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FORCED MIGRATION: A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

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Editorial

FORCED MIGRATION: A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

It is ironic that in the midst of huge strides made in technological advancement in the 21st century to improve the lives of human beings living in this planet, one of the growing problems faced globally is forced migration. The scale of forced migration has been unprecedented in recent times. The data on forced migrations in 2015 reveal that 65.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, out of which 21.3 million were refugees, 3.2 million were asylum seekers and 40.8 million were internally displaced. In the year 2015 itself an estimated 12.4 million people were newly displaced, which accounts for 24 persons displaced per minute or 34,000 persons displaced per day. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there are over 10 million stateless persons, though data from 78 countries admit to only 3.7 million stateless individuals. In the last couple of years, Europe has been struggling to come to terms with the huge influx of refugees from West Asia and northern Africa. In 2015 alone, it is estimated that over 1.8 million migrants crossed into Europe and over 1.35 million refugees claimed asylum in several European countries. Over one million refugees arrived by sea and another 35,000 by land to Europe in 2015. More than 3,770 migrants died while crossing the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa to Italy, while at least 800 migrants perished in the Aegean Sea while crossing from Turkey to Greece. The face of the little Syrian boy, Aylan, lying lifeless on the beach of Northern Turkey shook the conscience of the world on the plight of forced migrants desperately trying to reach Europe by any means. The former United Nations Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki Moon, admitted, "We are facing the biggest refugee and displacement crisis of our time. Above all, this is not just a crisis of numbers, it is also a crisis of solidarity."

In the midst of the anti-immigrant sentiment that is sweeping Europe and America, Pope Francis strongly advocated that refugees and migrants be welcomed and treated with dignity. In his message on the occasion of the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, he writes, "Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity. They are children,

women and men who leave or are forced to leave their homes for various reasons, who share a legitimate desire for knowing and having, but above all for being more.” Europe responded by allowing some migrants get asylum in their countries. Germany accepted over 500,000 refugees, but Hungary, Sweden and Austria accepted over 1,000 refugees per 100,000 of its local population. Most of the refugees came from conflict prone regions of the world like, Syria, Eritrea, Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran. In spite of several efforts by the United Nations and the international community, internal strife continues to plague several countries in the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe and some parts of Asia resulting in large scale movement of migrants leaving their homes for countries that are safer and with better opportunities.

The large numbers of migrants due to conflicts overshadow forced migration on account of other reasons. There are millions of people displaced due to development projects in several countries. There are also a growing number of people displaced due to natural disasters, such as earthquakes, tropical storms, floods, droughts and tsunamis. The effects of climate change and rising sea levels have also started manifesting itself through a new phenomenon known as climate refugees. Finally, there are forced migrants due to criminal activity such as smuggling and trafficking of people for sexual services or labour.

India is not immune to the phenomenon of forced migration. The birth of the country itself resulted in the forced migration of millions of people on account of the partition of India and Pakistan. India has been welcoming refugees from neighbouring countries ever since. India welcomed Tibetan refugees in 1959 after the Chinese invasion of Tibet and India continues to host the Dalai Lama and his followers even today. India absorbed the Chakma refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan in 1963 and gave shelter to millions of Bangladeshi refugees until India liberated East Pakistan in 1971 and helped in the formation of a new nation, Bangladesh. The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka resulted in a large number of Tamil refugees crossing the sea into India from 1983 till the conflict ended in 2009. Even today, there is a steady flow of refugees from Myanmar, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and some African states coming to India. UNHCR data from its 2015 report reveals that India has 207,861 refugees, out of which 6,480 have applied for asylum and 27,078 are being assisted by UNHCR. India has been

hosting refugees for several decades but it has not acceded to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol nor has it drafted a special legislation on refugees.

In India, the issue of refugees is not a pressing problem. India has more serious problems of internally displaced people due to conflicts, development projects and due to natural disasters. Thousands have been displaced in ethnic conflicts in the North-Eastern parts of India over the past seven decades since Independence. Besides, communal riots that have taken place periodically on the basis of religion, caste or language have also displaced large numbers of people. As India is growing into a fast developing country, there is a huge demand for land for industrial and development projects. The land acquired for these projects have displaced millions of people in the last few decades. Mining and other extractive industries in tribal dominated regions have threatened the existence of indigenous peoples in India. These trends have made development induced displacement as one of the biggest contributors of internally displaced people in India. Finally, thousands of people are displaced due to natural disasters that takes place more frequently in the last few years. The tsunami of 2004 took the country by surprise and resulted in the deaths of thousands of people and the displacement of people in coastal regions. Tropical storms that frequently hit the eastern coast of India has displaced thousands of people in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. The floods that recur in northern India every year results in loss of life and property in addition to displacement of people from their original habitat.

In September 2016, the United Nations convened a High Level Summit on Migrants and Refugees which resulted in the adoption by all member states of the “New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants”. The declaration contains a comprehensive refugee response framework and outlines steps towards the achievement of a global compact on refugees as well as for safe, orderly and regular migration in 2018.

In view of the global crisis on refugees and migrants, this issue of Social Action has focussed on the global phenomenon of forced migration. The first article by Rabab Imam and Rakesh S. presents the issue of forced migration as a consequence of the failure of the present system of globalisation, which allows for free trade but not free movement of peoples. They point out that several countries have collapsed resulting

in civil wars that are generating millions of refugees and migrants fleeing conflict zones. On the other hand the influx of migrants have fuelled nationalistic feelings and right wing extremism in Europe and the American continent which could lead to geo-political re-alignments and newer forms of globalisation. The article by Sitaram Behera and Gayatri Padhy focuses on forced migration in Odisha state due to various developmental activities. Preethi Nagaveni and Amit Anand presents the Indian reality of forced migration as a consequence of mismanagement of human and natural resources in their article “Migration and Poverty: An Indian Reality”.

Forced migration is a global issue that requires a global response by the international community. Therefore, all nations, international organizations and civil society all over the globe must unite to deal with the human tragedy that is unfolding today and ensure a safe and secure environment for every human being to live a decent life with human dignity.

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