

The COVID-19 pandemic and the global plight of refugees and migrant workers

Jordan Shilton**24 June 2020**

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to tear through the global population, the disease is having an especially devastating impact on the tens of millions of displaced people throughout the world.

More than 1 percent of humanity--some 79.5 million people--were living as forcibly displaced people in 2019, the highest number on record. This staggering figure, which is almost double the number of displaced people just a decade ago and 10 million more than at the end of 2018, was cited in the latest United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) annual Global Trends report released last week.

If the world's displaced were considered as their own country, that country would have a population almost equivalent to that of Germany, Europe's largest economy, or that of Iran.

The vast majority of the refugees come from five countries, all of which have either been direct targets of US imperialist aggression and intrigue or are suffering as a result of decades of colonial domination and neocolonial occupation. Afghanistan, Myanmar, South Sudan, Syria and Venezuela account for 68 percent of the total. Syria alone, which has been devastated for almost a decade by a bloody US-instigated civil war, accounts for over 13 million displaced people--more than half of its 22 million pre-war population.

The poorest countries are bearing the brunt of the crisis, as the imperialist powers in North America and Europe seal their borders to refugees, use heavily armed, fascistic border guards to fire on them, or allow them to drown at sea. The UNHCR report notes that 73 percent of people displaced outside of their home country have found refuge in a neighbouring country, i.e., they live in countries that are often as ill-prepared as their war-torn, impoverished homelands to provide for their survival and well-being.

The report noted in this context the fate of the Rohingya, who were forced out of Myanmar in a vicious campaign of terror by the US-backed military regime. Tens of thousands remain confined to miserable, inhospitable camps in

Bangladesh. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the UNHCR has registered growing numbers of Rohingya moving towards Malaysia and other southeast Asian countries due to the hardship produced by lockdown measures and the diminishing prospect of ever returning home.

Refugees and displaced people who seek to reach richer countries in Europe and North America confront brutal repression and the threat of death due to the ruling elites' criminal policies. In the United States, the Trump administration has established a vast array of internment camps, where desperate and impoverished people fleeing horrendous social conditions in Latin America, including women and children separated from their families, are treated no better than animals. Militarized guards and militias patrol the US-Mexico border, which has become the scene of hundreds of migrant deaths every year.

In "Fortress Europe," the European Union has all but abolished the right to asylum and shredded the protections adopted in the Geneva Convention on Refugees, a piece of international law instituted following the unbridled savagery of the Nazi regime. Seven decades later, European governments, with Germany in the lead, are well on the way to resurrecting similarly barbaric practices.

Tens of thousands of refugees are confined to hellish concentration camps in Libya and other parts of North Africa, where they are subjected to torture, rape, slavery and worse by EU-funded militias. On the Greek islands, tens of thousands of people are crammed into overcrowded camps with virtually no sanitary facilities, amid a raging global pandemic. Thousands of refugees are left to drown in the Mediterranean on Europe's doorstep each year.

The cruelty and vindictiveness shown towards refugees by European capitalism is so brazen that even UN officials have been compelled to criticise it. Speaking at the release of the Global Trends report, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said that as a European, he feels "embarrassed and ashamed" over how the EU has handled the refugee crisis.

As horrific as the figures are in the UNHCR report, it accounts for the situation in 2019. It therefore does not take note of the devastating impact of the coronavirus crisis, which has dramatically worsened conditions facing refugees and migrant workers on every continent.

Migrants and displaced people typically belong to the most oppressed and exploited sections of the working class. They have been hit especially hard by coronavirus outbreaks, and largely left to fend for themselves by callously indifferent and often maliciously hostile state authorities, from Modi's India to Merkel's Germany and Trump's United States.

In Germany, where the fascistic Alternative for Germany plays a major role in determining government policy, large numbers of Romanian, Bulgarian and other Eastern European migrant workers are herded into dilapidated buildings often unfit for human habitation. They receive poverty wages and have no rights or job protection. They have been infected in large numbers in meat packing plants and in the agricultural sector, while many more have been placed under effective police guard in hopelessly overcrowded tower blocks and disused army barracks, which then become hotbeds for the spread of the virus.

In India, millions of migrant workers were left to starve by the Hindu supremacist government of Narendra Modi, which failed to provide adequate assistance to them when it unveiled a nationwide lockdown with just four hours' notice in March. Due to the fact that the vast majority of migrant workers are day labourers in the so-called "informal sector," they were left virtually overnight with no income to obtain food and other basic necessities. Hundreds of thousands began trekking on foot back to their home villages, often covering hundreds of miles and carrying the virus with them. Many more were detained in camps.

In the United States, migrant workers make up a large proportion of the more than 25,000 meat packing workers infected by CoVID-19. Hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants received no assistance during lockdown measures, due to fears that contacting state institutions could result in their detention or deportation.

Building on the Obama presidency, which oversaw a record number of immigrant deportations, the fascistic-minded Trump has launched a series of military-style immigration raids carried out by Immigration and Customs Enforcement thugs to arbitrarily round up immigrants for detention and removal. In July 2019, Trump launched nationwide raids targeting 2,000 families in 10 major cities for deportation.

The defence of refugees and migrant workers is a task that falls to the working class. Anti-immigrant chauvinism and nationalism have been systematically promoted by all factions of the political establishment in every country to

justify right-wing policies of law-and-order and attacks on democratic rights. They also seek to scapegoat immigrants and refugees for the social problems produced by decades of savage austerity and attacks on working conditions, which have in reality been implemented to boost the wealth of the super-rich and pay for imperialist militarism and war.

"The world of decaying capitalism is overcrowded," wrote Leon Trotsky in the *Manifesto of the Fourth International* in 1940. "The question of admitting a hundred extra refugees becomes a major problem for such a world power as the United States. In an era of aviation, telegraph, telephone, radio, and television, travel from country to country is paralyzed by passports and visas. The period of the wasting away of foreign trade and the decline of domestic trade is at the same time the period of the monstrous intensification of chauvinism and especially of anti-Semitism... Amid the vast expanses of land and the marvels of technology, which has also conquered the skies for man as well as the earth, the bourgeoisie has managed to convert our planet into a foul prison."

Eighty years after these lines were written, their forceful condemnation of the bourgeoisie is, if anything, even stronger than in 1940. While the bourgeoisie of every country is returning to the reactionary politics of nationalism, militarism and the far-right, the working class on a world scale is more interconnected and unified than ever before. The mass multi-racial protests over recent weeks in dozens of countries triggered by the brutal police murder of George Floyd testify to the common experiences of exploitation and state repression faced by workers of all backgrounds around the world under capitalism.

Rejecting the ruling elite's nationalism and anti-immigrant poison, working people must come to the defence of refugees and migrant workers on a global scale. They must defend the rights of workers of all nationalities to work, live and access social and health care services in the country of their choice without fear of persecution or deportation.

The defence of the democratic rights of refugees and migrant workers is possible only as part of the broadest mobilisation of workers and young people against social inequality, capitalist state repression and militarism and war. Such a struggle should be guided by a socialist and internationalist perspective and set as its goal the transfer of political power to workers' governments committed to socialist policies.



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