



Refugee Digest 39

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Displaced Persons in a Time of COVID-19.

On 4th April the highly respected medical journal, *The Lancet*, spoke of a fourth wave of the pandemic, predicting a move of the epicentre from China, Europe, and the USA to the poorer nations of the world. The journal repeated the call for nations that host refugees and migrants to take into account the particular vulnerabilities that attach to this group. It noted that the UNHCR has indicated that the 34 countries that host most displaced persons have begun to see increasing local transmissions. The article also noted that most of these countries have very compromised health care systems.

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30758-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30758-3/fulltext)

An important consideration that is emerging strongly in discussions around the interventions to curb the pandemic, has been the issues pertaining to human rights and the need for vigilance in respecting these for everyone, including displaced persons. These range from access to basic health care to the right to privacy and being treated with respect. It is a sad truth, but emergency situations are often accompanied by a disregard for human rights and the rule of law. In fact there is a need to be proactive as with the example of New York City cited below. A key phrase in such discussions is 'a rights based approach.'

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/COVID-19.aspx>

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25762&LangID=E>

<https://www1.nyc.gov/site/cchr/media/covid19.page>

<https://www.hhrjournal.org/2020/03/a-rights-based-response-to-covid-19-lessons-learned-from-hiv-and-tb-epidemics/>

The appeal to specifically include displaced persons in the planning for interventions around the pandemic has been echoed by a number of organisations across the globe. The World Economic Forum speaks of 'exacerbating the existing vulnerabilities' and points to the living conditions in most refugee camps.

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/the-coronavirus-pandemic-could-be-devastating-for-the-worlds-refugees/>

<http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/news/news/2020/3/measures-against-covid-19-need-to-include-refugees-and-migrants>

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/09/covid-19-spreading-quickly-though-refugee-camps-warn-calais-aid-groups>

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1060872>

In early April, UNICEF made a special appeal for practical care especially for displaced children who do not have the luxury of visiting a doctor or washing their hands regularly. It also made an appeal for humane policies for such children. It made the point that 31 million children have been uprooted from their homes over the past years. 17m are internally displaced, 12.7m are refugees and 1.1m are asylum seekers. A strong appeal has been made to respect the rights of children as arguably the most vulnerable amongst the vulnerable.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1060872>

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/09/covid-19-and-childrens-rights-0>

Unaccompanied children have been deported in large numbers from the USA, with the government citing concerns about the spread of the Corona virus. On 21st March the US administration scrapped long-standing rules for protecting children at the border, designed to stop trafficking in children. The rules gave border officials the right to deport children without the normal proceedings.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-deportations/u-s-deports-400-migrant-children-under-new-coronavirus-rules-idUSKBN21P354>

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-us-swiftly-deporting-unaccompanied-migrant-children-citing-covid-19/>

Referring to the US policy of forcing asylum seekers to be encamped on the border of Mexico in unhygienic conditions, Human Rights Watch has warned the US governments – but also by implication other governments – that ‘there are obligations under international law not to compel people to risk their right to life in order to pursue their right to seek asylum.’ Others have spoken of this pandemic in relation to displaced persons as ‘a crisis within a crisis.’

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/02/us-covid-19-policies-risk-asylum-seekers-lives>

In many parts of the world, ironically, people in this demographic are in the frontline of fighting the pandemic.

<https://www.rescue.org/announcement/refugees-serve-frontline-healthcare-workers-face-coronavirus-pandemic>

<https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2020/4/5e8c3ab84/refugee-nurse-line-against-coronavirus-iran.html>

One hears often in these days the old phrase about not letting a good crisis go to waste. It is clear that the handling of situations around displaced persons is one that needs to be reimagined and politically restructured. One issue is clear in the various discussions: the need for protection of vulnerable people, all vulnerable people, is essential and needs to be ramped up. This is doubly true for displaced persons. The odds they face are phenomenal and all advocacy needs to be geared to respecting their dignity, welcoming their giftedness, being hospitable, and sharing the earth’s resources and protecting their rights so that together we can contribute to building a more just world.

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