

REMEMBERING THE PLIGHT OF REFUGEES AMID COVID-19

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مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

To cite this article: Busuulwa, Huthaifah. "Remembering the Plight of Refugees Amid Covid-19", INSAMER, 26.06.2020.



Analysis

This year, just like every year since 2000, June 20 is known as World Refugee Day, highlighting the plight of millions who are forced to flee their home countries to escape war, violence, and oppression.

The current Coronavirus pandemic has wrought fear and panic, but the trouble of the world today does not stop there. For about 90 days now, most people and places of activities have been locked down around the world, with calls of social distancing or to stay at home dominating the airwaves. But the war continues in countries like Libya, Yemen, and Syria. The suffering of the displaced people in Idlib continues. Last week three small child refugees died in Idlib when they were swept away by floods that devastated their camps. In Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Burkina Faso, insurgents are continuing to target innocent lives, claiming tens of people's lives despite the pandemic.

It is particularly important to protect refugees, many of whom travel thousands of kilometers in the deserts and through water bodies in search of safety. Instead, we hear reports that the Trump administration for one has intensified their efforts to turn back unaccompanied children at the US border with Mexico. The Centers for Disease Control extended an order barring entry of migrants at land borders including children in violation of anti-trafficking laws that require the US government to place unaccompanied children into protective custody.¹ The New York Times reported that border patrol agents have turned back more than 2,000 children over the bridge to Mexico. In early March numerous outlets reported how Greek coastguard officers tried to capsize a boat carrying refugees from the Middle East attempting to cross to Western Europe. Several migrants including a child were killed off the Greek island of Lesbos. These



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abuses should never be condoned at any time, even during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Refugees are often individuals whose life has not been a walk in the park, but a crawl through firing ranges of war zones. These are the people who live their lives crawling through barbed wire and mine fields to a place where the grass is hoped to be greener. Good conscience and humanity dictate that they deserve the chance to be given an opportunity, a safe haven away from home. In return, as has been severally documented, migrants can in fact be the ones to assist their host countries in times of need. During the pandemic, migrants have been at the frontlines to fight Covid-19. David Milliband, the head of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) spoke to CNN, revealing the role that refugees have played during the pandemic:

“One in five refugees resettled in the US by the IRC this year immediately took positions in health care and the food industry, supporting the US Covid-19 pandemic response. As the Covid-19 pandemic rages on, we’re seeing thousands of refugees in the US on the front lines, from doctors and nurses to Uber drivers and factory workers”.²

Many of the people displaced by war are skilled, including doctors, nurses, teachers, chefs, and managers who can transfer their skills to host communities with proper help. That is why the UN chose the theme of this year’s Refugee Day as ‘Every Action Counts’. It is based on the conviction that everyone needs help sometimes and that people need other people to survive in this world. It is a concept that was defended early on by the classical Muslim sociologist and political scientist Ibn Khaldun who observed that one reason why people form themselves into communities is to be able to assist one another to achieve the necessities of life. Meaning that even in times of disaster like the one we are currently living in; our collective efforts are the beacon that can guide us towards the future.

Some countries are heeding to this principle. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan while speaking on Refugee Day highlighted that some wealthier countries that have more opportunities to lend a helping hand towards refugees instead place quotas on the numbers they can let in, yet others like Turkey embrace everyone in need. It is morally unjustifiable to place quotas on people’s lives. According to the president, 25,000 people, mostly women, and children died in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea over the past eight years and the fate of some 10,000 Syrian children who sought asylum in Europe remains unknown. Imagine a migrant boat of some 250 people being let to capsize because a country’s set quota is reached; could such action be morally justified?

Some people defend such actions in utilitarian terms. Utilitarianists believe that an action should be performed if it is supported and thus, brings pleasure to the majority. With this logic, if there are more anti-refugee sentiments in a country, the government is bound to respect these wishes and block the entry of more refugees, despite the fact that such an action would result in untold sufferings by the blocked humans. It is crucial to say that such logic is inhumane; it does not value the sanctity of human lives. Each and every life matters and we must do everything in our power to protect all lives regardless of nationality, orientation, gender, and creed.

When people use normalized words like refugees, sometimes we forget the personal experiences behind those verbal frames. Among those refugees are people like Gilbert Nkurunziza from Burundi who prior to 2015 was a headteacher at a school in his community before he decided to engage in politics, a civic duty he had reckoned would benefit his community. In 2015, when former president Pierre Nkurunziza controversially extended his term in office, Gilbert and his compatriots attempted to resist. On Feb 5, 2016, security agents, the police, and Imbonekure (the youth

wing of the Burundi ruling party) raided his house where he was with his wife and mother. He was then forced to rape his own mother as other militias took turns on his wife. As if what was done to him and his family was not enough, they injected substances into his testicles and continued to torture him from Mugamba police station where he was held for some time before he escaped to Uganda as a refugee. On top of that horrible background, Gilbert was one of the first Coronavirus victims in Uganda; a status that only brought him more sorrow and tribulations. Although every recovered Covid-19 patient in Uganda who are released from hospitals is supposed to get a certificate of recovery, Gilbert never received his. His neighbors are scared of him and his family. They are stigmatized and called “Corona”. Community members do not want to be in their midst. They cannot go to fetch water from the community wells as people suspect them. They have to get someone to fetch water and other supplies for them but with meager finances, this is proving difficult. None in his family is working and their psychological situation is ever-deteriorating.

There are many ways where refugee situations during Covid-19 can be ameliorated.

- First and foremost, the majority of the countries that had imposed lockdown have started to reopen. Refugees in need should be embraced and helped. Quarantine centers can be set up at borders to check and monitor the entrants.
- Since most individuals are earning again, it's time to consider increasing aid to help out.
- Similarly, medical personnel should be put on sites for regular testing, advocating preventive health measures such as washing hands and encouraging the practice of social distancing.

The responsibility certainly rests with us all to ensure that this predicament we are in does not escalate further. This can be achieved by trying to help everyone in need, knowing that until the situation is better for all, none of us will be entirely safe. Helping others is one way of helping ourselves.

Endnotes

¹ Woltjen, Maria. New York Times. Opinion. “The White House Is Quietly Deporting Children” June 22, 2020.

² Hines, Benthamy. CNN. “June 20 is World Refugee Day. Here are ways you can show support” June 20, 2020.