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Covid-19, refugees and the shift to the right: the Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh

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Covid-19 has led to a sustained and non-regional suspension of globalization for the first time since the Second World War. The roots of the situation however pre-date Covid-19. As Antonio Guterres has pointed out, the state paradigm trumped the human rights paradigm a while ago. One dimension of globalisation impacted by this are the rights of displaced persons and refugees.

Main Rohingya Refugee camp near Cox's Bazaar
Photo: Mike Charney

Under international law, States have the sovereign power to regulate the entry of non-nationals. However, States cannot legally prevent people from seeking asylum from persecution. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, provides that '[e]veryone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution' which is supported by the principle of non-refoulement. Several regional instruments affirm the right. Yet under international law it is left to states to determine and interpret the right to asylum.

In reality, transnational migration outside of privileged circles, is not protected with the same kinds of safeguards national, stated populations receive. There are approximately 80 million forcibly displaced people around the globe. Forcibly displaced people are some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in the world. If you are not being protected by a state you are helpless, especially when everything goes wrong. There are huge disparities in the kinds of issues refugees from different conflict zones face because of the numbers of people involved and/or the amount of resources available in the different host countries. Most displaced persons are hosted not in wealthy, European countries but in low or middle income countries. What has become apparent with the coronavirus global pandemic is that the most vulnerable populations with the least international protections are not included in national protection measures put in place to fight the virus. The response by most countries has been lockdowns and social distancing. For refugees everywhere though, these measures often mean stopping access to clean water, working sanitation systems, food, psychological and emotional support, education, protection from domestic abuse and how can they follow the required measures, washing their hands, for example, when they do not have access to clean water, or social distancing when they are packed together tightly in camps and unable to distance?

There are approximately 80 million forcibly displaced people around the globe

Covid-19 is posing significant challenges for ethnic minorities on Myanmar's borderlands, particularly to the Rohingya.

Myanmar

Association with disease is historically a powerful tool for othering. Covid-19 is already proving to be really nasty for vulnerable people, like migrant communities, when they get infected because they become associated with disease. The label tends to stick to them and soon a migrant group can become a political target in what is already a tense national climate. Already Italian and Hungarian populists are blaming the coronavirus spread on African refugees or on

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Iranian migrants. It is commonly recognised that associating particular groups with disease or disease carrying qualities like vermin is part of the early stages of genocide.

Covid-19 may give a seemingly legitimate façade to Myanmar's concern about not wanting the Rohingya. Myanmar will not have to rely on the old arguments that Rohingya are not Burmese, they are not Buddhists, they are colonial-era migrants, all arguments that have failed to legitimate their course of action in the past. They can now refuse to readmit Rohingya on the basis that they are a

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potential health threat that should not be moved back to Rakhine, that they should remain in isolation legitimately. So, concern over public health can now be weaponised by the Myanmar state. And if Covid-19 continues to be around, in waves or endemically for the next few years, the sense that the Rohingya must remain where they are is only going to get strengthened. As a result,

Walled Out—Myanmar's wall to keep Rohingya from re-entering country, near Tek Naaf Photo: Mike Charney

Covid-19 is likely to severely diminish any prospect for a long-term resolution to the situation that led to Myanmar's expulsion of the Rohingya from Rakhine state in 2017.

Bangladesh

It is not only in Myanmar that the Rohingya face increasing hostility. A severe Covid-19 outbreak amongst the Rohingya located in camps in Bangladesh could result in a significant political problem for the host state. The risk of this happening are however already high.

Cox's Bazaar in Southeastern Bangladesh is not just the world's biggest refugee camp—860,000 people there and in other nearby camps - it is also the world's most densely packed refugee camp. The situation of the camps makes social distancing precautions nearly impossible. It is literally impossible to undertake all the precautions residents in other countries can if they choose to do so. Anyone who has been to the camps knows it was a disaster waiting for Covid-19 to happen. Human Rights experts are trying to draw attention to the deteriorating situation in the camps as potential hotspots for the spread of Covid-19.

In April the Bangladesh Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner issues a Directive that reduced critical services in the Rohingya refugees camps. These measures meant that the number of humanitarian workers in the refugee camps was cut by 80%. Refugees are now at risk of food and water shortages raising concern about infectious diseases, cholera and so on. However, the International Organization for Migration and other groups put in place contingency measures for three Covid-19 isolation and treatment centres. Although, as of 21 June 2020, only 4 Rohingya had died and 45 have been infected, a lack of expertise in the testing centres means we do not know the true extent of infection

The Rohingya being viewed as a potential cluster for the disease in Bangladesh is a major risk. They were already becoming a source of political anger amongst Bangladeshis in the region before Covid-19. There are opportunities for infections to spread between the communities. The Rohingya camps near Cox's Bazaar are in close proximity to Bangladeshi communities with approximately 400,0000 people. Not only do

Bangladeshi's work in the camps but women and girls are frequently also secreted out at night from the Rohingya Cox's Bazaar for prostitution with Bangladeshi men. There is also a domestic violence dimension to this. When Rohingya in the camps are free to move about, international aid organizations support safe spaces for women. With Covid-19, the safe spaces are closed as part of the lockdown. So now there's an increased risk of gender-based violence (GBV) – intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation and other abuse directed at the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. This is something on a very different scale than the problems faced by or increased domestic violence because of isolation.

Any identification with spreading Covid-19 could lead to further political anger that at a minimum will make the Rohingya much more unwanted by their hosts. Political pressure on the government to deal with the Rohingya as a result may lead to more plans to relocate the Rohingya onto islets for example that are environmentally vulnerable.

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Shift to the Right

Normally there is a tension between the commitment to universal human rights and the right to national self-determination but as securitisation in response to the perceived threats of transnational migration get voiced during the pandemic, there has been a shift to stronger border control. Covid-19 has strengthened globally a pre-existing political shift to the Right, both a nativist zenophobia in nominally Democratic societies and a newfound sense of security in the kind of administrative efficacy nominally authoritarian states can offer. It appears that democracies have not done very well in coping with the coronavirus pandemic and authoritarian regimes have. The virus has also made more authoritarian regimes seem safer because they have done better at containing the virus, but it has made people in both Asia and the West more afraid of migrant populations. It has made expulsions of migrants by the US easier, keeping people out of the UK easier, and countries refusing Rohingya entry easier. Formerly welcoming and supportive communities, like Malaysia have recently begun to see a dramatic increase in harassment in the streets and online of Rohingya. and this has wound up making transnational migrants more vulnerable. Covid-19 has made everyone, everywhere feel threatened, it has made globalization look bad and foreign migrants seen as the symptoms of a problem. This has strengthened the Right.

Conclusion

The situation of the Rohingya demonstrates that Covid-19 raises special problems for the victims of forced displacement and refugees from conflict zones. These problems can be examined from different angles, but only by looking at them with the migrants themselves as the security referent, human security, can the scale of the risks and damage be really understood. We are going to have to talk more about human security as something that is just as important for everyone as state security. South Africa building a fence across its border with Zimbabwe or Greece closing its borders to stop undocumented migrants is not the best way to solve Covid-19. We need to think globally, we need to be more inclusive, and we need to act collectively if we are going to beat Covid-19. Better protections for forcibly displaced migrants and undocumented migrants is really an important part of this collective process.

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