

HUMANITARIANISM AMID COVID-19: HUMANITY, INTERVENTIONS AND PROTECTIONISM

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To cite this article: Busuulwa, Huthaifah. "Humanitarianism amid COVID-19: Humanity, Interventions and Protectionism", INSAMER, 21.04.2020.

 Analysis

Ernest Mwiru, a Ugandan refugee in Kenya, committed suicide at the UNHCR compound, the very humanitarian body he had gone to seeking for aid amidst the coronavirus pandemic. Instead of assistance, it is alleged the guards beat him up. He soon afterwards hanged himself at a tree nearby.¹ Mwiru's story is not a solitary case. An increasing number of people are committing suicide around the world as businesses and livelihoods are shuttered due to the novel coronavirus. History shows that the longer a crisis last, the worse such suicide attempts will be. In Europe and the United States, suicide rates rise about 1% for every one percent increase in unemployment, according to a research published by lead author Aaron Reeves from Oxford University. Researchers found that the surge of unemployment in 1982 cut the life spans of Americans by a collective of two to three million years. The last recession

from 2007-2009, helped spike suicide rates in America and Europe, claiming more than 10,000 lives. There are valid fears that the psychological repercussions have the potential to make any tragedy look even worse. Some specialists fear that the long-term health impacts of economies in hibernation, shuttered families and social networks may become unbearable for many. That is why the world cannot afford to reduce assistance programs to help the increasing number of vulnerable people.

In many regions, the pandemic could not have come at a worse time. In Eastern Africa for instance, the locust invasion there had devastated vast swaths of land, destroying food and other crops as they trekked for hundreds of kilometers, eating everything on their paths. In Ethiopia alone, some one million people require food aid after swarms of locusts damaged 200,000 hectares (half a million acres) of cropland



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according to the announcement on Monday April 13 by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)². Billions of desert locusts have already left devastating impacts in Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Djibouti, Eritrea, Tanzania, Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda. Of the one million individuals requiring emergency food aid, it is reported some 75 percent live in the Somali and Oromia regions, which had been long pushed to the periphery by the authorities.

As coronavirus pandemic hit harder, governments around the world have raced to shut their countries in a bid to stem its spread. In the effort to protect citizens, refugees and migrants have often been ignored or at worst, targeted and blamed for spreading the virus. Foreigners are facing unprecedented stigma, many facing mob lynching by people attempting to cast away the virus. China is facing a diplomatic crisis in Africa after reports of alleged coronavirus-related discrimination against African nationals in China sparked widespread anger across the continent³. In the southern city of Guangzhou, African students and expatriates were subjected to forced testing and arbitrary 14-day self-quarantine. A large number of Africans were left homeless after being evicted by their landlords and hotels.

The crisis has at several times been manipulated for political convenience. President Donald Trump tried to sow a narrative that the globally devastating disease was caused by the 'Chinese virus' prompting rebuttal from democrats, Chinese authorities and even the World Health Organization (WHO) which went ahead to formally name the virus COVID-19. Labelling the virus as Chinese virus only works to stir xenophobia and increase tensions among people. Now that the situation is dire around the world, arbitrary actions do not serve anyone's interests in the long run. It is a time for concerted global efforts if we are to be able to overcome this crisis with minimal cost to lives and economies. The WHO has at various occasions come out with guidelines in this direction. But despite these efforts, attacks inspired by racism have persisted,

some directed at the WHO's Director General accused of being lenient towards China and not doing enough to hold them to account over what many see as the Chinese government's initial lukewarm early-stage mitigation and warning efforts.

Our common goal is to overcome the virus, but in addition to this, we should be cognizant of older problems that together ought to be ameliorated. Food security had already become a big problem even before the outbreak; and now it is exacerbated due to the virus. If nothing is done on the food security front for vulnerable people in particular, many may succumb not from the virus, but simply from hunger.

Yet food security is not the only element that should be considered parallel with the efforts to contain the pandemic. During the lockdown, reports are increasing about mothers who die in labor due to failure to access hospitals on time. In Uganda, Scovia Nakawooya's unborn child died inside her as she struggled to reach hospital on foot. She also died hours later.⁴ Authorities in Uganda banned private and public transportation without special authorization, and in the country with few ambulances, the travel ban can be dangerous. Even when the pandemic is put under control, the ripple effects will be immense. Apart from suicides from extreme pressure and anxiety, the crisis may engender high crime rates as people become desperate. We should think of plans and measures to focus on the several fronts opened in this battle against COVID-19.

Among the most immediate measures should include the implementation of mental health surveillance of high-risk populations, and increasing charitable donations. This is the time for solidarity at national and global levels. Both national and global efforts are vital, even if one country were to put the virus under control, if other countries are still affected severely, no one can guarantee that any one country can return to normality minus the cooperation of the rest. The director of WHO Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus for example tweeted that the rule

of the game to defeat COVID-19 is solidarity at national and global levels. We have so far witnessed several examples of this vital solidarity. The example of Turkey's solidarity campaign can be emulated. The campaign launched by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan looks at the two vital fronts, in-ward and out-ward solidarity efforts. Businesses, charitable organizations and individuals are encouraged to pool resources to help cater for the vulnerable people. In addition, Turkey has also airlifted health care products and other essential products to several dozen countries. This is commendable, and the world should look at such interventions as a template that should be followed.

As the lockdown lifting begins, some countries are phasing their restrictions starting with essential workers. Humanitarian assistance providers should be considered as essential workers and accorded assistance to help them aid the vulnerable people. Many refugees, migrants, the elderly, and poor people depend on

the ability of the aid workers to reach them with the aid and assistance they desperately need. Vulnerability sometimes knows no citizenship, but in crises like this, refugees and migrants tend to be neglected as governments prioritize their own citizens. This should not be the case because every life matters, and sympathizing with the pain of another human being, and even other living creatures is what makes us human. Interventions should be wide and apolitical, otherwise we may not be able to bounce from the crisis as quickly and humanely as we should.

In doing all this, people ought to be motivated by the ideals and values of humanity, that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. The respect for dignity of all, the respect for human rights, for fundamental freedoms, and human dignity still hold the same value as they did before the outbreak. Yet, with the right doze of love, care and compassion, we shall rise up together and shine again.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/17633-unhcr-kenya-statement-by-the-unhcr-representative-in-kenya-fathiaa-abdalla.html>

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/locust-invasion-creates-food-crisis-1-million-ethiopians-200413180500972.html>

³ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/13/asia/china-guangzhou-african-blacklash-hnk-intl/index.html>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-uganda-idUSKCN21R2FA>