



Surplus people

Figures for the year 2015 from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) showed that there were 65.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, 21.3 million refugees, 10 million stateless people and 107 100 refugees re-settled. Of these, 53% came from three countries – Somalia, Afghanistan and Syria. The top hosting countries are Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Islamic Republic of Iran, Ethiopia and Jordan. Europe takes in just 6%, the Americas 12% and Asia and the Pacific (which includes Australia) 14%. There is a stark figure in the UNHCR 2015 report – 33 972 people a day flee their homes because of conflict and persecution. Experts say that figures such as this have not been seen since World War II.

The term ‘refugee’ is misleading – most of these people are what are called internally displaced people (IDP). These are people who are forced from their homes but have not left their countries, and in most cases cannot do so. Refugees and asylum seekers are people who have been forced from their homes *and* their countries. IDP cannot simply ‘go home’ – their homes are no longer available and they can no longer live normal lives, often landing up in vast camps for displaced people.

Syria is the country that springs to mind when we think about forcibly displaced people generally. But Syrians make up only one-third of the world’s refugees. Closer to home there are three major humanitarian crises unfolding – South Sudan, Somalia and northern Nigeria. There are at least 1.9 million IDP in each of South Sudan and northern Nigeria. In Somalia there are 6 million people facing starvation. Across the Horn of Africa there are around 40 million people at risk.

The proximal cause of the suffering in Africa is famine. This is largely man made, even though below-average rainfall has made local food production difficult. The crisis in northern Nigeria is due to 8 years of violent conflict, leading to widespread displacement and a desperate shortage of essential healthcare. This is part of the Chad Basin crisis, which affects some 17 million people. Likewise, in South Sudan and Somalia, it is military conflict that disrupts food production and prevents the delivery of any humanitarian assistance that is available.

According to John Campbell, writing in *The Conversation*,^[1] the situation is similar to the events that took place in Ethiopia in the early 1980s. Western governments failed to monitor and intervene in time to prevent or mitigate the famine. It was the global media event –

Band Aid in 1984 – that focused the attention of Western governments, and the humanitarian assistance, when it arrived, was too little, too late. The causes of famine are complex, but include poor governance, inadequate planning, limited investment in development, ongoing violence and large-scale population displacement – and development assistance to Africa has declined since 1990, and is likely to decline further as the West focuses more on its own concerns.

The extent of Western interest in Africa is focused on the flow of oil and other commodities. Along with this are determined efforts to stop illegal migrants and refugees from entering the West. If you think that re-settling and aiding people is too expensive for Western countries, look at what they are spending on keeping people out – USD21 billion for Trump’s wall between the USA and Mexico, and the European Union (EU)’s EUR2.5 billion to bottle up migrants in Africa to prevent them from reaching Europe. The current cost of humanitarian assistance for Africa is insignificant in comparison.

What happened in 1980 is nothing in comparison to the scale of the current crisis, affecting an estimated 40 million people. Humanitarian assistance has come far too late and is too little – the EU pledged only EUR760 million to the Horn of Africa late last year, and smaller pledges were made by European states in February this year. The USA has not yet said what it will pledge in food aid. In the words of Desmond Tutu, ‘we live in a moral universe’ where what happens to others affects us all. Let’s not forget these ‘surplus people’.

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1. Campbell JR. Famine creeps in on Africa while the world’s media look elsewhere. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/famine-creeps-in-on-africa-while-the-worlds-media-looks-elsewhere-76340?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Latest%20from%20The%20Conversation%20for%20April%2025%202017%20-%2072585516&utm_content=Latest%20from%20The%20Conversation%20for%20April%2025%202017%20-%2072585516+CID_2344e614d350e5011e79371e445919a&utm_source=campaign_monitor_africa&utm_term=Famine%20creeps%20in%20on%20Africa%20while%20the%20worlds%20media%20looks%20elsewhere (accessed 5 May 2017).

S Afr Med J 2017;107(6):465. DOI:10.7196/SAMJ.2017.v107i6.12558