

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON REFUGEES IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Analysis

On this year's World Refugee Day, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) launched its "Every Action Counts" campaign. The campaign actually emphasizes that all contributors including refugees are important to make the world a more just and inclusive place to live in.

While we celebrate the contributions of refugees, we have neglected the challenges they face in fighting the pandemic. We are unable to offer them the protections they deserve to fight against Covid-19. Refugees all over the world are not even able to follow the basic preventive measures against Covid-19, like frequent hand washing, wearing masks, etc. The millions of people, which is almost 1 percent of the world's population, lack access to clean water, sanitizers, soap, facemasks, and basic health facilities. This

situation has put refugees at a heightened risk of contracting, suffering, and even dying from the virus.

Global measures to stop the Covid-19 pandemic have been drastic. Restrictions on many aspects of life have affected billions of people across the world. Businesses have shuttered, social distancing is being observed, and travel restrictions have been imposed in many parts of the world. People have started to work from home. All these are done in order to prevent the spread of the virus. Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of refugees cannot adhere to these recommendations and measures. It is easy for people with adequate shelter and access to clean water, sanitation, and health services to follow these guidelines. But it is almost impossible for refugee communities to follow



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these recommendations and measures. Refugee camps are densely populated, with the scarcity of water to even wash their hands, and healthcare facilities are a lot of the times unavailable.

Refugees in South Asia

The Covid-19 pandemic is hitting refugees and marginalized communities in South Asia as well. These people are being denied refugee or minority status. This deprivation of status has made them more vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic. A large number of refugees have been deprived of basic rights and other services throughout the South Asian region. Rights groups all over the world are concerned about this problem.

‘While the virus has the potency to kill, poor governance choices can weaponize this potency,’ says Joshua Castellino, Executive Director of Minority Rights Group International (MRG). ‘Stirring hate and attributing blame underscores two things: an inability of effective governance in solving a grave problem without playing blame games; and the real possibility that the life of the virus will be prolonged if left lurking amidst the most vulnerable communities’.¹

Refugees in South Asia were already facing many difficulties and now the pandemic has made it more challenging for them. They are facing situations, which breach their human rights, and face denial of access to basic needs, including access to health care even in the midst of the pandemic. Not to mention the socio-economic challenges faced by the refugees.

In Bangladesh’s refugee camps, a single Covid-19 infection could lead to a disaster. Even outside of the camps, refugees face a higher risk of infection. The situation is critical in the world’s largest refugee camp in Bangladesh, where about one million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar are living under severe conditions. The administration has imposed internet blackouts in a densely-packed camp which is in squalid conditions. Social distancing and maintaining

proper hygiene are nearly impossible in the camp. Almost up to a dozen people share a small shelter, while there are limited water and sanitary supplies. Access to health services and information are also severely curtailed, and any outbreak in the camp will surely have a devastating impact.

In India, the National Register of Citizens (NRC) has caused 1.9 million people declared stateless in Assam alone. The controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) has also pushed Muslims to the wall. Strangely the Act poses a threat to the rights of minority Muslims while protecting every other relevant religious group.

The condition of Rohingya refugees in India is also sad. They face hatred and discrimination on the basis of their religious identity. Furthermore, there are reports of food scarcity and child labor among Rohingya refugees. The whole population of Jammu and Kashmir is suffering a lockdown, communications blackout, and detention, including torture. Being deprived of refugee status, numerous vulnerable refugee communities cannot access essential protections. The pandemic has only increased the difficulties for these refugee communities and minority groups in India.

In Pakistan, there are an estimated 2.8 million Afghan refugees, which is the second-largest refugee population in the world after the Syrians in Turkey. A large number of Afghan refugees are unregistered, which has made life under Covid-19 even more difficult for them. The Pakistani government has appealed to the UNHCR to contribute in helping the Afghan refugees during the pandemic crisis.

Shehryar Afridi, the Pakistani state minister for border affairs, said in a letter to the UNHCR, “It is earnestly requested that keeping in view of our national policies and our commitment to Afghan refugees, the provisioning for essential rations/ food supplies during the lockdown period be arranged on an urgent basis.”²

Refugees in Southeast Asia

Refugees in Southeast Asia are no exception to the challenges created by the pandemic. Besides facing the problems in access to basic needs like food, shelter, water, and health services, many of the refugees fear arrest as well. A large number of refugees do not access healthcare services as they live in fear of being arrested because of their legal status. The Malaysian police went on a hunt to locate many Rohingya refugees who had attended a religious event in Kuala Lumpur in the beginning of the pandemic, which caused hundreds of new infections in the region.

“Malaysia, which has almost 200,000 refugees, is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention, and views refugees as residing illegally in the country. It is therefore not surprising that some of the Rohingya who attended the mosque gathering failed to present themselves for testing out of fear of being arrested. On March 22, Malaysia’s defense minister announced that the refugees who attended the event should not worry about being detained, but the fear they felt is indicative of the difficulties facing thousands of other refugees across the region.”³

The case of refugees in Thailand is no different. Thailand has also not ratified the UN Refugee Convention. There are almost 100,000 refugees residing in Thailand, who have no access to legal rights, health care, or employment. The case of refugee employment in Thailand is an eye-opener for the global community to describe the situation that refugees are going through. A large number of refugees work in the informal sector. They all are relying on daily wages, but

most of them have lost this essential income as a result of businesses shutting down. This makes their access to food, water, and other necessities increasingly difficult.

“Although the Thai government announced a stimulus package for those working in the informal sector, the 5,000 baht (around \$154) per month that will be issued between April and June is only available to those with a Thai identity card, neglecting the needs of refugees and asylum seekers.”⁴

So far, we can see that the world has failed to protect its refugees. Refugees are vulnerable to discrimination, especially if they are undocumented. Many refugee women and girls face gender-specific challenges in the camps. They are in dire need of physical and mental health care support. The pandemic has increased the risk of domestic and gender-based violence, especially on refugee women.

The world must come together to the rescue of refugee communities. All refugees must be granted access to affordable healthcare and basic needs. The needs of refugees must be seriously considered as part of the global response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Access to basic healthcare and testing, adequate food, shelter, water, and sanitation are essential needs of refugees. The world should take the necessary steps to guarantee these for all refugees. Health is a human right. We have to be proactive and ensure that everyone enjoys this right today and in the future. UNHCR’s “Every Action Counts” campaign will only make sense if these matters are taken into consideration and concrete steps are taken to address them.

Endnotes

¹ <https://minorityrights.org/2020/04/29/south-asia-minorities-report/>

² Latif, Aamir. (2020) ‘COVID-19: Afghan refugees in Pakistan seek world’s help’, Anadolu Agency, Ankara, 3 April. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/covid-19-afghan-refugees-in-pakistan-seek-world-s-help/1790585>

³ Ismail, Natrah. (2020) ‘Refugees must be protected during the coronavirus pandemic’, Aljazeera, 22 April. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/refugees-protected-coronavirus-pandemic-200422101438710.html>

⁴ *ibid.*