500 legal issues for the refugees in Turkey, especially the Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, and Iranians. We have taught them where they should apply for their legal status, and more. These are the main activities that we have done last year.

In 2023, as the world is bracing for an even worse economic crisis, even in developed countries, do you

think the situations will be more challenging for the refugees in terms of their host countries?

Yes, after the coronavirus pandemic, the world was faced with rising prices in the markets, not just in developing countries, but also in developed countries like the US, the UK, Germany, etc. They had faced an offending inflation flow as well. But the inflation rate was also very high in Turkey. I think it is now four times higher than the developed countries. For example, housing prices, food prices, and energy prices are very high in this country compared to that in 2020.

The Turkish public had a huge challenge in this regard. But for migrants in Turkey, in particular, they had two different issues in terms of inflation. They had already been working in very bad conditions; many do not have a work permit and legal assurance in the workplace. There was another problem that these people faced. There is an analogy between the economic contradictions and the rise of xenophobia. When economic contradiction rises in Turkey, xenophobia increases along with it. This is because the Turkish people thought that the inflation rates are caused by migrants. "The settled people" in Turkey consider that migrants take their jobs away from their hands. One more thing, the elections in Turkey are also a factor in the rising Xenophobia in Turkey. Some parties want to use the migrant issue as a political tool.

You went to the UN, from your visit, do you think that Xenophobia is also felt by other developed countries, have they thought about this and have they thought about the solution?

The United Nations has been struggling with the flow of migration around the world for years. They keep the data. They set international norms. They are trying to bring actors together. But... I think you cannot solve the 21st century's problem with 20th-century institutions. The UN is very exhausted to solve the latest century's issues. It is overburdened in managing this crisis effectively. UN's credibility is getting a bad mark. Right now, international political literatures criticize the institutions and discuss ways how we can reorganize the UN because its system is very unjust.

I don't think there is strong anticipation on the UN side to find a dignified solution for migration. We can, instead, look at Europe. When you look at the migration flow all over the world, many people want to go to European locomotive countries such as Germany, France, and Italy. After the coronavirus crisis, the EU had risen its fences and "castles" on the borders. The head of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, said that Greece is Europe's shield in facing the continent's migrant crisis.

They think that Greece is the most important "castle" of the European side. And they have given new facilities to the interior ministry of Greece to protect its borders. They do not want new refugees. They believe that they are overburdened. In the future, maybe the "castle" will be risen even higher, given new challenges are coming for the international system with the Russian-Ukraine war and climate crisis. So I don't believe that the EU wanted to be organized with a humanitarian solution regarding the refugee flow. They will look at the problem to be as much as a national security issue. As Federica Fasanottia underlined, "Despite its good intentions to reform migration and asylum rules, the EU is distracted by more seemingly pressing problems."

How does IRRA view climate change and its impact on migration in 2023? What has the association prepared for this specific issue?

As far as I know, two new challenges might be faced by the world, especially from Afghanistan and East Africa. When I follow the 2020 reports on food issues, many of them highlight the possibility of a new crisis in Eastern Africa because of drought and climatic conditions. According to the Global Crisis Report, the combined effects of war, economic shocks, and crop pests can expose us to food crises. We can focus on Afghanistan, Sudan, Nigeria, Congo, Haiti, Ethiopia, and of course Yemen. Those countries are in a critical gap in terms of the global food crisis in the near future. So, this problem can trigger a new migration wave to Europe.

In the past couple of years, people have been more divided, partly thanks to the role of social media. This division of society can very well trigger potential migration waves in many parts of the world. What is IRRA's view on this?

Let me answer this question from the "anti-refugee parties" perspective. When I look at Europe, only about

7% of the people give their votes to racist parties. I think it is almost the same in Turkey. This is actually a small percentage. They are only 7%, but they project themselves as if they are 70%. Racist people do not hesitate to express their violent thoughts on social media. Social media is also a platform for them to fight for their agenda.

Their offensive rhetoric unfortunately makes them seem bigger and more crowded than they are. Because at the same time, they have an organized structure among each other without being aware of it. This situation may worry the refugee-friendly masses, but even if they are not fought in the same language, they should be fought with the same force.

I once posted a refugee-friendly tweet and I received many negative and offensive comments. When I saw their post, I believe they were acting in an organized manner. These offensive comments annoyed me but didn't stop me from expressing my opinion. Sometimes you have to stay where you are.

Social media is a kind of platform to create a bigger image of reality... They also have fake accounts, and they are very active. Maybe they can have one account but post many tweets against the refugees. Social media magnifies the effects.

Regarding the boiling anti-refugee sentiment, do you believe that it is a shared problem amongst refugee-host countries or is Turkey a unique case, being the largest host of refugees?

Actually, Turkey is no longer the biggest host of refugees. Poland is currently the biggest refugee host in the world. 9 million refugees are in Poland, they especially come from Ukraine. The United States of America also hosts many economic refugees from Mexico, Uruguay, and Venezuela. 4.4 million people migrated to other countries from Venezuela in 2020. Many Ukrainians have gone to Poland to seek refuge. The Syrian refugee case is already an old global refugee case but it is not unique.

There are opinions expressing that Turkey has a large refugee burden. It is not possible to completely oppose these statements. They are right in a way, but the issue is more about how to organize the refugees and reach a positive result rather than staying on the "caretaker" discourse. Every refugee has a unique story. Instead of opposing refugees' stories, we should try to understand them and focus on mutual opportunities.