

Frank Orefice

Professor Kolkmeier

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Refugee Limbo: How Low Can We Go?

The refugee crisis has beset the media as of late. Almost daily we hear about the massive upheaval of thousands of people as they attempt to escape from their war-torn countries. However, despite this daily dose of information about the crisis, there are still many people who don't know much about it except for what they see on the news or hear by word of mouth. Those who've seen the effects of the crisis first-hand are usually those who live in the countries where the upheavals took place or where the displaced people ended up. Many of these refugees don't make it to their destinations, but are instead placed into camps before being granted access into the country they seek refuge in. Many of these camps, however, are not hospitable as they're so rundown, cramped, and under-supplied that it's shameful that these are government-run. The consequences of these camps are the detriment of the health and well-being of the refugees, and the only ones at fault are the governments of these developed countries that put them there.

It's unfortunate to find refugees living in such deplorable conditions today. Refugees are forced to leave their country due to war, persecution, or disaster. Due to prejudice, and other people's lack of desire to get involved in racial, ethnic, or religious conflicts, there are numerous groups of people fleeing their home countries. Many of these refugees involved in the refugee

crisis are from the Middle East and are attempting to travel to neighboring countries and Europe to start a new life. These refugees left their homes, not because they wanted to, but because it was the only way for them to guarantee their safety. However, safety comes at a large price as they must go on an arduous journey that may lead to their deaths instead of preventing them. Most hope to achieve asylum at the countries that they believe will be their new homes. Asylum is when displaced people are granted protection by a nation after they left their native country; these individuals who gain asylum are known as political refugees.

Sadly, despite the hope that is put into these sanctuary countries, with the influx in refugees, many conservative movements have begun to emerge hoping to close their countries' borders to their unwelcomed guests. With nowhere else to go, refugees are forced into camps as they wait to be given asylum from a country that is indecisive as to whether it should allow these people into their country or force them back into their own. While these refugees wait in the camps, they're subjected to: health problems, lack of resources, poor conditions, and being treated as prisoners; though these countries have their reasons and there are some that are exceptions to this, these problems are too prevalent to ignore. These conditions lead to the refugees feeling as though they're in a perpetual limbo, where they're unsure if they've truly made it to the end of their journey or if it was all for naught.

All the deficiencies in these camps culminate into physical and mental health problems for the refugees. The article "The health impacts of the refugee crisis: a medical charity perspective," by Leigh Daynes, details the variety of physical and mental health problems found in refugees before and after they enter the camps. Many of the health problems found in refugees stem from "traumatic experiences in the country of origin, compounded by displacement, panic

attacks and debilitating forms of anxiety” (Daynes). The journey itself has already undone the minds of those who’ve undergone traumatic experiences along the way, and the unsavory conditions of the camps are only intensifying the effects. Many of the refugees have not taken their health into consideration when traveling as they prioritized their basic needs, such as food, water, and shelter. When they enter these camps, they’re exposed to “poor sanitary conditions, which lead to the spread of viruses and bacteria” (Daynes). There are even instances of institutional and police violence among refugees. These acts of violence are due to police efforts to quell the influx of refugees, but these acts have “resulted in serious injuries, including head injuries and fractures” (Daynes). These camps were made as a temporary measure, so that the countries can decide what to do with these refugees, but the conditions that they’re forced to live in show that these countries are “seemingly forgetting, or indeed ignoring, their duty to protect and care for people” (Daynes).

The camps that these refugees are placed in usually lack resources. These camps are under-supplied, even though they’re meant to house thousands of people. The article “My time at a refugee camp in Greece: Waiting in Malakasa,” by Arianne Zwartjes, details her time volunteering in an under-supplied camp located in the Greek town of Malakasa. Her account of the camp is that “they desperately needed a pediatrician and an OB/GYN to make consistent visits and access to a dentist” (Zwartjes). She also notes the camp’s lack of other necessities, such as air conditioners, showers, and toilets for the thousands of inhabitants in the camp. This shouldn’t even have to be an issue, as these are expected to be available in even the most rudimentary places. The lack of essentials in these camps can be attributed to Greece’s economic struggle, but the problems are not only economical, but political as they don’t “want to

encourage more people to come” (Zwartjes). Despite the camps’ lack of essentials, there are those who go against regulations to supply the guests with much needed supplies. Those who watch over the throngs of people seem to be very sympathetic due to the poor conditions that they’re left in as “young soldiers ... hand them bags of food they’d brought home to share with people in the camp” (Zwartjes). Though this is a kind gesture, it’s still not enough to help sustain the camp and its inhabitants.

In the Pikpa camp located on the Greek island of Lesbos, the poor conditions have become even more detrimental to the inhabitant’s well-being as the temperature is going below freezing. The article “These refugees escaped war. Now they’re freezing in Greece’s migrant camps.” by Annabell Van den Berghe, describes how conditions are like for those in the Pikpa camp and how the camp’s inadequacies have led to its inhabitants taking matters into their own hands. Due to scarce resources in the camps, such as blankets and coats, the refugees have opted to “burning anything they can find to heat their tents” (Van den Berghe). This puts even more unneeded pressure on the refugees, as they must begin deciding on what to give up to survive in the harsh winter months. What’s worse is that “With all of the camps heavily overcrowded, often reaching three times their capacity, aid workers find themselves trying to help with steeply curtailed resources” (Van den Berghe). Despite Greece’s desire to lessen the traffic of refugees in their country, refugees continue to seep into the camps, leaving even more people waiting in the cold. Since Greece’s camps are lacking resources and are in poor condition, other European countries should help by picking up the slack and send much needed supplies to Greece, even if it goes against their wishes.

Australia is another country that's been afflicted by the refugee crisis, but has decided not to bother with the formalities that the rest of the countries involved in the crisis have followed. They've instead chosen to use a more authoritarian approach by treating the refugees as prisoners instead of guests. The article "Broken Men in Paradise," by Roger Cohen, describes Australia's treatment of refugees who've attempted to smuggle themselves into the country by placing them in camps on the neighboring islands, Manus Island and Nauru. Unlike the previous camps mentioned, the camps located on these islands lack resources and are in poor condition for a reason. They're meant to punish those who're considered by Australia as "" queue jumpers", a phrase that resonates in a nation devoted to a "fair go" for all, it has safeguarded Australia's right to select who gets to people a vast and empty country" (Cohen). However, most of Australia's actions towards these refugees are due to the increase in conservative movements in the country and abroad, which are fueled by the fear of the unknown: The possibility of an increase in terrorism and the loss of jobs. So, for Australia to fight these possibilities, its "government argues that toughness is the only way to prevent the country from being overwhelmed" (Cohen). Despite Australia being in the right as to punish those who don't follow the country's policies, they're wrong in treating these refugees as criminals for wanting a better life.

Though there is some hope that a "one-time agreement with the United States ... will, over an unspecified period, take in an unspecified number of the refugees" (Cohen). However, due to the presidency of Donald Trump, who hopes to suppress the flow of immigration in the United States, the future of the deal is left unknown. This uncertainty leaves the refugees on the islands waiting and hoping that they'll soon be freed from these prisons. Australia could've saved these refugees the trouble of being subjected to the prison-like experience of these camps

by sending them back to their own countries, or even owning up to their responsibilities by processing the refugees instead of having them wait for nothing. Australia was founded on a similar philosophy of “out of sight, out of mind” when “Britain’s dispatch in the late 18th century of convicts to a faraway land in Oceania, where they, too, would be invisible” (Cohen). Yet, Australia still felt the need to give these people the full prison experience with a detention center that’s “primitive, hundreds of men crammed into makeshift compounds or tents, scant food, bullying expat staff contracted by Australia” (Cohen). Australia’s blatant disregard for the well-being of these refugees by hiding them off the mainland and pretending that they don’t exist is not only sending a message to the smugglers, but to other nations that Australia is a lost cause in terms of asylum and humanitarianism.

Do not consider my criticism of these countries as one-sided. Even though I disagree with their methods of decreasing the migration of refugees into their countries, I can’t deny that I don’t understand their reasoning. Greece is suffering economically and is unable to take in and provide for refugees when it has its own people to provide for. Australia is faultless in terms of enforcing its laws, as the country is in its right to protect its borders from anyone who wants to enter the country by illegal means. The refugee crisis is much more complicated than it appears as the article “The Hard Truth About Refugees,” by James Traub, explains how the refugee crisis isn’t as simple as just leaving our borders open for anybody who wants to enter. He mentions that in Sweden there is a word, “’asikstkorridor,’ which translates as ‘opinion corridor’ and describes all those things considered incorrect not only to say but to think” (Traub), which includes the view that the refugees will not be able to integrate into their new country. Though this assumption is unfair, we can’t “insist that the arrival of vast numbers of people on our

doorstep is an unmixed blessing” (Traub). What many of these countries’ share is their fear of the unknown: “Will these refugees affect jobs?”, “Who are we letting into the country?”, and “Will they be able to integrate into the country’s culture?” in addition to a myriad of other questions, as by letting these refugees into their country, they are opening themselves up for many possibilities that will not only affect the future of the refugees, but their people as well.

This fear has also led to a growth in conservative movements in the countries involved in the refugee crisis. These conservatives fear that by letting the refugees into their country, their culture, as well as financial, and personal safety will be in jeopardy. This fear has also affected the United States, despite there being “no real refugee problem ... no immigrant crime wave” (Traub). This can be attributed to the 2016 election and the presidency of Donald Trump, who is one of the many representatives of conservative movements found in countries affected by the refugee crisis. Though I didn’t vote for Donald Trump, I can understand what people see in him. Despite “Trump’s habit of blaming refugees for terrorism ... flies in the face of the evidence” (Traub), he brings up the concerns of American citizens when it comes to the refugee crisis. We can’t be sure that every refugee that we take in will be able to integrate into our culture, or that they won’t commit a crime, or even in the extreme case, an act of terror. Despite these fears being unfounded, they are still apparent in the minds of many of the country’s citizens. But fear is a double-edged sword that can run rampant if left unchecked.

These feelings towards refugees are not new as they have appeared in many others who’ve encountered those who are different from themselves. The novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, by J.M. Coetzee, is an allegory that shows how the fear of the unknown can cause us to distort our reality and view those who are different from us as though they were barbarians. In

the novel, the protagonist (also known as the Magistrate), sees the injustice that is done against those who are deemed barbarians and attempts to help as well as to better understand them; much to the ire of those around him. Despite his willingness to help, his conviction begins to waver and he starts to question if he should have never gotten involved. But even when he tries to ignore them, he can't help himself as he watches his own countrymen commit barbarous actions against those who they believe to be the true barbarians. In the novel, the Magistrate profoundly states "Nothing is worse than what we can imagine," (Coetzee 31) which holds true as what we imagine can be worse than how something really is, and these countries' citizens are letting their fear take the place of reality. However, we can't let these refugees suffer due to our uncertainty; we must persevere with both the country's citizens and the refugees' interests in mind.

Though many of these countries shy away from helping these refugees, Germany is an exception. Unlike its peers, Germany has decided to take the reins of the refugee crisis by taking in and housing people displaced by the crisis before granting them asylum. The article "The New Europeans," by James Angelos, explores Germany's housing of refugees in their country and the reaction of the country's people. The article states that Germany is housing refugees in temporary residencies in the country, such as "school gymnasiums, shuttered big-box stores and crowded tent encampments" (Angelos). Unlike the camps found in other sanctuary countries, these refugees aren't left in unhealthy and poor conditions. Though many of these refugees are "showing up in train stations or emerging from the back of smugglers' trucks" (Angelos), local officials would work to find somewhere that they could be housed, instead of turning them away or imprisoning them. Much of Germany's eagerness to help in the refugee crisis is due to the country's past, "which unleashed the violence that prompted the earlier mass flight – has now

become a beacon of safety and opportunity for imperiled and dispossessed people around the world” (Angelos).

Though Germany is holding its head high due to its moral achievement, the country still struggles from their decision to let these refugees into their country. Like other countries that let in refugees, there is a growing fear of terrorism as “Germany’s domestic intelligence service assessed the risk of a terrorist attack in Germany as ‘high’” (Angelos). This has in turn increased activities of conservative groups that want to keep the refugees out of the country, as they’re wary of Germany becoming a multicultural nation as it “has not traditionally viewed itself as a destination for migrants” (Angelos). Many German citizens even feel that they’re unable to express their own opinion in fear of being labelled as a Nazi. Contrary to Sweden’s *asikstkorridor*, in Germany those who’ve pent up their anger towards the refugees have found comfort in the *stammtisch*, “a regularly scheduled beer-drinking session that is often established among groups of friends in Germany” (Angelos). These events give catharsis to those afraid of being viewed as racist since “*stammtisch* talk is often considered beer-fueled blather not to be taken seriously” (Angelos). Despite these problems that Germany shares with other countries involved in the refugee crisis, Germany is distinguishable from the rest; as its shown, it has the capability to struggle through with all the hardships that come with their humanitarian effort. Though it may be challenging to accept new people into their countries, by persevering through these challenges they’re showing their country’s integrity and living up to the ideals that these refugees sought-after.

The crisis is still going on, with refugees losing their lives while trying to look for protection and safety. Most of us are unable to fathom what types of hardships these people have

been through and can only see it through the news. However, the government in these countries that hold these camps see the crisis on a daily-basis. These countries that house these refugees also hold their lives in their hands. It's up to them to provide for these refugees, not treat them as though they were pests. They must remember that they didn't choose to come to their country; they had no choice. It's our duty to treat these guests with open arms; even with our prejudices and our fears, they're still human beings just like us and deserve a chance for a better life. It's a commitment that has its upsides as well as its downsides, but if we can manage to preserve the lives of the displaced as well as our countries' citizens, we'll be placing a precedent for future generations to learn from, as to prevent or diminish the effects of any future crisis that may occur.

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