

Human rights violations in Syria and the refugee crisis

Monday 14 September 2015 marked the opening of the 30th session of **the Human Rights Council at the United Nations** in Geneva, Switzerland. In light of the horrendous human rights violations that are happening in Syria and the subsequent refugee crisis, the international community present at the Council took this opportunity to express their horror at the situation and to pledge their solidarity and support in helping victims and for seeking a resolution to the conflict.

In his opening speech to the council,¹ the **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein**, expressed his and his colleagues' in the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights devastation and exhaustion from the persistent and horrific human rights violations by the extremists and the opposing governments in Syria. Like so many across the world, the Commissioner's conscience and emotions were also moved by the photographs of the little Syrian refugee boy, Aylan, who, in his life and death, represents **the plight and danger faced by the Syrian civilian population forced to flee from this conflict**. He acknowledged the complexity of the issue at hand and that unfortunately, there is no single quick solution that can be applied. Despite the lengthy process that lies ahead to restore human rights in Syria, **the international community has the potential** to use their power and influence to assist in rectifying this terrible conflict and he called on the member states to uphold their pledges through concrete actions in order **to assist refugees and restore peace in Syria**.

Some countries in the middle east including Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and other European countries such as Germany and Sweden were commended for their leadership and humanity in protecting and accommodating refugees and migrants in need. The recent proposals from other member state governments to accept and host more refugees and the efforts from members of civil society who have volunteered assistance were also applauded. The Commissioner went on **to recognize the importance of sovereignty in states** including their rights to determine borders and conditions of entry and stay in their lands. Upholding this right of self-determination is intrinsic in upholding a harmonious state. Whilst considering this, each state also has obligations to respect under international human rights, refugee and humanitarian law. The Commissioner [...] implored decision-makers in all member states to swiftly establish effective and principled migration governance to meet the refugee crisis and to immediately cease any detention or ill-treatment of refugees, especially children. He also urged for the obstruction of international humanitarian aid offered to the people in Syria to cease immediately. By taking these measures there is hope that deaths of those fleeing can be prevented, that cases of people smuggling can be cut and that the needs of refugees can be met effectively and with social conscience.

The Human Rights Council has continued over recent weeks and the various issues surrounding the conflict in Syria have been brought to the attention of the Council² in particular, during the presentation of the Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic on Monday 21 September.³ According to the report,⁴ **half of the Syrian population has been displaced** due to the atrocity of the conflict. **More than 4 million Syrians are refugees** and a further 7.6 million have become internally displaced persons of the majority of whom are women and children. Those who are internally displaced seek shelter in official or makeshift camps or have migrated to other towns and villages where they have sought accommodation from residents. A large number have sought refuge overseas by placing their safety in the hands of people smugglers and traffickers and making the dangerous journey in makeshift boats across the Mediterranean Sea. Since

¹ <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16414&LangID=E>

² <http://webtv.un.org/topics-issues/non-governmental-organizations/watch/item4-general-debate-contd-18th-meeting-30th-regular-session-of-human-rights-council/4500789702001#full-text>

³ <http://webtv.un.org/topics-issues/non-governmental-organizations/watch/id-commission-of-inquiry-on-syria-15th-meeting-30th-regular-session-of-human-rights-council/4498727176001>

⁴ http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session30/Documents/A.HRC.30.48_AEV.pdf

2011, more than 2000 Syrian refugees have drowned whilst attempting this journey. The report emphasized how the inadequate global response to protect these refugees has resulted in a crisis and that it is imperative that countries abide by the principle of non-refoulement and respect their international obligations to accommodate these refugees so that the responsibility and can be shared between countries in an efficient and fair manner.

The conflict in Syria as well as the plight of Syrian refugees have been priority issues in many side events organized by various government and non-government organizations. Matters that were discussed at the side event on Human Rights in Australia, organized by Franciscans International, included Australia's policy of sending refugees back to their country of origin. Besides that, other matters that were brought up included the issue of cleanliness, safety of women and girls, religious right to pray, violence against refugees by authorities and lack of school provided for children in the refugee camp. Due to the harsh conditions, many refugees suffer from mental health issues and because of the lack of services and the stigma against mental illness among the community, they have not been able to seek help. UNHCR has visited Australia and found that the conditions in refugee detention centres do not meet Human Rights international standards.

As a response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe, **Pope Francis** addressed the European church on 6 September 2015 after the weekly recitation of the Angelus prayer in St. Peter's Square and implored all parishes, religious communities, monasteries and shrines throughout Europe to host a refugee family.⁵ He emphasized the Gospel's message for us to be "neighbours" of the marginalized and to provide them with hope. Simply taking a passive approach and saying "take heart and be patient" is not enough and the Church must take an active approach to assist the tens of thousands of refugees facing dire conditions. The Pope finally added that the Vatican will follow this call by accommodating two refugee families in the coming days.

Following the Pope's appeal, **the Superior General of the Marist Brothers, Br Emili Turú**, has announced that the General House of the Marist Brothers will also offer to host Syrian refugees.⁶ This is not the first time the General House has welcomed refugees and Br Emili sees this as a "concrete way to give a response to this emergency that there is in Europe". In a letter written to the Marist Provincials in Europe Br Emili has encouraged all brothers to follow Pope Francis' appeal and support this initiative to assist Syrian refugees using the "most appropriate responses in each case".

Although there is no immediate solution, the attention and importance that **the international community** has placed upon the refugee crisis and the pledges of action and assistance by the member states during the 30th session of the **Human Rights Council** has brought light to these issues. Alongside this, the initiatives taken by the **Catholic Church** in hosting refugees gives a concrete response to this emergency and provides a compassionate example for others to follow. This provides hope that through international cooperation, principled migration governance and compassion, the international community will be able to effectively manage with social conscience the largest exodus of refugees since World War II and make some steps to restore peace in Syria.

⁵ <http://www.news.va/en/news/angelus-6-september-2015>

⁶ <http://www.champagnat.org/400.php?a=6&n=3715>