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## **Forced Migration: Some Sobering Realities**

*By Mely Caballero-Anthony*

### **Synopsis**

*There is an unprecedented global phenomenon of people uprooted and displaced due to conflicts and disasters. The need to contain and reverse this trend is dire. The immensity of the problem requires no less than a global solution, underscoring a shared responsibility among different actors of the international community.*

### **Commentary**

THE FIGURES on forced migration released recently by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) present alarming trends that the global community should pay attention to for a better perspective of their implications to state and people's security. The UNHCR's 2015 Global Trends Report stated that the number of people displaced from their homes due to conflict and persecution in 2015 reached 65 million.

This latest number is five million more than the 2014 figures of 59.5 million. According to the UN agency, this record displacement is unprecedented in human history, and exceeds the number of people displaced during the Second World War period.

### **Who Are the Forced Migrants?**

The International Migration Organisation (IOM) puts displacement along the category of irregular/forced migration, broadly defined as cases that occur outside the regulatory norms of the countries of origin, transit and destination. Both the IOM and the UNHCR consider irregular or forced migrants to include refugees, asylum

seekers and those with specific needs such as trafficked persons, stateless persons and internally displaced due to conflicts and natural disasters.

The UNHCR Report notes that of the 65 million displaced people, 21 million are refugees, three million are asylum seekers and 41 million are those internally displaced within their own countries. The total number of 65 million, when measured against the world's population of 7.4 billion people, means that one in every 113 people around the world is now either a refugee, an asylum seeker or internally displaced.

While half of these refugees come from war-torn countries—Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia - it is noteworthy that the other half are also from developing countries in the global south that experience a range of conflicts and humanitarian disasters.

### **Beyond the Numbers**

Understanding the gravity of the crises of massive global displacement compels one to go beyond the numbers and examine the plight of these people on the move. Behind every number is an individual, a family, a group and a community who face not only an uncertain future but also have to endure the physical and mental pain and suffering of being rendered homeless—either internally displaced or forced to flee to another country to seek refuge and hope to be resettled in another country.

According to UNHCR, on average about 42,500 people are forced out of their homes every day, and about two thirds of these are women and children. A number of these women are exposed to great risks of violence and sexual abuse, often at the hands of unscrupulous smugglers and human traffickers.

Children on the other hand face greater dangers. Many of these children are separated from their parents or are travelling alone. The UNHCR Report notes that children make up 51 per cent of the world's refugees. So far, there were 98,400 asylum requests from unaccompanied or separated children, which is the highest total the UNHCR has seen. According to them this is “a tragic reflection of how global forced displacement is disproportionately affecting young lives”.

This staggering figure also highlights the plight of the most vulnerable group of forced migrants whose lives are at risk as they take on treacherous journeys in search for safety and security. In September 2015, the searing image of a lifeless body of a young boy washed ashore in Turkey after having crossed the Mediterranean Sea raised questions about how the international community ought to respond to such humanitarian tragedies.

It has been reported that since late 2015, an average of two children die every day as hundreds of families take on perilous journeys to escape conflict and despair, and this number is expected to grow, according to the UNHCR and UNICEF, the UN fund for children's rights and protection.

### **Not Only a European Problem**

Most of the attention on forced migrants had focused mainly on the challenges facing

Europe as destination countries like Italy, Germany and Greece tried to provide immediate shelter, while many others grappled with the massive influx of people desperate to enter. The push-back against irregular migrants particularly against refugees, has been strong.

The choices presented to many polities in Europe are often starkly framed: economic issues such as unemployment, worries about social cohesion, fears about religious extremism and security against concerns about human rights, humanitarianism and international solidarity.

But Europe alone does not bear the burden. According to one refugee expert, Khalid Koser, 85 per cent of refugees are found in the developing world. Refugee camps are bursting in countries like Lebanon and Jordan, and in African countries like Kenya—a fact often missed in the debates about the refugee crises in Europe.

Asia has its share of refugees, despite the absence of major wars in the region. The UNHCR 2015 figures show that Southeast Asia is home to more than 500,000 refugees and asylum seekers who are from within the region and beyond. Be they the boat people stranded at sea or the stateless ones camped in refugee camps in Thailand, their plight presents challenges to governments in ASEAN and the humanitarian community to demonstrate a serious and collective effort to deal with the urgent humanitarian needs of these people.

### **Shared Responsibility**

At the UN General Assembly Meeting in September 2015, Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon had implored the international community to act collectively to address the crises of massive forced displacement. Mr Ban had called for a global compact and a greater sharing of responsibility among states to deal with the unprecedented humanitarian crises facing the global community.

To be sure, addressing the complexity of challenges of providing security and protection to the massively displaced population around the world requires comprehensive measures and at multiple levels that are sustainable and people-oriented. These include a range of efforts from providing immediate shelter, allowing safe passage to legalising migration and resettlement.

It also requires stepping up law enforcement to individuals and groups involved in human trafficking and migrant smuggling syndicates. Undertaking such a huge challenge requires the involvement of different actors—local communities, civil society, private sector, regional and international agencies to ease the burden on states.

All these measures, however, do not negate the fact that preventing massive population displacement begins at home. Helping states and societies to avoid the escalation of conflicts to widespread violence and wars can go a long way in preventing and controlling the unfolding humanitarian tragedy of the 21st century.

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