



Ensuring safe living conditions within refugee camps



UNHCR

Nehir Yılmaz, Eda Gönül
President, Deputy President

Forum: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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Name: Eda Gönül, Nehir Yılmaz

Position: Deputy Chair, President Chair

Introduction

“If this were the population of a country, it would be the 24th largest in the world.” says the annual Global Trends Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The number of refugees and asylum seekers worldwide is higher today than it has ever been. According to the report, one in every 122 people on the planet is now either a refugee, internally displaced or seeking asylum. The effects of displacement extend beyond individual lives, impacting countries, host communities, and many more. As the world witnesses its highest levels of displacement on record, a number of these people who have been forced to flee their homes due to war, persecution or violence, stay in refugee camps, seeking help and protection. These camps are intended as temporary settlements that are built for the purpose of serving as a place of accommodation for refugees. Most of the world’s refugee camps are run by the UNHCR itself and play a pivotal role in providing accommodation and assistance to refugees.

Although there are many refugee camps in different parts of the world, not all of them are able to serve as a completely safe place of stay for refugees, who already face many real-life struggles. The conditions in refugee camps vary widely, influenced by factors such as but not limited to geographic location, economic sources, and the duration of these ‘temporary’ displacements. Refugees, having faced the trauma of forced migration, get highly and directly affected by the conditions of their places of stay. Safe living conditions are basic human rights of a person, and to respect the dignity and rights of a forcefully displaced person, the state of refugee camps needs to be carefully taken care of. This report will investigate the different aspects of human life that refugee camps contribute to, the current situations of these camps worldwide, and possible ways they could be improved.

Definition of Key Terms

Asylum

A form of international protection granted by a country to foreign nationals who have fled their own country due to fear of persecution. Understanding asylum is crucial for comprehending the legal mechanisms in place to provide refuge to those in need.

Refugee

People who are forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, or violence. As the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the link between statelessness and refuge is important to examine.

Refugee Camps

Camps where people who have escaped their country and are seeking refuge can stay. These camps are and should be intended to be a temporary solution and not a permanent living condition.

General Overview

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, there are today around 15,000 refugee camps worldwide and nearly 22% of the global refugee population lives in refugee camps – an estimated 6.6 million people. The rest are spread in towns and cities, mostly hoping to find work. Camps are settlements that make it easier for authorities to take care of refugees since they are places that gather all displaced people in one place. They are pretty effective in that matter too. Though the situation of refugee camps is so diverse, that while in some, refugees are given duties to work and stay safely, some lack even the basic needs of people, turning refuge into a miserable experience.

Health and Sanitation

Some initial services are and must be provided by refugee camps around the world. These include access to clean water and sanitation facilities, disease prevention and control measures, and other health services. Since these camps are aimed to serve as a place of living, any vital tool that a person might need must be available. Blankets, sleeping mats, mosquito nets, clothing and personal hygiene kits are some basic examples of the needed tools.

The availability of health services in camps is not always easily provided. In some camps, there are insufficient medical facilities to meet the needs of the population, generally due to limited funding

or hardships in transportation. Plus, there is sometimes a lack of medical personnel, which creates even a harder problem to solve. The lack of medical facilities, personnel, or hygiene in general causes great threats to the well-being of residents. Especially since the environment in a refugee camp is what can be referred to as 'overcrowded', the spread of communicable diseases poses a major threat. Alternatively, there can be refugees with chronic illnesses or far more complex medical conditions, needing access to specialized care. In such cases, there is often a lack of expertise to address specific health problems, in addition to an environment that complicates individual treatment. Also, in chronic diseases or any treatment overall, the background and medical history of a person has great significance. In a camp of such, there is never the presence of proper health information systems, leaving a harder job to the hands of a single doctor. Last but surely not least, displacement is a major cause of trauma, and the loss of a home contributes majorly to stress and significant mental health issues among refugees. Most of the refugee camps create a stress- and fearful environment for the people, let alone helping them address their mental problems and concerns.

The most well-known and functioning example of measures to improve this situation would be Doctors Without Borders. Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is an independent movement that dedicated itself to sending medical care to those in crises, including conflicts, refuge, and natural disasters. MSF has a team consisting of doctors specialized in their area, nurses, logisticians and other volunteers and continues to provide medical care to refugees and displaced people all over the world. It is a major initiative to strengthen the medical side of refugee camps, addressing the problem of the number of personnel. Naturally, one organization can't be present in 15,000 different refugee camps, which once again highlights the importance of finding alternative measures for healthcare and hygiene, specific to the camps' needs and from the lessons the international community learned from past experiences.

Shelter and Infrastructure

The living conditions in refugee camps rely heavily on their physical form as a shelter. While examining this, it is important to keep in mind the necessities of a refugee camp. While services like healthcare or basic sheltering need to be present in every single camp, it is in some cases when educational and livelihood opportunities as well as basic materials to build more permanent homes are needed. In situations of long-term displacement, these services are expanded in order to help people rebuild their lives. Infrastructure development is a factor that effectively supports livelihood opportunities within a camp. In some camps around the world, there are spaces for small businesses or agricultural initiatives, which provide refugees with some sort of work as well as promoting self-

sufficiency. Though camps in which these initiatives are present are limited, depending on the resources the camp has and the productivity of its geographical location. When it comes to geography, it must also be mentioned that these refugee camps need to be adaptable to the climate of their environment. The Center for Global Development states “Refugees are both highly exposed and highly vulnerable to climate shocks.”, reminding that shelters are there to provide protection from weather conditions or natural disasters in regions prone to them. Refugee camps in northern Syria are an active example. In July 2023, the heatwave in the Middle East left Syrian refugees who lacked cooling options affected by heat-based illnesses. The same region, in the winter, got hit by winter storms, once again causing illnesses that affect the quality of life and other economic consequences. Refugee camps are often located at the edge of cities or remote and desolate locations, the research of The United Nations University MERIT states. And with the increased effects of climate change, refugees are becoming more and more vulnerable each day.

Security and Protection

To those fleeing violation and conflict, the most important aim of a camp is to provide refugees with security and protection. In some camps, personnel are not properly trained to protect themselves and the refugees from outside security threats, which fosters an environment of panic. Even the healthcare workers that the report has priorly touched upon. Any person operating or residing in the region is usually at risk of outside attacks or acts of violence. This usually leaves women and children under a bigger threat. In an environment of chaos, children or vulnerable adults might be exploited in different ways. In February 2002, the UNHCR and Save the Children UK released a report entitled "Sexual Violence and Exploitation: The Experience of Refugee Children in Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone." It investigated sexual violence and exploitation in the region, including its extent, causes, and consequences, and made recommendations for future action. According to the report, sexual exploitation in refugee camps was spread and even perpetrated by aid workers, peacekeepers, or community leaders. Humanitarian care, so food and relief items, or medical care or medicines are traded for sexual favours, the report suggests. Sexual as well as other types of exploitation is common in the chaotic environment of a shelter, and the ones that are most affected by it are women and children, as it is in any other part of the world.

Furthermore, as protection can and needs to be physical, there is also the legal side of hosting a refugee. Policies and procedures for the legal protection of refugees vary across nations, which leads to complexities. Today, the improvement of legal safeguards is mainly done by international

organizations like the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). The organization believes in the refugees' right to have legal representation. Asylum procedures for refugees can be complicated, and refugees need to be advocated for so that their social and economic rights are recognized. In areas where the integration of refugees into host societies requires a hard procedure, these legal efforts become increasingly important.

Education Opportunities

Once again in situations when there is long-term displacement, children who reside in the region need their right to receive education fulfilled, as education is a crucial factor that contributes to a person's growth and long-term well-being. In refugee camps, providing education is especially difficult, since there is usually a mix of different races, cultures, and languages. The language and culture barriers are sometimes too hard to overcome that education is not even given. Around the world, there are both good and bad instances when it comes to the field of education in refugee camps. The Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya shows a great example of recognition of the critical role of education. The efforts made by humanitarian organizations in the area continuously expand educational opportunities, engaging the community (parents and local community members) to support and enhance the learning environment. On the other hand, in countless camps, the situation is the opposite. The Cox's Bazar refugee camp in Bangladesh hosts a significant Rohingya population. Although the camp does not have a language or culture barrier within itself, it presents many challenges in providing quality education. The camp, like many other camps around the world, does not have trained teachers, a shared curriculum, and enough resources, resources that are supposed to suffice overcrowded classrooms.

These camps are meant to be temporary places of stay for refugees, meaning most of them will later on move to the town or city like the rest of the refugee population. And if these camps cannot, as stated in the infrastructure part, provide refugees with working opportunities, the least they could do is vocational training so that these people at some point get the chance to find the needed work. Azraq refugee camp (Jordan), Zaatari refugee camp (Jordan), and Skaramangas refugee camp (Greece) are examples of camps in which vocational training programs are being implemented. These trainings conducted in established related centres equip refugees with skills such as carpentry, tailoring, agriculture, hair styling, or electrical work – basically, any field that will help refugees fit for potential employment within and outside the camp.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Event
December 22, 1971	Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is officially established in Paris, France
April 7 - July 15, 1994	The Rwandan Genocide and the Great Lake Refugee Crisis, the influx of refugees from the Rwandan genocide into camps in Goma and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo)
1997	The establishment of the Sphere Organization “to improve the quality of humanitarian response in situations of disaster and conflict, and to enhance the accountability of the humanitarian system to disaster-affected people” (The Sphere Project ii)
February 27, 2002	Report entitled "Sexual Violence and Exploitation: The Experience of Refugee Children in Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone" was released by the UNHCR and Save the Children UK
March 2011	The beginning of the Syrian Refugee Crisis due to the violent government crackdown and internal as well as external conflict
2015	The European Migrant Crisis where approximately 1.3 million people seeking asylum entered Europe
December 2017	“The Contribution of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) to discussions on the Global Compact on Refugees” is released.
July 2023	Many countries are heavily affected by the heatwave in the Middle East

Major Parties Involved

Syria

As mentioned before, Syria has had many people migrate as a result of the lack of safe living conditions caused by the ongoing conflicts and the heatwave in the Middle East. Many have also been internally displaced. Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon have set up refugee camps and provided shelter, food, and basic services. The majority of the refugees in the European Migrant Crisis were from Syria and therefore occupied the preponderance of refugee camps set up as well. The Syrian conflict has become protracted, resulting in long-term displacement for many refugees.

Jordan

Jordan has hosted several refugees from different countries including Syria and Iraq. Many refugee camps have been set up such as the Azraq and Zaatari Refugee Camps. Therefore, Jordan plays a major role when it comes to the responsibility of providing necessities such as healthcare aid to ensure safe living conditions for refugees.

Turkey

With Turkey being on the border and many Syrians seeking asylum, many refugees have found shelter in this country. Accordingly, refugee camps rapidly became a necessity. Currently, Turkey has opened its borders to millions of migrants. The country's geographical proximity to conflict zones in the Middle East has made it the probable destination for those seeking shelter. Thus, Turkey has faced humanitarian challenges when it comes to this issue.

Kenya

Likewise, Kenya has hosted many refugees from neighbouring countries in refugee camps like the aforementioned Dadaab and Kakuma Camps. The Dadaab refugee camp was established in the 1990s as a result of the Civil War in Somalia causing people to migrate to Kenya. This camp is one of the largest refugee camps in the world. The Kakuma Refugee Camp has provided refuge to migrants from many countries including South Sudan, Ethiopia, Burundi and The Democratic Republic of Congo.

Germany

Germany is one of the most involved countries in the European Migrant Crises. The country has opened its borders to many refugees from the Middle East. In 2015 Germany adopted an open-

door policy which allowed the entry of higher numbers of asylum seekers within their region. Subsequently, emergency shelters were placed to provide humanitarian aid for refugees under safe living conditions. Germany has also provided a legal framework regarding the protection of refugees and asylum seekers.

United States of America

The United States has a longstanding history of providing refuge to people fleeing persecution and violence in their country. Although the U.S. does not follow the conventional approach in providing shelter for refugees, resettlement programs have been established to accommodate refugees. However, often due to the difficult and unreliable process of admission to this program, many have illegally passed the border from South America. Therefore, it has become more difficult to estimate the number and origin of refugees in the U.S. which creates a susceptible environment for unsafe living conditions for refugees.

Possible Solutions

With refugee crises increasing all around the globe, it has become an emergency that needs to be addressed with the right approach. First and foremost, establishing infrastructure to facilitate refugee camps is essential. It is important to prioritize and contribute to providing secure shelter, clean water, sanitation facilities, and adequate healthcare within refugee camps. As mentioned before, health and sanitation are one of the major problems when it comes to this issue. Therefore, these aspects are crucial in establishing safe living environments. Another crucial point is providing security. Considering the vulnerable state that refugees are in due to conditions that led them to flee their country, taking security measures is all the more important. Access to education and occupational training for children and adults can increase inclusion and self-sufficiency. Furthermore, encouraging community involvement and mitigating the inclusion of refugees in camp management decision-making procedures might improve their overall safety and security. International collaboration and shared responsibility among countries may contribute to a more equally spread task of hosting refugees. Addressing the core causes of displacement, as well as engaging in conflict resolution and peace-building activities, can also help achieve long-term solutions. Ultimately ensuring secure and humane living conditions within refugee camps requires a comprehensive and delicate strategy that prioritizes refugees' human rights.

Further Reading

<https://emergency.unhcr.org/emergency-assistance/shelter-camp-and-settlement>

(An emergency handbook published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on shelter, camp and settlement for refugees)

<https://www.concern.net/news/largest-refugee-crises>

(Information about the 10 largest refugee crises according to the data provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)

<https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/camps/>

(Information about what refugee camps are, what process is undergone in providing shelter, where the largest refugee camps in the world are etc.)

<https://reporting.unhcr.org/shelter-and-infrastructure-99>

(An example of measures taken and planned to take by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to provide shelter and infrastructure)

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