



Refugees from Syria pray after arriving on the shores of the Greek island of Lesbos aboard

PHOTO: AFP

ON THE OCCASION OF WORLD REFUGEE DAY ON JUNE 20 WE FOCUS ON EUROPE'S REFUGEE CRISIS AS A RESULT OF THE CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

# SAVING OUR DROWNING HUMANITY

PETER SUTHERLAND

In the last week of May, at least 1,050 migrants and asylum-seekers died in the Mediterranean Sea, victims of the international community's unwillingness to address the needs of the world's most vulnerable people. More than 2,800 migrants have died at sea so far this year – up nearly 40 percent from the same period in 2015. Almost all of those deaths could have been prevented. With every life that is extinguished, we are losing a bit of our humanity.

Clearly, the international response to the refugee crisis has done little to mitigate it. The surge of people risking their lives to cross from North Africa has confirmed that, regardless of targeted arrangements like that between the European Union and Turkey, flows of people across the Mediterranean are set to continue.

That should come as no surprise. The migrants from North Africa who have reached the shores of Italy fled war in Iraq and Syria, forced conscription in Eritrea, permanent conflict in Afghanistan, and criminal violence in other parts of Africa. Some may not technically be refugees, as defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention. But nearly all of them are fleeing dire situations caused by interstate conflict, internal strife, natural disasters, and economic collapse. Whatever their legal status, they deserve dignity and protection from abuse – and for every effort to be made to ensure their safety.

It is time to accept the facts: walls, fences, and patrolling warships cannot stop the flight of desperate people. What they do is aggravate the dangers migrants face on their journey and benefit the smugglers who prey on them; last year alone, human traffickers earned \$5.6 billion from migrants crossing into Europe.

With nearly 60 million people displaced worldwide, international cooperation and, above all, political leadership is urgently required to make migration safer. To put a stop to the needless deaths, the international community must step up orderly resettlement programmes and provide safe routes for

asylum-seekers.

The global annual target for the resettlement of refugees is 100,000 – far short of what is needed. And, even so, EU member states and other developed countries have failed to fulfill even that limited obligation. Much more must be done.

The situation in the Mediterranean region is challenging, but not hopeless. The EU has a population of more than 500 million and great wealth; it will not be undone by taking care of a million – or even a few million – asylum-seekers. It cannot turn its back on migrants left stranded for months in unsuitable facilities in Greece and Italy, while their children are denied the right to an education.

Rather than pandering to fear-mongering xenophobes, the EU's leaders must speak out and correct erroneous perceptions about migrants. They must not only clearly declare that the developed world has an obligation to protect the world's refugees; they must also explain why aiding refugees, if done well, can help build healthier communities and stronger economies.

In a recent report, the economist Philippe Legrain demonstrated how countries that invest in newcomers' successful and rapid integration into the workforce can, within five years, reap economic benefits that are twice as large as the initial outlay. Accomplishing this requires a comprehensive strategy that enables migrants to use their skills to become productive members of society as they rebuild their lives.

Germany seems to understand this, having recently committed to spending more than \$100 billion to integrate refugees over the next five years. It also recently adopted an integration law designed to provide language skills, prevent the formation of ghettos, and ease access to the job market for recent arrivals.

It is important to remember that many migrants who are not officially refugees can sometimes be at risk in their home countries. Next week, the Migrants in Countries in Crisis Initiative – a successful example of

mini-multilateralism, led by the United States and the Philippines – will unveil new guidelines to help states improve their ability to protect migrants (regardless of their status) before, during, and after the emergence of a crisis.

Similarly, at the G7's summit in Japan in May, the leaders of the world's major advanced economies pledged to "increase global assistance to meet immediate and long-term needs of refugees and other displaced persons as well as their host communities." Funds must be made available to help host and transit countries house, educate, and employ migrants in distress.

Human beings have always crossed borders, and as the world becomes ever more globalised, they will continue to do so. Demagogues claim that opening the door to migrants transforms host nations beyond recognition; in fact, the impact of migration is strongly positive. Migrants rejuvenate aging societies and create much-needed economic activity.

Turning Europe into a fortress, undermining freedom of movement across the continent, tightening borders, and ignoring legal – as well as moral – obligations to protect the vulnerable is a failing strategy. It undermines the EU's hard-won gains and poses heavy costs to the world economy.

Action is needed now. Summer is just beginning. Unless the international community provides a clear alternative, more migrants can be expected to crowd onto rickety vessels and risk their lives to reach Europe. For the sake of their humanity and ours, it is time to stop the carnage.

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## MOUHAMAD'S JOURNEY

TESTIMONY RECORDED BY JOWAN AKKASH



Despite the risk, I wouldn't hesitate to do it again. I can't look back. Orpheus did that mistake, and lost everything.

Mouhamad, a 40-year-old dentist and poet, lived in Aleppo, Syria, for many years. In his dental clinic, he offered free treatment to those in need, especially ex-political prisoners. He witnessed a mortar attack that killed 27 persons in September 2012.

"That day, I survived just by chance, because I had closed my clinic half an hour earlier. Like in a traditional Kurdish legend, I received three golden eggs which grant me three wishes. The first one saved me from the bombing, and the second helped me to flee to Iraqi Kurdistan. In January 2013, after passing 20 different checkpoints, I managed to enter Iraq, along with my wife and two children.

My house and the big library still exist. But my brother Nouri did not survive. One and a half years ago, he was killed during his military service. For many months, I imagined the shots rattling into Nouri's head. I had already left Syria, so I wasn't able to take a last glance at his body.

At the beginning of April 2014, I left from Iraq to Istanbul, Turkey, where I made a deal with a smuggler for 2,200 Euro. My wife and children stayed there, to be spared the dangerous journey.

On 3 July, along with other 11 Syrians, I took a bus to Bodrum. There, in a hostel, we hastily wrapped our documents with tape and hid them inside our underwear.

We received a call from friends, who told us how the smuggler had forced them at knife point to board a rickety boat. I only had one golden egg left, and it broke it without hesitation.

Once on board, the first time our fiber glass vessel was hit by the waves, it started to wreck. At 2:30 in the morning, the engine suddenly stopped. The deadly silence around us was creating a funeral atmosphere... The sea was terrifying. Terrifying and blue – more blue than it should be. At 5 a.m., we managed to call the Greek coastguard, which took us to Kalimnos. Three days later, we were released with a six months permit."

And Mouhamad really meant it: in September, he reached Italy by boat along with 25 others. One week later, he entered another EU country further north, where he applied for asylum and has been living ever since in a camp for asylum seekers.

"My fear, is to wake up one day transformed – as in Kafka's book – into a huge insect, willing to accept anything to survive... War creates slaves of anger. During my short stay in Athens, I found it a fascinating place, even though I don't know how to love another city, apart from Aleppo. The Greek capital is already part of my first novel, which I hope to finish now that I have found somewhere to settle down."

Testimonies of Mouhamad and Jihan provided by UNHCR. For more stories visit :www.thedailystar.net/the-refugee-story

## Jihan's Story, Greece

Like so many others, 34-year-old Jihan was willing to risk everything in order to escape war-torn Syria and find safety for her family. Unlike most, she is blind.

Nine months ago, she fled Damascus with her husband, Ashraf, 35, who is also losing his sight. Together with their two sons, they made their way to Turkey, boarding a boat with 40 others and setting out on the Mediterranean Sea. They hoped the journey would take eight hours. There was no guarantee they would make it alive.

After a treacherous voyage that lasted 45 hours, the family finally arrived at a Greek island in the Aegean Sea, called Milos – miles off course. Without support or assistance, they had to find their own way to Athens. The police detained them for four days upon their arrival. They were cautioned to stay out of Athens, as well as three other Greek cities, leaving them stranded.

By now destitute and exhausted, the family were forced to split up – with Ashraf continuing the journey northwards in search of asylum and Jihan taking their two sons to Lavrion, an informal settlement about an hour's drive from the Greek capital.

Today, Jihan still waits to be reunited with her husband, who has since been granted asylum in Denmark. The single room she shares with her two sons, Ahmed, 5, and Mohammad, 7, is tiny, and she worries about their education. Without an urgent, highly complex corneal transplant, her left eye will close forever.

"We came here for a better life and to find people who might better understand our situation," she says. "I am so upset when I see how little they do [understand]."



Jihan embraces her five-year-old son, Ahmed, as Mohammad, who is seven, strolls on the boardwalk by the harbour in Lavrio, Greece. Their dreary accommodation at Lavrion camp nearby is a world away from the picturesque tourist town.

PHOTO: UNHCR/A. D'AMATO/2014.