

Refugee Crises around the World Today

Eesha Pathak & Dr. Sharmiladevi J.C

Symbiosis Centre for Management Studies

Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, India

Abstract

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 65.6 million refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and asylum seekers across the world. One in every 113 people on Earth has now been driven from their home by persecution, conflict and violence or human rights violations. Roughly 50% of all refugees are children under the age of 18 – despite the fact that children only make up about 30% of the world’s population. The number of refugees has nearly doubled in the past 20 years. We live in a rapidly changing world in which refugees and forced migration have a significant impact on the economic, political and social agendas of sovereign states, intergovernmental agencies and civil society groups. Refugees have been the focus of considerable public concern in recent years and of a range of government and community responses. This conceptual paper makes an attempt to look into few dimensions of the refugee issues like origin and nature and assess the current refugee situation across the major part of the world. Although there is no single or set of solutions to overcome and face the refugee crisis, some practical solutions have been suggested from the academic point of view.

Keywords: refugees, internally displaced persons, asylum seekers, persecution, conflict, human rights.

Introduction

Motivation for choosing the topic

With the plight of Rohingyas coming up in the news, and the endless agony being faced by those displaced as a result of the conflict in the Middle-East and Africa, I was motivated to undertake this study. I did not stick to only one conflict zone, and chose to briefly study the conflicts all over the world, because all other conflicts are not getting enough media attention, with only a few being in focus.

Origin and Nature

As per Merriam-Webster, the word refugee came directly from the French word *réfugié* with a very specific meaning: it referred to Protestants who fled France following the revocation in 1685 of the Edict of Nantes, the law that granted religious liberty and civil rights to the Protestant Huguenots for nearly a century. Within a decade, *refugee* was being used more generally in English to refer to anyone who was forced to flee to a place of safety, often because of danger or persecution because of religious or political beliefs. 24 people per minute – this is the number of people that flee their homes fearing persecution and war, in hopes of a better and safer place elsewhere. This number amounts to 34,000 people per day. This means, every day, 34,000 new people get characterised as refugees (www.care.org, N.A.).

When persecution, war or violence forces a person to flee his or her own country, that person becomes characterised as a refugee. A refugee has a well-grounded fear of persecution due to his or her race, religion, political opinion, nationality or allegiance towards a particular social group. Many of these refugees either cannot return home or are under a constant fear of doing so. Apart from ‘refugee’, another term we all have come across today is ‘Internally Displaced Person (IDP)’. An IDP is a person who, due to the same reasons as those of refugees, has fled his or her home but has not crossed international borders. As a result, an IDP remains within his or her own country. One of the major flaws in the international legal system is that it does not recognize and protect IDPs and hence makes them ineligible to receive many types of aid. (www.care.org, N.A.)

The problem of protecting and assisting IDPs is not a new issue. In international law it is the responsibility of the government concerned to provide assistance and protection for the IDPs

in their country. However, as many of the displaced are a result of civil conflict and violence or where the authority of the central state is in doubt, there is no local authority willing to provide assistance and protection. It has been estimated that some 5 million IDPs in 11 countries are "without any significant humanitarian assistance from their governments". Under these circumstances rehabilitation policies on humanitarian grounds should be aimed at reducing inequality of opportunity among these vulnerable groups by integrating them into local social services and allowing them access to jobs, education, and healthcare opportunities; otherwise new conflicts might break out

Unlike the case of refugees, there is no international humanitarian institution which has the overall responsibility of protecting and assisting the refugees as well as the internally displaced. A number of organizations have stepped into the breach in specific circumstances. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was mandated by General Assembly Resolution 428 (V) of 14 December 1950 to "lead and coordinate international action for the worldwide protection of refugees and the resolution of refugee problems....guided by the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. The refugee phenomenon is not novel and the current refugee crisis is definitely not unprecedented. The following is a timeline of the various refugee crises the world has seen since the First World War.

Timeline of the refugee crises across the world: -

1914-1918 World War 1

- Roughly 8 million people of the Russian Tsar fled their homes

1938-1949 Japanese Invasion of China and Chinese revolution

- 90 million displaced

1939-1945 World War 2

- 60 million people displaced in Europe

1947 **Partition of India**

- 14.5 million displaced in India and Pakistan

Since 1948 **Israel Palestine Conflict**

- 5.1 million Palestenian refugees have fled their homes

1949 **Chinese Revolution**

- 90 million displaced due to the revolution that created the People's Republic of China

1950-1953 **Korean War**

- 1 to 5 million refugees fled

1955-1975 **Vietnam War**

- 3 million displaced

Since 1979 **Wars in Afghanistan**

- 2.6 million have fled Afghanistan

Since 1991 **Somalia**

- 1.1 million displaced

1994 **Democratic Republic of Congo**

- 3.5 million have been displaced

Since 2003 **Iraq**

- 4 million displaced

Since 2011 Syria

- 4 million have fled the country and 7.6 million have been internally displaced

2012 Myanmar

- 479,000 have been displaced

Source: (*The Hindu*, 2015)

Literature Review

Gatrell, (2017) talks about what makes up the definition of a “refugee”. He talks about how there has not been enough media attention towards certain fractions of refugees along with their wrong portrayal as those who have lost everything or are incapable of contributing productively to the host country. This article also gives a glimpse into the history of the refugee crisis – all the way from World War 1 to the Rohingyas. This article also throws light on the international response on the crisis and the various international institutions set up over the years that help in dealing with the crisis – League of Nations, United Nations Refugee Convention and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Caryl, (2016) gives an overview about how low- and middle-income countries are housing most of the refugees today, some of them being Jordan, Turkey, Pakistan and Ethiopia. The author talks about how the world’s richest countries like USA, Canada and Japan are protected from the refugee crisis because of their geographical location. He urges these countries, along with the aforementioned ones, to adopt a global approach to solving the refugee crisis.

Wildman, (2017) focuses more on Donald Trump’s stance on the refugee crisis and the signing of the executive order banning immigrants from seven Muslim-majority countries. The author throws light on these topics – definition and numbers of refugees worldwide, number of refugees that have entered USA, the vetting process for their entry into the USA, what the refugees are fleeing from, etc.

Helen Clark, (2016) states some statistics on the refugee crisis. It also talks about the United Nation’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and how the international community’s approach is not up to the mark. The authors urge changes to be made in the political and economic scenario surrounding this topic. Slaughter, (2015) – This article talks about how the

debate by USA and Europe on the fear of terrorists entering their countries as refugees is a flawed one. The author states that limited asylum quotas and temporary refugee camps are not the solution to the existing problem; there need to be places/cities that can house millions of refugees. The author illustrates this by giving the example of Naguib Sawaris who plans to settle hundreds of thousands of refugees on two Greek islands he owns. She also talks about how countries can build cities to house these refugees.

Khasru, (2017) throws light on the various structural flaws in the international organisations which limits their effectiveness. The author focuses more on the defects in United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and International Organisation for Migration and suggests solutions for the same. Silva, (2017) indicates how countries are not using their funds to help refugees and war-torn countries in the way intended. Due to this, the economic burden of supporting the refugees falls on the low- and middle-income countries in which these refugees seek asylum.

Deva,(2017) – this article throws light on the fact that we as people are not handling the refugee crisis in a proper manner. Simply absorbing the refugee flows into a country is not a solution; it is only through the observation of the root causes of this crisis that will help in alleviating the problem. The author talks about a financial model – blending of public, private and charitable contributions and mobilisation of the same. Ros, (2017) gives 15 astounding statistics on the refugee crisis around the world up-to 2017. This includes the total number of refugees, countries from which they originate and settle into, etc.

Current Situation

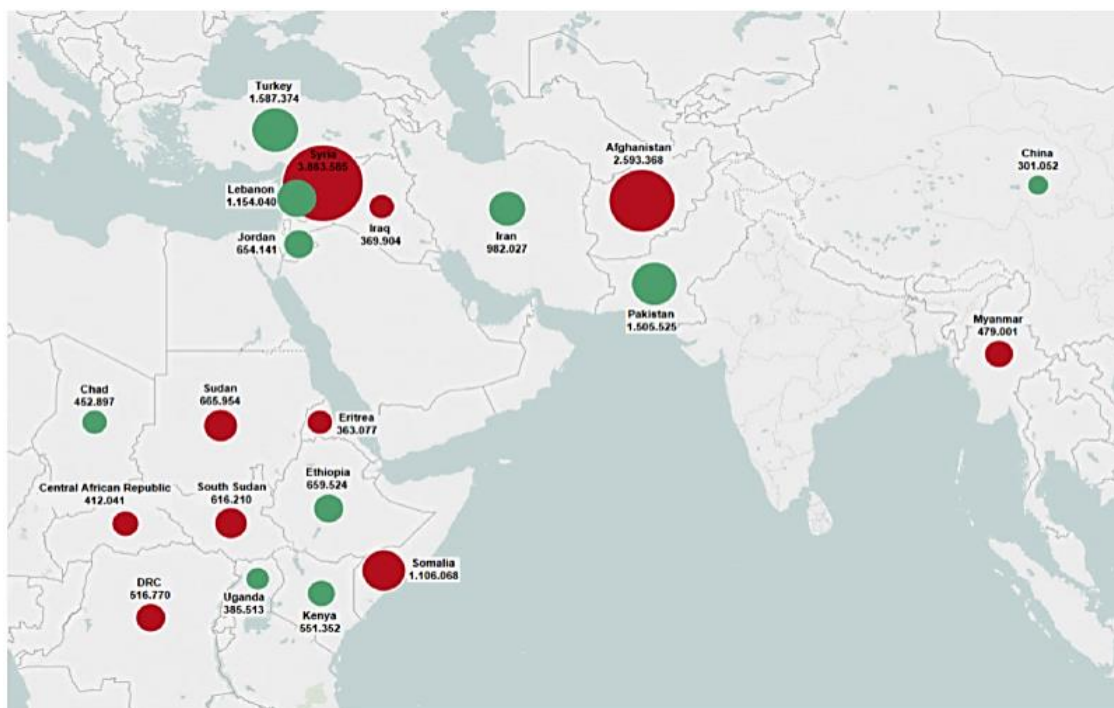
One in every 113 people in the world is a refugee (Wildman, 2017). The current refugee crisis is the worst the world has witnessed since the World Wars. The conflicts in the Middle-East, especially Syria, Iraq and Yemen, the civil unrest in Central African Republic, Nigeria, South Sudan and Burundi, and the social turmoil in the Rakhine province in Myanmar has contributed the most to the ongoing refugee crisis in the world. 2014 was the worst year in terms of the refugee crisis. About 42,500 people fled their homes every day. This number is four times than that in 2010 (Helen Clark, 2016)

Today, the number of refugees amounts to 65 million, roughly the size of six Swedens (Slaughter, 2015). In 2016, over 7500 migrants died while fleeing their countries (Haque, 2017). In the first half of 2017 alone, more than 2000 people have lost their lives trying to cross

the Mediterranean to get to better lands (Khasru, 2017). Almost 5 million of these refugees originate from Syria (Wildman, 2017). Other war-torn countries from which refugees originate are Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan, etc. These refugees seek asylum in countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, etc. Middle East and North Africa hosts 39 percent of refugees, Africa hosts 29 percent, Americas host 18 percent and Asia and the Pacific hosts 14 percent. Germany, Hungary and Sweden host the most number of refugees in Europe (Ros, 2017).

All countries have an estimated number of refugees that will enter into their country. Canada, Germany and Norway are at the top of the list, receiving and welcoming 250 percent, 144 percent and 118 percent of their estimates, respectively. The countries at the bottom of this list are USA, Spain and France, all accepting a mere 10 percent. Japan, Russia and South Korea accepted zero percent of these estimates (Ros, 2017).

Fig. 1 – A map of the top 10 countries from which refugees originate (red) and to which they settle (green).

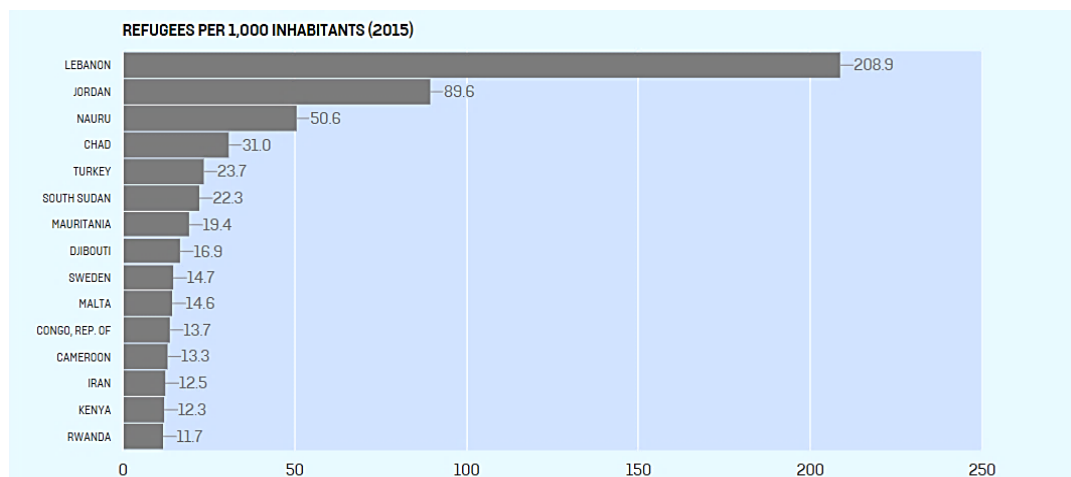


Source: (Gatrell, 2017)

It can be seen from the graph below that a maximum number of these 65 million refugees settle in countries neighbouring their war-torn nations. Nine out of ten refugees flee to neighbouring countries (Ros, 2017). Taking the example of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey – these countries

are not particularly wealthy. These countries belong to the low- and middle-income category. In spite of this, they house more number of refugees than the wealthy West.

Fig. 2 – Refugees per 1000 inhabitants.



Source (Caryl, 2016)

Some international organisations that work towards helping alleviate this crisis are the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organisation for Migration (IOM). These agencies have done tremendous work so far. They are funded by governments and inter-governmental organisations. However, these agencies face a lot of challenges. Talking about the UNHCR – it does not have broad enforcement powers and relies on government cooperation, which is not always guaranteed in conflict zones. Also, its communication with refugees on ground is inconsistent. It heavily depends on donations. It was underfunded by \$10.3 billion in 2015 (Ros, 2017). Like the UNHCR, the IOM also suffers from these problems – a mismatch between its mission and implementation, its budget, etc. (Khasru, 2017). Governmental cooperation and better funding are essential for the proper functioning of these organisations which in turn will help assuage the crisis faced by millions of refugees.

These agencies depend on the efforts taken by the government of various countries. However, these countries themselves are not doing their fair share for helping the people. The costs that European countries spend on the refugees that enter their country is being reported as Official Development Assistance (ODA), a measure developed by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) used to track international aid spending. In 2015, the EU's DAC members spent \$9.7 billion of their ODA budget on refugees in their country, and only \$3.2 billion of

their budget on war-torn countries (Silva, 2017). If countries continue to divert their funds this way, it will not help to alleviate matters.

Lessons Learnt

One lesson to be learnt from the refugee crises, that is common since the First World War till today, is that wars are inevitable. Conflicts among nations have grown to a new high this century. Wars, famines, persecution and other circumstances have forced millions of people to be displaced over the last century.

Looking at how the refugee crises was dealt with in the past century, we can see that a better approach needs to be adopted. At first, after World War 1, the League of Nations was established. This institution failed to provide adequate aid to all those 8 million refugees that were displaced. Then came the World War 2, after which the United Nations was established. The UN did a fair job in alleviating the problem of the refugees and it still continues to work today. However, the contribution of the UN and other similar institutions is not enough. These institutions lack funds and enforcement powers necessary for them to function more effectively.

Even though integration of global communities has occurred over the past few decades, the governments of these countries need to put in more efforts in order to unite further. A better integration of the governments and communities of the world will ensure that the refugee crisis does not deteriorate further.

The global community cannot do much to prevent wars and conflicts from occurring. All we can do is provide better aid and be welcoming to those suffering during this crisis.

Recommendations for Future

Taking into consideration the authors' opinions and interpretations from this study, the following recommendations are proposed: -

1. **Better treatment of refugees** – All the refugees today are given humanitarian aid, which seems like a good option considering the current situation. However, this aid does not do enough to help the refugees. They are only provided with the basic necessities like shelter, food, sanitation, etc. However, not much is done for their development. Refugees must be given developmental aid apart from the basic humanitarian aid. These refugees are treated

as passive recipients of aid without the ability to contribute productively to the economy of the host country (Helen Clark, 2016). This must be stopped. With proper education and training, these refugees will definitely be able to contribute to the growth of the host country's economy. For this purpose, NGOs involved in educating the under-privileged in the host countries can take initiatives to educate the refugees as well.

2. **Blend funds** – This requires creation of a model which blends public, private and charitable contributions. Private-sector standards should be followed while allocating these funds which will ensure effective and efficient mobilisation of funds. This model has already been put to use – a World Economic Forum survey found that every \$1 invested in such initiatives attracted as much as \$20 of private investments (Deva, 2017)
3. **Make international organisations more powerful** – International organisations working to find a solution to the refugee crises such as UNHCR, IOM, etc need to be given more power and funds to function effectively. These organisations lack the funds to carry out their intended operations in a proper manner. Apart from this, they also lack human capital on the ground to address the plight of the refugees and provide them with necessary help. Another problem faced by these agencies is that they are not well integrated around the world. They heavily depend on government integration which may not always be possible, especially among conflict-torn countries.
4. **Develop areas of permanent residence** – Conflicts all around the world do not seem to end. Many of the refugees fleeing their home countries do not wish to go back, given the fear of war and persecution. They wish to seek asylum in and become permanent residents of safer countries. A majority of those displaced spend decades and lifetimes in exile (Helen Clark, 2016). The only solution to this is to develop dedicated areas around the world that can house these refugees permanently. This has already been initiated by Naguib Sarawis, an Egyptian billionaire and the owner of two Greek islands who plans to develop them, by employing the refugees themselves, in order to house them (Slaughter, 2015). If Saudi Arabia can build a \$500 billion city to house robots, the least the countries around the world can do is develop areas to house the refugees in distress.

It is now time for us all to integrate our actions and work in unity to aid the anguishing refugees.

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