



An impending crisis-analysing the impact of COVID 19 pandemic on refugees and internally displaced people

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11 November 2020

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Abstract:

In his address, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi had highlighted that the global calamity affecting the world today has brought us to the realization that united action and cooperation is the key to combat the viral disaster. The outbreak of COVID 19 has confronted us with the most inevitable global public health emergency crisis. The virus which started off as an infectious respiratory disease in China last year quickly spiralled into a global disaster.¹ The latest infection numbers and death tolls seem unlikely to draw a line to its astonishingly large list. The World Health Organization regarded the virus as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, and as of July, the number of cases worldwide has exceeded the 10 million mark (Worldometer, 2020). Since the arrival of the calamitous virus, almost every country in the world has stumbled upon a large number of problems. In order to resist the lethality of the infection, most countries have adopted a number of strategies such as strict lockdown measures, shutdown of borders and implementation of immigration and travel bans. However, the vast trail of implications left behind by the virus along with stringent safety measures and health and hygiene protocols ought to have a veritable impact on one of the most endangered sections of society—refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs) and asylum seekers. The COVID 19 pandemic may be a very recent threat to the entire global community but the refugee crisis that the world is facing has been lurking around for long and has assumed a menacing character. The disproportionate effects of the pandemic put them at the risk of not only contracting the infection but also losing their means of livelihood and liberty. This research article claims to study the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on the lives of refugees in mainly two turbulent regions of the world—Asia and the Middle East.

Keywords

COVID 19, pandemic, refugees, IDPs, displaced people, UNHCR, hardships, misery

Introduction

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is defined as –“someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”² Ever since the widening breakout of the Coronavirus allegedly from the Huanan Seafood Market in China, even the strongest and most powerful regions such as the United States or the European Union seem to have been thrown off a cliff by its inevitable origin. To think of the repercussions it will have on the poor and most jeopardized communities is shuddering. As the virus has trickled into nearly every corner of the world, governments all across the world have started to chalk out ways and measures to recuperate from its impacts in terms of stronger health infrastructure, regional cooperation and economy. However, what has unfortunately evaded their minds is the plight of these refugees.

Refugees, IDPs and asylum seekers constitute that section of society who that have fled their homes to escape devastative circumstances created by ceaseless bombings, invading army, natural disaster, ineradicable destitution, perpetual violence or other life-threatening situations. Numbers made official by the UNHCR suggest that nearly 79.5 million people worldwide have been forced to flee their homes under unavoidable circumstances.³ This endangered group comprises around 46 million displaced people, 27 million refugees from all across the world and around 4.2 million asylum seekers.⁴ These refugees have all had their fair share of traumatic experiences such as separation from family members, relocation to overcrowded refugee camps, malnutrition and loss of property and basic means of livelihood. More than half of the world’s total refugee population come from persecuted regions of Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar or Somalia and are hosted by regional low-income or developing countries.⁵

Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees in the world which amounts to nearly 3.7 million. It is followed by Pakistan with 1.4 million refugees, Uganda with 1.2 million and Sudan and Germany each hosting 1.1 million refugees.⁶ Today, while most developing nations are grappling with health infrastructure facilities and extremely inadequate resources, the refugees find themselves standing on the verge of a new crisis.

How does the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbate the plight of the refugees?

COVID 19 observes no borders or boundaries. It does not discriminate. Therefore, global responses undertaken to combat the virus must also not be discriminatory and must equally take into account all communities and societies. As the fatal virus continues to spread in the overcrowded refugee camps, it promises to hurt the nearly 79.5 million people who have taken shelter in these camps. There are several ways which evoke further pathos into the plight of these vulnerable who are already surviving in extremely disadvantaged conditions.

First, the impending health crisis has forced a number of displaced people to relocate themselves. Loss of jobs and limited access to resources has compelled them to be on the move in order to fetch further means of survival. For instance, in Africa, border restrictions are being used as a tool by local authorities to shut down displacement camps. Second, restrictive mobility measures in some countries have also made it an ordeal for the displaced people to get access to medical assistance. According to a study carried out by the Norwegian Refugee Council, more than 11 per cent of IDPs in Iraq were denied health facilities during the last few pandemic months.⁷ Third, the widening viral outbreak has also caused massive devastation in terms of increasing food scarcity and malnutrition. With the lack of basic resources and adequate food supply, hunger levels among refugees have been on the rise. In a statement to the UN Security Council, the World Food Programme has warned that the hunger pandemic could push nearly 265 million people into starvation across persecuted territories in Syria, Afghanistan or Sudan.⁸

What comes up next is the issue of population density. Most of the refugees are sheltered in overcrowded refugee camps or settlements with bare minimum hygiene facilities or regular water supply. In most cases, multiple families often end up sharing one bathroom, one water tap, and the same cooking facilities and so on. The fifth factor which will hit them worst is a sudden disruption of humanitarian supplies that the refugees solely rely on for survival. In order to hinder the spread of the virus, various relief organizations and international aid agencies may reduce contacts with these endangered communities to break the infection cycle. Further, steps like the shutting of borders, restricted movements and travel bans contribute to unpleasant interruptions in the supply of humanitarian aid. Finally, as most NGOs and aid agencies have already invested their resources in devising ways to fight against the pandemic, financing needed to address such humanitarian crisis by providing relief measures will be the greatest

challenge. The lasting fiscal impact of the pandemic will be deeply felt among these vulnerable groups. What follows next in this paper is a brief analysis of the impacts of the pandemic on the lives of refugees in two regions- the Middle East and Asia.

Middle East

The Middle East remains the most perilous region in terms of fears of contracting the Coronavirus. The region alone hosts nearly 20 million refugees who are exposed to devastating health care facilities and incessant conflicts. Cases had been increasing sharply in the region, quickly turning it into an epicentre of the virus. The porous borders characterizing the Middle East makes it very convenient for refugees and migrants to embark on informal routes. In fact, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey host nearly 12 million refugees.⁹ The wrecked health care system in the Middle East has fuelled massive anxieties and fears about an extensive spread of the virus among refugees and IDPs. Some settlements have adopted certain measures to curb the spread of the virus. For instance, refugee camps situated in Jordan had entered into a lockdown model while in Kurdistan, restrictive mobility to camps was implemented. In the words of the senior UNHCR advisor for the Middle East, the number of real cases ought to be much higher but have not yet come to the forefront due to extremely inadequate testing facilities.¹⁰ The refugee crisis in the Middle East shall be discussed in three parts, each highlighting the conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq.

- ***Overview of the Syrian refugee crisis:*** The roots of the Syrian crisis trace back to the pro-democratic Arab Spring protests of 2011. Nine years of war and incessant fighting has transformed Syria into the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.¹¹ It has resulted in incalculable and inhuman damage to innocent civilians. According to data accumulated by the UNHCR, the Syrian crisis alone has birthed nearly 5.6 million refugees and 6.6 million internally displaced people.¹² The outbreak of the virus poses the greatest threat to millions of these refugees who grapple to survive in these dismal and miserable circumstances. These impoverished communities find it difficult to arrange for food if they are stopped from working because of lockdowns. The only question in their mind is why is there an absence of global response to the perpetual instability in their region.

The largest number of Syrian refugees live in the regional countries like Turkey that host 3.6 million, Lebanon hosting around 1 million and Jordan hosting over 650,000 refugees.¹³ Added to this list are the 1 million displaced people who have taken shelter in Idlib, a province in North-West Syria. Most of the health care infrastructures there have been debilitated by Russian and Iran-backed Bashar-al-Assad regime. This has deprived the country of essential medical equipments such as ventilators which are necessary for treating COVID patients. The United Nations has been working round the clock to ensure seamless supply of assistance to the highly volatile region.

The UNHCR provided emergency cash to almost two hundred thousand refugees located in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. These countries alone host nearly 5.5 million Syrian refugees, making it the highest in the world.¹⁴ The organisation also reported that a number of refugees have lost their jobs and are in dire need of financial support too. The World Health Organization had announced that Syria would be provided with 300 COVID 19 testing kits, 10,000 protective gears and 500 respirator masks to help health care workers.¹⁵ Spokesman of the UN Refugee Agency said that such distressing circumstances have proved to be draconian for children, women and the elderly. Loss of jobs and meagre or no income increases risks of domestic abuse. Disruptions on humanitarian assistance will make it difficult for families to even afford regular meals or prompt medical treatment.¹⁶

Within Syria, the northwest province of Idlib is the most affected region. Thousands of people who have been displaced by daily bombings take shelter in this zone. The pandemic has added a new landscape of loss to this region that was already scarred by years of unrest. Idlib's decimated health infrastructure is ill-equipped to deal with a virus as fatal as the Coronavirus. There is no scope for self-isolation or social distancing in such a zone where multiple families remain scooped in one refugee camp. Refugees living within these impoverished camps are of the opinion that they would "rather die of Coronavirus because it's better than starvation."¹⁷ Moreover, there is a lack of preventive measures from the authorities in the province who are more invested in gaining political dividends from the ongoing conflict. The global response to combat the spread of the

virus and recuperate from its grim impacts calls for the international community to step in the fragile zone and collaborate with local authorities to conceive relevant methods to lend humanitarian aid to a wrecked Syria.

- ***Overview of the Yemeni refugee crisis:*** Yemen is a region which has already been harrowed by years of civil war and unrest. The first sparks of unrest erupted in the 1990s and were reinforced in 2011, turning the country into what the UNICEF rightly puts as “a living hell”.¹⁸ The inefficacy of the health infrastructure in Yemen came to the forefront when the country showcased serious inability to combat diseases like diphtheria or a cholera epidemic in the recent past. Nearly 80 per cent of Yemen’s population that accounts for 2.41 million people are dependent on humanitarian assistance for their survival. Over the years, the crisis has displaced some 3.65 million people who have fled to neighbouring lands to escape violence and unrest.¹⁹

Ever since the bifurcation of the country at the hands of the Saudi-Emirati led coalition and the Houthi rebels, a massive humanitarian effect on the civilians prevails. The virus has hit Yemen at a time when the country only has 700 ICU beds and 500 ventilators to serve a population of 20 million. In the first week of March when the surge in cases was sharp, both the internationally recognized Yemeni government and Houthi rebels announced bans on international flights. The bans meant that availing supplies of humanitarian and medical aid from the UN or other agencies became critical.²⁰ The head of humanitarian operations in Yemen, Lise Grande claimed that the death toll in Yemen caused by the pandemic could very easily surpass the combined impacts of hunger, war and famines that have devastated the region over the last few years.²¹ Many of these refugees in Yemen who have not been able to make it to the hospitals on time have succumbed to virus while at home. Inadequate testing facilities have convinced Doctors without Borders that the real numbers are much higher and have just not been exposed yet.²²

The civilians live in atrocious circumstances with the total number of people not having access to water supply topping 50 per cent.²³ This has reduced sanitation protocols and

washing of hands to a mere luxury in the region. The insufficient facilities made available to them have therefore led to an uncontrolled and widespread community transmission. In such crippling hours, the UN has appealed to various agencies to step in and accumulate some funding to combat the viral disaster in Yemen. The pandemic has built up a crisis situation where the economy lies completely frozen. Disruptions in the flow of remittances from abroad that the civilians depend on have further pushed them into acute poverty and starvation. The problem is massive and Yemen is too feeble a zone to tackle the viral battle single handed. What Yemen deserves today is unanimous global response and negotiations to save the lives of millions.

- ***Overview of the refugee crisis in Iraq:*** Several years of violence and conflict has wreaked havoc in Iraq jeopardizing the lives of millions of innocent civilians. According to data accumulated by the UNHCR, more than 6.5 million Iraqis which amount to 18 per cent of the population are in need of humanitarian aid and protection. Ever since the inception of the conflict, nearly 360,000 Iraqis have been displaced and some 250,000 have taken refuge in neighbouring countries.²⁴ Millions of these refugees who had fled the Islamic State since 2014 now live in overcrowded camps whose poor infrastructure and filthy conditions accelerate the risk of the virus. This has led Doctors without Borders to aptly describe the situation as “extremely vulnerable” to the Coronavirus.²⁵ The crippled healthcare system in Iraq is ill-equipped to cope with a massive outbreak of the virus, according to the UN.

Among several measures to control the infection cycle, Baghdad and Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) had implemented a curfew and banned domestic flights. Furthermore, the government had restricted gatherings at public and religious sites and ordered schools, universities, cafes and so on to be shut down.²⁶ Thousands of people have lost their jobs and the absence of regular income has compelled pin all their hopes on the aid agencies.

In such harrowing circumstances, the UNHCR and the World Food Programme have extended assistance to Iraq to help the vulnerable groups cope with the impact of the viral tragedy. In a joint statement, the UNHCR and WFP have pledged to extend food

assistance to 76,000 refugees and 280,000 displaced people.²⁷ In the same statement, the organizations also claimed that they have appealed for 26 and 31.9 million dollars respectively to be used in the viral battle. Apart from this, UN agencies have also reached out to the persecuted region with testing kits and seamless availability of protective gears such as PPE kits, gloves and masks. Much like its persecuted neighbours, refugees in Iraq are also anticipating fruitful cooperation of the Baghdad and KRI governments and international donors to redeem them from such unprecedented circumstances.

Asia

Asia remains one of the most densely populated regions in the world. Considering the fact that the virus broke out from China, many countries in South Asia, which host a number of refugees and IDPs were in a precarious position. Examples of the endangered groups who have taken shelter in this part of the world include the Rohingyas in Bangladesh, Afghan refugees in Pakistan and several displaced people squeezed into camps inside Afghanistan.

- ***Overview of the Afghan refugee crisis:*** In the wake of the pandemic, another group that continues to be in acute need of assistance are the Afghan refugees. Afghanistan has been harrowed by nearly 40 millions of war that has resulted in the displacement of a large number of civilians. Millions of them have also fled the devastating circumstances to take shelter in neighbouring countries like Pakistan or Iran. Iran itself has emerged as a hotbed of Coronavirus infection which has resulted in massive criticisms being directed against the Iranian government. The overwhelming health infrastructure in Iran has compelled a number of these Afghan refugees to return to their original lands, thereby increasing the risk of spreading the virus. Afghanistan had entered the phase of community transmission by early April.²⁸

By the next month, cases had been surging sharply with the number of confirmed cases and death toll pegged at 8,145 and 187 respectively. (John Hopkins University, 2020) The WHO had extended assistance to the Afghan province to increase its testing ability. However, there are several factors that one must take into account while highlighting the plight of Afghan refugees. First, nearly four decades of war has demolished the healthcare system. The health sector continues to remain massively ill-equipped even after recent

advancements, such as the establishment of more than 420 new health facilities.²⁹ Secondly, although the local authorities are in no position to impose stringent quarantine protocols on the refugees, many have been accused of escaping quarantine facilities undertaken in the western part of the country.³⁰ This starkly exposes the lack of awareness among the public. Third, is the issue of returning migrants from regional countries such as Iran and Pakistan.

According to the International Organization of Migration, around 198,000 Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan after the situation accelerated in Iran.³¹ These refugees who conveniently cross the porous border have nowhere to go once they are on the other side. The government neither has sufficient testing capacity nor is it equipped to impose quarantine measures on the returnees. Afghans have been on the move since the USSR attacked the country in 1979. Over the last few decades, these refugees have moved into Pakistan as well, settling in the border city of Peshawar. Apart from this, Afghan refugees have also relocated to Turkey and Europe where they are second on the list after Syria, in terms of the largest refugee population.³²

Around 97 per cent of refugees from Afghanistan are settled in urban or semi-urban areas where they have acquired jobs as domestic help or as labourers in construction sites in Iran. Only 3 per cent of the total number of refugees has been able to manage shelter in camps regulated by local governments. They are exempted from medical assistance and are in dire need of humanitarian help. Government estimates have asserted that nearly 42 per cent of the population in Afghanistan lives below the poverty line which makes it difficult for the civilians to cope with harrowing effects of the pandemic.³³ At such a time, the situation takes a critical turn when some 150,000 refugees are deported from Iran to this war-torn territory or around 70,000 returnees from Pakistan add to the overwhelming numbers.

In such trying times, several organizations have stepped in to ease tensions. For instance, Pakistan has urged its UNHCR representative to divert funds to provide food assistance to some 2.8 million registered Afghan refugees settled in camps in Pakistan.³⁴ The

UNHCR along with several other donor agencies have also announced some relief packages for these displaced communities. In the words of Arsalan Kharoti, who heads an aid agency working for the refugees settled in Pakistan, the UNHCR had announced to offer Rs. 12,000 for refugee families.³⁵ However, his claims have also asserted that many families have been exempted from this amount.

The WHO has provided extensive medical assistance by establishing nearly seven testing laboratories and introducing training programmes for the frontline workers.³⁶ Other international aid agencies like the Red Cross have also been working to substantially be able to scale up their activities.³⁷ The need of the hour is a collaborative response by the government and humanitarian organizations to prioritize the lives of refugees and chalk out economic and healthcare measures to their benefit,

- ***Overview of the Rohingya refugee crisis:*** One of the major refugee concerns in South Asia is the Rohingyas who have been fleeing their original land, Myanmar over the last couple of years. The outbreak of the pandemic is the latest addition to the long list of calamities that have affected the Rohingyas. According to UN official figures, nearly a million Rohingya refugees have settled worldwide.³⁸ Their largest refugee camps are at Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh that houses nearly 900,000 refugees.³⁹ Authorities in Bangladesh are well aware of the risks of a massive viral outbreak in the Rohingya refugee camps. Most of these camps are deprived of healthy, proper living conditions, prompt access to healthcare and clean water supply. This has led them to gear up to thwart the effects of the infection inside the camps.

Tensions erupted in August 2017 when some 740,000 Muslim Rohingyas escaped a military genocide in Rakhine, in the northwest of Myanmar and made landfall into Bangladesh. This just added to an existing list of 200,000 refugees that had entered Bangladesh due to ongoing violence since 1970.⁴⁰ The unfortunate arrival of the pandemic has exacerbated uncertainties among the refugees who are now confronted with new possibilities of repatriation. According to a refugee settled in the Kutupalong camp, settlements are made of bamboo and plastic sheets and are very similar to overcrowded

slums with a population nearing 500,000. Poor living conditions have increased fears of contracting the virus among them. Due to the high population density which is nearly 70,000 per sq.km, social distancing or isolation norms seem far-fetched.

Apart from fearing the virus, the Rohingya refugees became targets of widespread rumours. Those residing in the refugee camps were under the impression that the pandemic is a tool to abduct and kill the refugees inside hospitals. Lack of awareness and public distrust stopped a number of refugees from visiting isolation centres and avoiding tests.⁴¹ Most of the refugees seemed to have been escaping the camps due to fear of further repatriation. The UNHCR claimed that it had been working along with the Bangladeshi government to not only dismiss such rumours and miscommunication but also bridge the communication gap to enable the Rohingyas to avoid the major threat to survival. In the light of such fast spreading rumours, Rohingya leaders have also urged the Bangladeshi government to lift internet bans to ensure free flow of credible information inside the refugee camps.⁴²

The camps recorded no confirmed case until May. However, according to the UNHCR, the real numbers remain uncertain due to limiting testing facilities. Nearly five months into the virus, Cox's Bazar observed only 145 people being tested for the virus.⁴³ Since the advent of the pandemic, the purchasing ability of households has shrunk due to loss of jobs and income. The World Health Organization had already announced that protection of vulnerable refugees is the central focus of their programme. It has trained around 300 volunteers to facilitate an appropriate contact tracing of positive cases. Apart from this, the WHO has also provided technical and medical assistance to improve testing facilities. The World Food Programme has provided rations and cash to support the vulnerable community.⁴⁴ However, despite the provisions, the refugees continued to be engulfed in misery as the Cyclone Amphan posed an enormous threat to their livelihood.

What is the way forward?

The global refugee crisis that affects the world today is definitely not a current phenomenon. It has been prevailing for several decades and has just taken a brutal shape in the wake of the pandemic. The refugee crisis has always managed to escape a cooperative global agenda. Therefore, the appropriate tackling of the situation lies in the formulation of long term goals and measures tailored specifically to safeguard these marginalized communities from emergency situations in the future. Several measures can be incorporated into the global agenda to address this indispensable humanitarian crisis.

First, the response to the refugee crisis in general should be inclusive. The practice of discriminatory laws has always impacted the refugees by harming their liberties. In order to curb the pandemic, the policies implemented by many host countries, seem tailor-made to especially hurt the refugees. For instance, in Lebanon, where nearly 1.5 million Syrian refugees take shelter, the local authorities have imposed mobility restrictions that do not apply to the Lebanese citizens but only to the Syrian refugees.⁴⁵ Again, in the quarantine centres established at the Ritsona camp in Greece, the country's Ministry of Migration announced that movements in and out of the camp will be restricted and thoroughly monitored by the police.⁴⁶ Constant checks on movement constitute major challenges for refugees who often have to travel to specific areas to avail drinking water, latrines or the food supplies from aid agencies. Thus, policies formulated by local authorities and leaders should be in accordance with these considerations so as to not deprive these vulnerable of basic humanitarian assistance.

Second, donors, NGOs, aid agencies and local governments must attempt to collaborate and improve water, sanitation and hygiene facilities inside the camps. This will not only help in creating public awareness on the importance of health and hygiene but also protect the refugees from fatal infections like the COVID 19 or future epidemics. Resources like soaps, towels and water taps must also be made easily available in an attempt to spread awareness and shield the lives of millions.

Third, establishing communication and smooth flow of trusted information is very important. Global and local authorities should develop trusted figures within the camps in terms of NGOs, leaders and so on, to make the refugees aware of the pandemic situation in the wider community

and the response undertaken to combat it. Unlike the case in Bangladesh, it is imperative to lift internet restrictions and allow easier flow of information regarding the importance of social distancing, isolation, washing of hands and testing.

As the entire world is torn apart by the pandemic, it is only important to ensure that the tragic tale of refugees and IDPs are not forgotten and unheard. No human being deserves to live a life deprived of basic rights or constantly threatened by external and internal factors. In the words of a refugee trapped in these camps, “What we need from the government is empathy...What people do not understand is that ‘refugee’ is a word of peace. All the things we are accused of-war, terrorism, torture-these are things that we have run away from to be safe. We are also suffering with you in this pandemic, treat us as human beings.”⁴⁷

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