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Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Europe: Unfolding of a Humanitarian Crisis from Human Rights Perspective

Sudhansu Sekhar Datta

Assistant Professor, Vidyasagar School of Social Work, Vidyasagar University, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

The paper first outlines the unfolding refugee crisis as different European nations have witnessed influx of millions of refugees and asylum seekers mainly from the war ravaged Syria and other Middle -East countries like Iraq. It also defines the concept of refugees as per the United Nations Convention and the practical difficulties to implement those in the reality. The possible reasons behind this crisis are also highlighted and the response of different nations has been outlined. The role of humanitarian aid workers and social workers is explored to mitigate the sufferings of the refugees and revival of their faith and trust on the foundations of humanity. As this crisis is perceived to be a long term problem, the need for developing International Cooperation and coordination is urged. This paper is concluded by issuing a note of caution that this crisis has the potentials to destroy the world peace and security in the coming days if it is not handled properly.

Keywords: Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Convention, crisis, human rights, humanitarian aid, social worker

1. Introduction

The iconic photograph of the lifeless body of three-year-old Aylan kurdi on the beach of Turkey published in the different print medias and circulated on the electronic medias in September, stirred the conscience of the world population. Aylan along with his five-year-old brother and mother could not make it to the Europe where millions are seeking refuge to escape from the persecution and uncertainties that prevail in the lives in their own land. The photograph draws the world attention to the recent refugee crisis that the Europe is facing and yet to find out a possible solution to provide to the refugees. The popular support for the refugees has forced almost all the European Union nations to think over the matter and responding to the crisis.

In the recent time, the refugee crisis is intensifying in various European

Countries. The world has witnessed exodus of millions from war ravaged Syria and other Middle-East countries like Iraq. Lives are at stake for thousands because of this unprecedented humanitarian crisis of the 21st century which can only be compared to the mass displacement and forced migration occurred during the Second World War. Initially, most countries of Europe were reluctant but after the massive and mounting public pressure, they started to act. The situation is further complicated after the suicide attacks in Paris, the cultural capital of Europe. There are considerable differences of opinions among the nation states regarding the solution and addressing this unfolding problem. The problem did not appear overnight and it is directly linked with the political movements and upheavals in the recent past. The genesis of this crisis can be traced to the policies followed by the Western Countries to dictate the course of human civilization on earth.

The major contributor of the refugees is of course Syria but the migration wave started in 2011 itself after the Arab spring. The rebels were backed by the United States to throw their government in Libya and it was thought that these initiatives would ultimately liberate the countrymen from the tyranny of the ruler. It eventually forced thousands to flee their country when the war broke out between Government forces and rebels. Even in Syria, the rising numbers of internally displaced persons and asylum seekers in Europe can be also linked to the faulty Western policies and armed interventions. United States backed the uprising against the Syrian president which ultimately resulted in the rise of Iraq Syria Islamic State (ISIS), a radical Islamic Group which has no respect for the human lives and human rights. This is an unfortunate fall out that by 2014, 4 million Syrians became refugees living outside Syria (Menon, 2015). The situation has further worsened in the 2015 and the European countries which have supported directly or indirectly the US-led intervention to provide justice to the people of these troubled countries, are now facing the influx of millions of refugees from these countries and are not in a position to hide behind the façade of logical argument that these people are merely “economic migrants”. This can be evident from the statement issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees who has categorically added that this influx is a “refugee crisis, not only a migration phenomenon” (Menon,2015, p.48). It is pertinent to mention that refugees and asylum seekers are mostly coming from those countries which have faced or encountered US- military intervention. The U.N data shows that wars and insurrections have made 14 million people refugees in North African Countries and in different West Asian nations including Syria and Iraq (Cherian, 2015, p.61).

1.1. Objectives

The current paper seeks to examine the following-

- To examine the refugee crisis that is tormenting the European countries
- To explain the refugee rights from human rights perspective and possible reasons for escalation of the problem and the challenges faced by refugees
- To describe the humanitarian responses and role of social workers in response to the crisis.

2. Research Methodology

The authors of this paper completely depend on the secondary sources. The secondary data were collected from various publications, books, study report, magazine, newspapers and internet website.

2.1. Refugees, Asylum Seekers: Concepts, Rights and Challenges that Lies Ahead

Understanding of the crisis and possible solutions lies in the existing mechanisms and its use. It is pertinent to inquire the question: who is a refugee or when a person becomes an asylum seeker? It is generally found that there is confusion about the difference between an asylum seeker and a refugee. An asylum seeker is someone who is seeking international protection but whose claim for refugee status has not yet been determined (Phillips, 2011, p.3). On the other hand, the United Nations 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol defines the "refugee" as "A person who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country". So it can be construed that "refugee" does not cover other individuals or groups of people who flees their country only because of war or other civil disturbance, famine, natural disaster or in order to seek a better life. So the refugees who are coming to Europe through Turkey can be best described as the asylum seekers rather than refugees.

The refugees tide is not equally welcomed in different nations as some of the governments like Hungary, Czech Republic and few Eastern European countries have shown open hostilities towards the migrants. Even though the European nations under European Union (EU) Laws are obliged to share the burden of refugees in an equitable manner, differences have come into open regarding how to deal with the refugees. Germany initially had shown liberal attitude and promised to take 800000 refugees but after the initial weeks of crisis, it has hardened its stance and contemplating to enact new laws that would make it easier for asylum seekers to be deported to their own country (Cherian, 2015, p.62). The trend shows that it is Germany and Sweden which have evolved as the preferred destinations of refugees. Developed nations like France and Great Britain are reluctant to shoulder the burden of this refugee population. The things have become more complicated after the Paris attack which is claimed by ISIS. Even the liberal sympathizers of European nations have started questioning the policy of creating refugee corridor and giving refugee. The right wing politicians and community organizations in respective countries have started agitations against the liberal refugee policy followed in Western and Northern Europe. The incidence of riots has been reported from Sweden (Bagchi, 2015, p. 13). Hungary has closed their borders with Croatia Slovenia. Poland and Switzerland have imposed their own version of control.

Meanwhile, the refugees who have till recently enjoyed popular support and human treatment on arrival to an unknown European city may be treated with disdain and suspicion after the terrorist attacks. There is apprehension among the refugees that they may even face forced deportation to the land of persecution controlled by the Non-State terrorist's organization like ISIS or ravaged by internal conflicts and war. It is true that a section of the refugees has sneaked in the hope of having a good quality of life. They may be segregated in future and may be sent back to their home. The refugees may face discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation especially after the Paris carnage carried by the Islamic terrorists. The headlines like "Far right calls for border closure, end to migration"; "Attack boosts Right- wingers call for strict immigration norms"; "Rattled Europe may start slamming doors on refugees"; "Syrian refugees will be worst hits" highlights the deepening humanitarian crisis that is looming large before the millions of refugees who are going to face hard winter this time. There is hardly any alternative left to them as they could not turn back to their nations as most of the war ravaged countries have lost the economic- social and political structures thus making it impossible to find out a secure livelihood (Tripathi, 2015). The Gulf countries have not opened the gates for Muslim brethren and the spirit of Muslim brotherhood is conspicuously missing in the Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Amnesty International, a leading human rights organization has called the Gulf State's behavior as "utterly shameful" (The Times of india, 08.09.2015, p.16). So the refugees cannot turn back and at the same time have to face the growing dissent among the citizens of European countries who may perceive a threat in future regarding the preservation of their cultures and negotiating with the refugees in the field of livelihood, shelter and social insurance facilities provided by the States.

The right wing politicians have already started spreading fears that Islamic terrorists had have sneaked in Europe in the disguise of refugees and would ultimately threaten the peace, tranquility and the European Life style in the coming days. Even the supporters of the liberal refugee policy followed in different nations have "questioned the impact of the arrival of 750,000 migrants this year alone will have on the continent" (Chaudhury, 2015, p.3).

The refugee policies followed by different European nations have already created rift among the leaders and allegations are often heard against each other which is quite unhealthy as it may jeopardize the unity and stability of the European Union (EU). Even the refugee quota which in obligatory in nature is threatened not to be observed by few countries. This is disturbing especially in the wake of refugee crisis which cannot be addressed by any single nation.

If the nations both European and Non- European fail to address this issue, then there is every possibility that conflicts would escalate further in the world. The refugees and asylum seekers who have crossed over to Europe for search of security and livelihood after

facing numerous hardships on the way, may not remain silent if the basic necessities are not found in their perceived land of peace and security. The European societies would ultimately face an upheaval in absence of a logical solution to the problem. There is ever possibility that if this generation does not get access to the basic human rights like right to life, right to access to food, shelter, medical assistance and at a later point the right to livelihood, they may turn violent and would be exploited by the Non- State Terrorist organizations to spread hatred, riots and terrorist activities.

The challenges that the European societies are supposed to encounter in the coming years may be visualized as the problem of social integration of the refugees in the mainstream, the identity crisis faced by the generation which have come to stay over, the spread of radicalism, issues of cultural relativism, economic stress, weakening of the social security measures, unemployment problem, supply of civic necessities required for maintaining quality of life etc. The material implications of the presence of huge number of refugees are already being felt in many countries (Ghose, 2015, p.64). It is true that the burden on the health care facilities and several other facilities like electricity cannot be overhauled within a short period. So rationing of many facilities is the only alternative right now which in turn may ignite the public dissent which can be exploited by the right –wing politicians to create a rift in the society. The ordinary citizens of the European cities may not be willing to sacrifice the quality of life if austerity drive is taken up by the administration. Simultaneously the liberal entry right may inspire more to come to Europe which would have irreversible decaying effect on the European civilization. The problems are numerous and it is predicted that this crisis would last longer than anticipated. It is evident from the reactions of the several nations which indicate that European Union is yet to formulate a pragmatic policy of countering this humanitarian crisis that has snowballed in the Western Europe since World War-II.

2.2. Humanitarian Response and Role of Social Workers

Refugee crisis in fact throws a challenge before the humanity and needs urgent response. It is heartwarming experience to see on the media reports that common people of different European have welcomed the exhausted migrants from troubled zones of Middle East. Millions through their social media network have pledged support for the asylum seekers. Even Pope Francis has called for the parishes to disseminate the message among the Christian families to take one refugee (Menon,2015, p.50). This is no doubt a very good proposal for humanitarian cause even then it will be debated how far it is practicable to accommodate an unknown individual within family and how far is it logical to separate an individual from his family just for sake of survival. Number of humanitarian organizations like Migrant Offshore Aid Station, Medecins Sans Frontieres, the Aylan Kurdi Fund, Save the Children and many others have come forward to help the distressed refugee population.

Social workers have a pivotal role to play in this circumstance and they are doing their best at the bus stops, railway stations and registration centers. They are arranging foods, blankets and firewood to withstand the hard winter of Europe. They are also felicitating the refugees to overcome different hardships. It is true that it is just the beginning as the refugees start settling down; there would be bigger challenges for the social workers. The wound that has been created by the forced displacement would take years perhaps decades to heal. The social workers need to remain vigilant to protect the social solidarity which would be under stress in the coming years. Refugees should face intense competition from the locals to survive and hence there is a possibility for reduced respect for the human rights norms in the society. The women and children would suffer more than the adult males. The human traffickers would have heydays. The spectre of sexual abuse, prostitution, lack of governance and corruption is looming large on the nations. The social workers may need to use the group work method to alleviate the pain and suffering of the refugees. The community organization would be an important method to maintain the peace and initiating the integration process in the European societies. The helping hands of the social workers would be sought after in the refugee camps where the people would jostle for space. If the borders are closed down, there would be rise of illegal trades like human smuggling, human trafficking etc. The social workers need to organize the refugees by using all the available programmes and use of self to spread awareness regarding social evils. They will be pressed in the service by the humanitarian aid agencies and respective governments to assess the trauma and its mental consequences of being displaced from own land. The medical psychiatrist social workers would face huge number of patients who have experienced nervous breakdown because of the perilous journey and the loss that they have suffered. It can be safely presumed that most of the European neighborhood would experience a high level of social tensions because of the presence of the refugees who have different life style, cultural norms and religious ethos. The Social workers should be alert to counter the conflict arising out of these contradictions. The establishment of social cohesiveness in the European societies largely depend on the successful intervention of social work methods in the coming days.

3. Conclusion

The impending humanitarian crisis on the European nations cannot be solved by the goodwill of the people of the continent. The United Nations has realized the gravity of the situation and called for an International intervention. The days of uncontrolled immigration cannot be the solution. The solution lies in the creation of a safe and secure world keeping in mind the spirit of Universal Declaration of Human Rights which requires unified efforts on part of the all nations irrespective of their size, geographical location, political structure, social system and economic status on this planet.

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