

Refugees need more than just emergency support

Education helps protect refugee children from illiteracy, abuse, and exploitation via child labour, forced early marriage, or recruitment to armed groups.



KHALED HOSSEINI

LIKE millions around the world, I have been moved by the recent public outcry and spontaneous acts of solidarity towards

refugees in Europe. It has been riveting to watch, as well as greatly encouraging. As an Ambassador for UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, I have been overwhelmed by the support for the organisation's efforts in Europe, where UNHCR has delivered tents, blankets, food and other essential items that refugee families so desperately need in this period of emergency.

But what next? What happens when the dramatic images fade from our TV screens?

They must not fade as well from our collective consciousness. As incredibly trying as this initial emergency has been for all involved parties, this is when the hard work truly begins. It is vital to remember that the average length of time a refugee lives in exile is over 15 years, be it in a camp in Jordan or Uganda, an informal settlement in Lebanon or Thailand, or resettled in the US or Europe. That is a long time, and thus the difficult work ahead lies in making sure the refugees remain contributing, productive members of society. The hard work lies in ensuring

that refugees have access to education and vocational skills training, because this is in the best interests of everyone - the host country, the refugees, and the home to which they eventually hope to return.

Far too often, refugees are viewed as burdens. In reality, refugees often become some of the most dynamic members of society. It is well known that Einstein was a refugee, as was Marlene Dietrich, and Madeleine Albright, George Soros, Sigmund Freud, Isabelle Allende, to name just a few. But there are millions of other names, less celebrated but no less heroic refugees, working quietly, anonymously, often under difficult and dangerous circumstances. Aqeela Asifi, whom UNHCR has announced as this year's Nansen Refugee Award laureate in recognition of her extraordinary commitment and exceptional service to refugees, is one such name.

In 1992, at the age of 26 years, Asifi fled the Mujahedeen siege of Kabul, Afghanistan, with her husband and two small children, and arrived in the remote Kot Chandana refugee village in Pakistan. When she first fled her native country, she thought it would be a matter of months before she was home once more.

But she soon realised what all refugees know: in the midst of the noise and chaos and trauma of fleeing your country, your focus is on the immediate. You want to protect your children and seek sanctuary. You want to simply survive. It takes time to



Afghan refugee teacher Aqeela Asifi, who has dedicated her life to bringing education to refugee girls in Pakistan, has been named as the winner of the United Nations annual Nansen Award.

process fully that going home anytime soon is an improbable dream; that your life has been re-set at zero; that you have to build it back up from nothing. When this acceptance does eventually set in, a shift happens, from survival to resilience, and with it a determination to be strong, move forward, and create anew.

Asifi's children had seen their education interrupted by war and displacement. As a former teacher, she could not watch them languish in a state of arrested development. She was struck by the lack of schools in Kot Chandana and a total absence of learning opportunities for girls. Having won the backing of the village elders, Asifi went door-to-door convincing

reluctant parents to let her tutor their girls. With 20 pupils, a tent, handwritten worksheets, and above all, fierce determination, she started a school.

Asifi's tiny school blossomed and she received funding from the Pakistani government. Asifi expanded the school to six tents and began including local Pakistani girls as well. Today, the school is a permanent building. Asifi has transformed the lives of over 1,000 girls, and her efforts have encouraged another six schools to open with a further 1,500 girls and boys enrolled.

As a writer, I believe more in the power of words than numbers. But there are numbers scrawled in the margin of Asifi's tale that we should

not ignore. At UNHCR, it is well-known that educated Afghans are three times more likely to repatriate than stay in their country of refuge. Education, instead of anchoring refugees in Pakistan, has been a mobilising factor for people returning to Afghanistan. Education helps protect refugee children from illiteracy, abuse, and exploitation via child labour, forced early marriage, or recruitment to armed groups. Education offers refugees a pathway out of poverty, gives them the skills to build themselves and their country a stable, secure, and prosperous future when they return home. Globally over 50 percent of refugees are children. Yet only one in every two refugee children attends primary school. Only one in four refugee adolescents receives secondary school education.

I hope, when the media spotlight inevitably moves away from the current crisis in Europe, that the awareness and goodwill of the public towards refugees across the world remains strong, that we remember that refugees need more than just emergency support. They need the hope of a future, as we all do. I hope we remember that refugees make lasting contributions to their host nations. Above all, we must remember that, in our increasingly inter-connected world, an investment in their future is an investment in ours too.

For more info on UNHCR's response to the refugee crisis in Europe, please visit www.unhcr.org.

The writer is Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, and author of internationally acclaimed best-selling novels, *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Mountains Echoed*.

Migration augments development

Dr Tasneem Siddiqui talks to The Daily Star about the factors behind human trafficking and how we can make the process of legitimate migrant employment more efficient and humane. She is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Dhaka and the Chair of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), an internationally reputed think tank.

Are poverty and persecution the only reasons why we have seen so many people desperately trying to leave the country on boats?

Migration to Malaysia through maritime route is interlinked with the protracted Rohingya refugee issue. In 2012, when the government of Bangladesh decided not to allow the persecuted Rohingyas to enter the country, some of them took dangerous voyage to Malaysia through sea routes. The Malaysian government treated them with a degree of compassion. It encouraged others to follow suit. Bangladeshi human smugglers and Thai fishing trawlers, and later sea pirates, joined hands to expand this illegal business rapidly. By 2012, some Bangladeshis also started to take this risky journey. Most of those who ventured into this, originated from areas affected by natural disasters and climate change. In the absence of formal migration services, they became easy targets of human traffickers and smugglers. Reduced scope of formal migration also created space for irregular migration. In 2007 and 2008, almost 900,000 Bangladeshis were migrating to the Middle East and Southeast Asian countries each year. The figure came down to half in the past few years. Over the years, we have lost labour markets of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

What kind of a fate awaits them after they reach the countries of destination?

If you go to Malaysia, you will see many Bangladeshis walking on the streets. Some of them went through irregular channels while others went

with tourist or student visas and stayed back. They do not have work permits. They survive by doing odd jobs. They hardly have any freedom to move, the police harass them and if they are lucky to get jobs, employers can get away with paying them low wages. And some end up in detention centres.

What has been done to prevent people from falling victim to smugglers?

Until the discovery of the mass graves, the government did not take the issue seriously. Occasionally few boats got apprehended, but cases against the perpetrators were not filed under proper law and they came out of jail within a few days. The Overseas Employment and Migration Act 2013 has provision for 10 years' imprisonment and financial penalty up to Tk 10 lakh against the human smugglers. In order to ensure prosecution under this law, RMMRU filed a writ petition. Since then, some cases were filed under this law. Government and NGOs are now conducting awareness campaigns in certain parts of the country. But that's not enough. The perpetrators will have to be punished.

For the time being, the Bay of Bengal route is inactive, but it may start again once the rainy season is over. Moreover, irregular migration is still taking place by air. There is an increase in the number of people going to Libya via Sudan in an attempt to reach Italy. Their ultimate goal is to go to wealthier countries in Europe. You can hardly blame them for wanting a better life when opportunities at home are few.

How has the G2G programme to send workers to Malaysia fared so far?

Only 7,500 workers went to Malaysia under this programme in four years. Within a year of commencement of the programme, we realised that it would not work. Although our government tried to fix the problem

years. There are reports that a powerful lobby is trying to thwart the process and monopolise this business by forming syndicates. In order to make G2G Plus a success, the government should be vigilant against such syndication and create a level playing field for all licensed recruiting agencies. It is essential for

development. The National Skills Policy will have to be implemented. In Nepal, I saw that they have developed training centres that are linked with the job market. Nepal used to send 50 to 60 thousand workers abroad annually. Now they send about 500,000. Most of these Nepalese are going through formal channels. There can be PPP (public-private partnership) programmes to establish training centres in Bangladesh. There has to be coordination among concerned ministries and agencies of the government. A new minister has taken over responsibility of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment. He should make fresh attempts to pursue bilateral agreements with our traditional labour receiving countries by acting on concerns of the latter.

How can we engage more expat Bangladeshis in the development of the country?

When the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment was established, among others, it had two goals: to help migrant workers and to look after the interests of the diaspora. However, it is yet to come up with concrete programmes to tap the diaspora resources for the development of Bangladesh. India has declared January 9 as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas coinciding with the day of Mr. Gandhi's return home from South Africa. In 2013, the country received 60 billion USD as remittances; on top of that 31 billion USD came as investment by the non-resident Indians. In Bangladesh only private universities has had success in

attracting highly educated and talented expatriate Bangladeshis. Business links are yet to be established in a significant way.

What are the international organisations doing to monitor and regulate labour migration?

In 2004, the UN recognised that migrant workers are the most vulnerable workforce in the world. Kofi Annan, the then Secretary General, suggested that a UN body be formed to look after the interests of migrant workers. But that did not materialise. As a compromise, the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) was formed. The forum is playing a positive role in highlighting the contribution of migrants both in the receiving and sending countries. Among the western states, Switzerland stands out in promoting migration in the global development agenda. After discovering Aylan's body on the Turkish shore, we have seen a global outpouring of compassion for the refugees and other types of migrants. This is the time to start demanding a UN body on migration. In the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, migration has been mentioned in several indicators. The governments need to integrate migration into their long-term development goals.

[Dr Tasneem Siddiqui is one of the key members of committees which drafted the National Overseas Employment Policy 2006 of Bangladesh and the Emigration and Overseas Employment Act 2013.]

-The interview was taken by Amitava Kar.



Dr Tasneem Siddiqui

on the supply side, very little was done at the demand side. The Malaysian employers did not recruit workers from online database as they were supposed to. Now a G2G Plus agreement is under discussion under which the Malaysian government is planning to take 1.5 million workers from Bangladesh over the next three

reducing the cost of migration and ensuring accountability of the recruiting agents.

In your opinion, what needs to be done to regain the lost labour market overseas? The nation should make major investments in human resource

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