

# Refugees. Victims of Misrule and Indifference

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## **59.5 million<sup>1</sup>**

This is the number of people who in 2014 found themselves displaced from their homes due to persecution, conflict, generalised violence or the violation of their human rights. 59.5 million is not just a statistic, however, but rather a multitude of faces and stories which would make up the number of inhabitants of the 24th most populated country in the world today. The scale of this tragedy is overwhelming, even more so when we learn that this figure increased by 8.3 million people in the year 2013 and in 2014, 42,500 people had to abandon their homes every day in order to seek refuge elsewhere.

## **A world at war**

This increase is largely due to the war in Syria. According to an Amnesty Interna-

tional report in June 2015, almost four million women, men and children were forced to abandon the country in what is considered to be one of the most serious refugee crises in history. However, it was not just Syria that contributed to this deadly increase, but it was also due to the continuation and worsening of conflicts in many places around the world. In Sub-Saharan Africa, with old and new conflicts like the civil war in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda; in parts of Asia and the Pacific, and with the almost endemic troubles in Afghanistan and Pakistan; in Latin America, with Colombia at the forefront; in the Middle East and northern Africa, areas which have become deeply destabilised in recent years which has led to huge movements of the global population in different directions; and finally, in Europe,

yes, even the European continent has seen an increase in the number of refugees over the past year due to the conflict in the east of Ukraine where an estimated 250,000 people fled toward the Russian Federation.

From the beginning of the century, there was never such an extensive map of conflicts with so many raging at the same time as there are at the moment.

### **Return, resettlement and full citizenship**

Among the almost 60 million people that have been displaced, the context of their movements vary greatly. Nearly 20 million of them have been officially registered as refugees; 38.2 million are internally displaced, and 1.8 million are asylum seekers<sup>2</sup>. It is important to take these different categories into account because they determine the three solutions that are on offer at the moment:

a) Voluntary return which upholds the security and dignity of refugees. This will only be possible when countries at war undertake stable and secure peace processes to guarantee the return of those displaced. Unfortunately, the figures on this front are not very encouraging. During 2014, only 126,800 refugees decided to return, and they did this with the assistance of UNHCR<sup>3</sup>. This is the lowest number of people who have returned since 1983. This figure alone should set alarm bells ringing, since it is indicative of increasing unrest and conflicts as well as a growing inability to resolve conflicts peacefully.

b) Resettlement to a third country has been offered to a select number of refugees faced with the impossibility of returning in the short or long-term, and in order to avoid overcrowding and deterioration of refugee camps,. Nevertheless, often host

countries have very strict selection criteria which only benefit the most able, while more vulnerable people (widowed, elderly, people with chronic illnesses, etc.) have to remain in refugee camps. 26 countries welcomed 105,200 refugees in this way. The figures were higher in 2013 but still not enough to absorb the growing number of refugees. The United States of America continues to welcome the most refugees under resettlement programmes, followed by Canada, Australia and Sweden. In this sense, the agreement made by the European Union to establish quotas for refugees among member states marks a step forward offering a lasting and stable solution for many refugees.

c) Integrating refugees into their first countries of asylum through means of legal, economic and cultural processes allows refugees the chance to start a new life in their host countries and enjoy the rights of full citizenship. However, only 27 countries have established specific processes to integrate a mere 32,100 people.

Looking at these figures, it is easy to see how these solutions aiming to offer a life of dignity to refugees are seriously inadequate. In the meantime, refugees must survive in huge camps enduring very hard living conditions, or undertaking desperate journeys along dangerous migratory routes. In these cases, they fall victim to human trafficking, and, as has been proven by the statistics of the dead and disappeared, they put their lives at risk, a situation which is happening very near to us in the Mediterranean. We can no longer look upon this unfolding drama with passive indifference. We believe that half of refugees are under the age of 18. These are people whose lives are cut short and condemned to no future when they have hardly even begun to live.

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## **Activate international policies**

Faced with this crisis, a stronger reaction from countries and international organisations is a neglected but imminent need. This fragmentation of conflicts seems to have given the false impression that the ongoing widespread unrest is less severe, since only the case of Syria managed to gain international attention. The majority of global conflicts rage on against a backdrop of deadly silence from the media. People are left in the hands of warmongers and arms traffickers, the only real winners of these wars. The UN needs to reactivate their role and their agencies, putting their efforts towards both the prevention of conflicts as well as their peaceful and negotiated resolution. If the current situation is prolonged any further, the lack of stability could intensify in certain regions, and conflict could spill over into neighbouring countries, particularly when those countries are weaker and cannot face threats on their own.

At the same time, policies of resettlement and asylum need to be broadened and given greater significance, particularly for those who fled prolonged and ongoing conflicts. Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan and Turkey currently welcome the most refugees. The case of Lebanon is particularly striking given that in addition to the mere four million inhabitants, 1.15 million refugees also reside. The refugee crisis in Lebanon continues to stretch the socio-economic capabilities of this small country to its limits. These crises are taking place on the back door of Europe, so near the Mediterranean. In response, Italy has asked for support from other countries in the EU, encouraging secure routes for the resettlement of refugees to be activated at an international level, so as to prevent them from falling into the hands of human smugglers.

At a time when the number of refugees continues to increase, we must consider

those policies of national “security” which lean toward reinforcing borders and building walls to be literally criminal laws. This is a time for active solidarity and for a common search for solutions. Public opinions of the countries able to welcome refugees need to be much more informed, clear and insistent in the face of authorities. And as countries which manufacture arms, as active participants in the dynamics of the exploitation of raw materials and resources, or as international players with a seat on the Security Council of the United Nations, should we deny whatever responsibility we have for the current situation of worldwide instability and misrule? Should we continue to remain indifferent to the fact that in 2015 the number of displaced people will carry on rising, surpassing the 70 million people mark?

## **“Remember...”**

This whole situation, as we have already stated, is about specific people with human faces, such as Leila, a 27-year-old mother of four. At age 23, she had to leave her home in Sudan and walk for weeks, in order to flee the indiscriminate bombings on the civilian population by the Khartoum government. When she reached Maban in South Sudan, she joined 130,000 other refugees seeking shelter. Now she finds herself trapped between two wars, the war she was fleeing in her home country and the one which has broken out in her host country. She wants to be able to return to her country one day with her children; but at the moment the violence there makes it impossible. When asked what she misses the most, she answered, “I miss my home and the relatives that couldn’t leave with us. I miss them an awful lot and would really like to be able to return and see them again”.

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Leila forms part of the population who have had to leave everything behind in order to save their life and the lives of their loved ones. Her story and her pain cannot leave us indifferent, even more so if we belong to a monotheistic tradition which reads words of warning like these: “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm” (Dt 5, 15).

Our shared memory begins with a people who were fleeing from slavery and oppression. Our tradition should help us to understand how necessary it is today to unconditionally welcome those who are living in exile: “remember”. This memory should stop us from being fearful of refugees, and this shared memory should also encourage us to be open to offering hospitality and welcome not only on a personal level, but also as communities and nations; as people and societies who once were refugees and who now form part of a tradition which “reminds” us of our origin... we cannot remain indifferent to the displacement in which 59.5 million people in the world now find themselves in. Remaining silent or turning our backs would also deny the humanity of our brothers and sisters. A humanity wounded by injustice, but at the same time calling us to live as brothers and sisters.

## **Accompany, serve and defend**

One concrete response is that of the Jesuit Refugee Service who has sought to accompany, serve and defend the rights of refugees throughout the past 35 years, responding to this brutal reality of the forced displacement of millions of people in individual and communal solidarity.

To accompany means to remain at the side of refugees, to listen to and acknowledge their stories, and to establish a personal relationship and bond with them.

To serve is to build alternatives together to long periods of exile, offering education, training and other activities which dignify this period of waiting and help prevent the person from falling into despair.

To defend emphasises the need to analyse, understand and denounce the causes which force so many millions of people to live like refugees, in order to be able to influence the deep roots of armed conflicts.

To accompany, serve and defend are three aspects which are all interlinked, and mutually enriching. They are three aspects which allow us to concretely respond to the need for fraternity and rebuild hope where everything seems lost.

Pau Vidal  
Santi Torres<sup>4</sup>

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1. The majority of these figures are taken from the UNCHR Global Trends 2014 report presented last June.
  2. We should also add stateless people here. The UNHCR calculated a figure of 3.5 million but it is believed that the actual figure would be closer to 10 million people. We should also add another generic category entitled “other”, to apply to displaced people who do not fall into any of the categories previously mentioned.
  3. The number of internally displaced people was higher: 1.8 million during 2014. But this is still a low number in relation to previous years.
  4. Pau Vidal is a Jesuit in charge of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) project in Maban (South Sudan). Santi Torres is a Jesuit, assistant director of CJ and a member of the Fundació Migra Studium-Servicio Jesuita a Migrantes (Barcelona).