



European Economic
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BLOG by the President

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Blog by Luca Jahier, President of the European Economic and Social Committee
COVID-19: Let's not forget the millions of refugees

If today, we are afraid of falling ill, losing our loved ones, our jobs, and our individual freedoms, we should not lose sight of those who are living in refugee camps, in and outside Europe.

A month ago, I was in Cyprus, a country that is experiencing an unprecedented pressure of refugees of all backgrounds. Typically, they arrive in the north of the island, pass the green zone and illegally enter the Republic of Cyprus. This results in the highest rate of first-time asylum applicants relative to population in the European Union.

On 5-6 March, I visited Athens, in the aftermath of the explosion of the crisis on the Greek-Turkish border and the revolts of the population in Lesbos and other islands in the Aegean Sea. Despite the laudable efforts by the Greek government to relocate part of the refugees from Turkey to other Greek provinces and to build shelters that would guarantee more decent conditions for these desperate people, the pressure is increasing.

Only two weeks ago, the issue of the protection of external borders, of migratory waves, sometimes maneuvered cynically as an unconventional geopolitical weapon, and the need to accelerate the European Pact for Migration and Asylum were high on the European political agenda.

Within two weeks, all of this simply vanished from our radars.

However, the unacceptable inhumane conditions, the impossible limbo in which millions of people find themselves in, piled up at the external borders of the EU, or in the camps on both sides of these borders--often elderly, women, children, patients forced into makeshift shelters, with minimal access to adequate health protection; this should not and cannot be forgotten so easily.

What will happen when the COVID-19 pandemic overruns them? Perhaps, it has already hit them, and nobody cares. Will we put all of them into forced quarantines, abandoning them to themselves and to the few humanitarian workers and international organisations who are doing their best in the midst of tides of despair?

All my deepest appreciation goes to the initiative already taken by the European Commission to ensure the health protection of asylum seekers and migrants who are in the camps on the EU territory, in Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta or elsewhere. In times of crisis, applying European values is even more crucial than in normal times. Let's keep this up!

But what about all the others?

Over 12 million children and 70 million people forced to abandon their homes are now, in many cases, in overcrowded conditions, with minimal or non-existent access to health care. Children are already very exposed to contagious diseases due to poor health care, lack of clean water and hygiene. Frequent hand washing, social distancing, or self-isolation are simply impossible measures in overcrowded migrant camps.

In Syria, in Idlib, nearly 1 million people are displaced, living in inhumane conditions in camps that have grown enormously. In Bangladesh, in Cox's Bazar, where 1 million Rohingya refugees live (half of them are children), there is currently no screening or testing system for Covid-19 and there are no intensive care units. The same can be said for Yemen or Venezuela, where most of the hospitals have been destroyed, and the health systems with them.

In sub-Saharan Africa, which hosts more than a quarter of the world's refugees and has the lowest absolute percentage of doctors per person, 0.2 per 1,000 people, Covid-19 case confirmations are multiplying in most of the countries.

The largest concentration of refugees in Africa is hosted in the east of the continent and comes in particular from South Sudan. Over 2.2 million people have been forced to leave the country, and over

83% are women and children. Another two million are still displaced in Sudan itself. In this regard, I cannot fail to recall the expanse of migrant and refugee camps in the provinces east of Ethiopia, which I visited last June.

Besides the obvious tragic consequences for migrants and refugees, the explosion of new substantial outbreaks of pandemics at Europe's borders could largely jeopardize containment efforts, which already affect over one billion people worldwide.

On this front, many governments are left alone, so are humanitarian organisations and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). A few days ago, UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi launched an urgent appeal to governments for an allocation of \$33 million to provide hygiene kits, protective masks, sanitation of water for human use and training for health workers, in order to increase refugee and migrant protection against COVID-19.

We should not let this appeal go unheeded. It must be seen as a priority for urgent decisions to be taken these days. Refugees' and migrants' health is also our health. We are one humanity, and now more than ever, the Coronavirus - which knows no races or borders - confirms it.

Recently, in Cyprus, I met a girl named Treasure in a protection centre for migrant families. I hope that Treasure will be protected like my children and will have the future she deserves, like any other human being.

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