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READINGS IN NONVIOLENCE

● 'Readings in Nonviolence' features extracts from our favourite books, pamphlets, articles or other material on nonviolence and related areas, or reviews of important works in the field (suggestions and contributions welcome)

To accompany the exhibition on *War-Torn Children* at the Linen Hall Library, Belfast (1st March – 15th April 2017) which is organised by Conflict Textiles and INNATE, we are having a short series of pieces on refugee issues. Yes, there is a problem, mainly for countries in southern Europe such as Greece and Italy. But there is an amazing and Eurocentric view which imagines that 'we' in Europe are having it bad; tell that to the people of Turkey, Lebanon or Jordan, for example, who have had a far bigger burden to bear concerning refugees than almost all of the EU countries.

Everyone has a right – morally and in international law - to flee the risk of death and persecution and seek safe refuge elsewhere. Countries have an obligation, again morally and in international law, to deal properly with such people who are in almost all cases vulnerable and in some cases incredibly so. The prevailing rhetoric, however, has often become one of the 'danger' of admitting refugees when in fact it looks like in Sweden's case their policy has very much assisted economic growth. While it cannot be said there is no danger in any course of action, a xenophobic and Eurocentric (or narrow US American) point of view has come into play whereas the victims of militant Islamist violence have overwhelmingly been other Muslims, and mainly in a country like Pakistan, not in 'the West'. Europe and the USA have suffered very little from Islamist violence compared to others.

We are not saying there should not be processes for assisting refugees and processing asylum applications. We are saying those processes should be fair and that the burden should be borne proportionately, something which is not the case in that most of Europe is not 'pulling its weight'.

We need a wider view of the issues. This wider view is given below by Stefania Gualberti based on a talk by Dr Rebecca Schaaf.

The refugee crisis and children

*"you have to understand,
no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land."*

from "Home", by Warsan Shire

A report by Stefania Gualberti

In recent years the media has reported almost continuous news and images about the so called European migration crisis. Numbers of migrants arriving in Europe either by sea or land have increased (with a peak in 2015) but the situation can only be understood by taking a global perspective. On this matter, Dr Rebecca Schaaf from Bath University gave a lecture in October 2016 as part of Belfast International Arts Festival. In particular, the lecture explained the drivers, flows, impacts and strategies of the European/Global migration situation. The presentation started with the global trends video of the UN refugee agency <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RstxqdvwFlo>. Numbers presented in the video describing the situation were shocking:

- 1 in every 113 people of the world (65.3 million of people) is either a refugee an asylum seeker or an internally displaced person; of those:
- 21.3 million are refugees (51% of them are children), a refugee is a person who has fled his or her own country and cannot return due to fear of persecution, and has been given refugee status.

- 40.8 million are Internally Displaced People, an internally displaced person is someone who is living inside the borders of their own country, but is unable to safely live in their own home or region.
- 3.2 million Asylum Seekers, an asylum seeker is a person who has fled from his or her own country due to fear of persecution and has applied for (legal and physical) protection in another country but has not yet had their claim for protection assessed. A person remains an asylum seeker until their protection 'status' has been determined.

Over 1 million of refugees arrived in Europe by sea in 2015, mostly young men in the beginning, then increasingly families, 18% of which are children. This journey is expensive: around UK£2500 per person. The wealthier in society can afford it and they leave on the base of trusted information and thanks to a network of social connection. The journey is quite risky, the public is familiar with the images of overcrowded boats arriving at the Italian and Greek coast, more than 3,770 migrants were reported to have died trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2015.

Dr Schaaf presented some "pull and push" factors which drive people's decision to migrate and seek asylum. On one side the push of conflicts and crisis situations, weak or absent governments, long history of crisis, underlying poverty and inequality or environmental vulnerability. On the other side is the pull of real or perceived opportunities, the possibility to flee those situations and a right to seek asylum, often with the help of smugglers and through dangerous journeys. In her talk, Dr Schaaf refused to take the Eurocentric perspective and invited the audience to take a wider, global approach: only 6% of refugees are in Europe, while the top host countries are Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran and Ethiopia.

Responses to this global crisis differ by country, but are generally focused on short term needs of providing medical assistance, food, shelter, water, clothing, psychological support for violence and psychological trauma. Overall, this is an inadequate approach as it does not respond to the long term needs. Meanwhile there are other pressures including 'securitisation', anti-migration rhetoric and feeling, erosion of refugee protections and the shrinking of 'asylum space' (where people can go). Countries are trying to stop people moving, detain them if they do, almost criminalise them. On this issue, Amnesty International (*1) declares "Powerful media and politicians are manipulating reality and dehumanising them, portraying refugees as illegal, faceless invaders who threaten our security. They're ducking their responsibility to protect people fleeing persecution or brutality. And every single day that goes by, their indecision and inaction are causing immense human suffering."

Dr Schaaf argued that the current strategy is ineffective as it does not take into consideration the bigger picture from which the migration crisis was created: chronic poverty, growing global inequality, weak governance, climate change, failures and mistakes in the development approach and western countries' lack of taking their responsibilities on creating the problem. Dr Schaaf discussed the tardy response by the UK Government in processing the list of unaccompanied children living in the Calais 'Jungle' Camp who were likely to have a legal claim to live with family members who were already in the UK. In the refugee camps unaccompanied children are vulnerable to predators. Despite that it seemed the world had lost the empathy and compassion to look at this problem and respond to it appropriately. Later last year when those children finally arrived in the UK the Conservative MP David Davies (*2) questioned their age and suggested dental tests should be carried out to confirm their age - despite professionals saying they would prove inconclusive.

"The proportion of unaccompanied children is on the rise, as parents see a lack of prospects for adults in Europe and take the risk that their children at least might be better looked after on arrival. Italy estimates that around 90% of the children arriving in 2016 were unaccompanied. Heartbreakingly, the high numbers of child refugees that go missing from camps and holding centres – Europol estimated that 10,000 had been lost by the beginning of 2016—show that this hope is misplaced." (*3)

As a way forward, she suggested that countries need to ensure protection of all migrants; countries need to improve legal channels of access to the EU; to reform the Dublin Regulation, which looks at the process of application for asylum in the EU member States; and to adopt a strategic approach to causes and consequences.

It is absolutely necessary to make sure refugee children have access to education. Like all young people, refugee youth have skills, ideas and dreams but with no education they have no hopes for

their future. Through education they can shape their own destinies, rebuild their own countries and contribute meaningfully to the communities that offer them shelter and protection.

Amnesty International states “Almost 5 million people have fled Syria in the last five years. Most of them live in just three countries: Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. The UK has accepted approximately 8,000 Syrians since 2011. In March 2016 Europe made a deal with Turkey to return the asylum seekers arriving in the Greek islands (850,000 arrived in 2015 only) with €6 billion funding to help Syrian refugees in Turkish soil and facilitation for Turkish citizens to get a Visa for Europe. Since the adoption of the deal returns have not happened the way leaders expected, with the result of overcrowding in very inhuman conditions.

While the plight of Syria refugees has received much media attention, refugees from other regions including 5.3 million Palestinians, 2.7 million Afghans and 1.1 million Somalis, are also being neglected, in some cases for decades .This year, South Sudan - the world's newest country - has joined this appalling list with over one million of its citizens forced to flee because of conflict in that country.” (*4)

References

(*1) <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/world-leaders-are-spectacularly-failing-refugees>

(*2) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-37687916>

(*3)

http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_seven_worrying_trends_in_the_european_refugee_crisis7138

(*4) <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/world-leaders-are-spectacularly-failing-refugees>
