



Responding to the Global Refugee Crisis - 3 Dimensional Thinking

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“We Somalis did not sleep in the night because we are afraid. The government of Kenya says that we must go back to Somalia. If we refuse, they will stop our ration of food and water.” -Mama Fartun

These words came to me via WhatsApp from Mama Fartun, a middle-aged widow in a refugee camp in Kenya. She is one of the 190,000 women, children and men who have found refuge there. But their protection may soon be taken away.

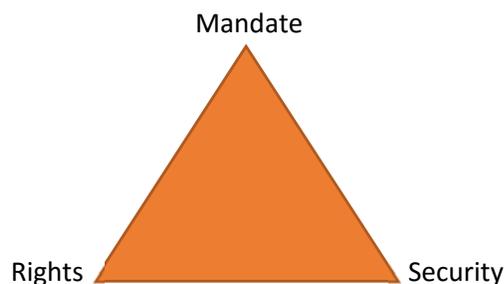
On May 6th, the Kenyan government announced that it has disbanded its Department of Refugee Affairs and that it intends to close its refugee camps – including 2 of the largest camps in the world. 600,000 lives may be affected.¹

While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly states that *“everyone has the right to see and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution”* (Article 14), Kenya is following the example of many industrialized countries committed to protecting themselves from desperate people seeking refuge within their borders.

These are strange times, when desperate people are viewed as a threat. Politicians gain votes by promising to build walls and erect fences to stop refugees. The EU has offered to pay Turkey \$6.6 billion in hope of enticing Turkey to stop potential refugees from escaping its borders.² NATO ships have been deployed in the Mediterranean with the mission to stop incoming refugees.³ Industrialized nations have lost any moral authority to call Kenya’s new policy into question.

The tragedy is that while the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide is growing, there is less and less humanitarian space to be found. In most cases, national security is the stated reason that countries feel the need to protect themselves from refugees.

As the global community engages this long-term refugee crisis, we need to avoid the trap of thinking one dimensionally. As Christians, there are at least three foundational aspects that must inform our response.



¹ “UNHCR appeals to Kenya over decision to end refugee hosting”, 9 May 2016. UNHCR.

<http://www.unhcr.org/5730b5f36.html>

² “The EU’s deal with Turkey on refugees is inhumane”, by David L. Phillips. Boston Globe. 4 April 2016.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2016/04/04/the-deal-with-turkey-refugees-inhumane/Z5jilD6MpoKhRhyXutW8SJ/story.html>

³ “NATO’s Mediterranean Mission”, by Yuri M. Zhukov. Foreign Affairs, 21 February 2016.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2016-02-21/natos-mediterranean-mission>



As we look for solutions, we must respect the tension that exists as we address the need for national security without compromising our adherence to human rights or our faithfulness to the divine mandate to love the foreigner⁴ and welcome the stranger⁵. And when they are in tension, we need to choose which has supremacy.

For those who follow of Jesus, there can be little confusion that the ways of his kingdom take priority. This is not to belittle issues of national security or human rights. It simply puts them into perspective.

So as Christians, we need to be well informed concerning God's expectations of our relationship to the stranger and the foreigner -including the refugee.⁶ We would do well to review the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁷ and the Refugee Convention⁸ to be sure that our country does not deny desperate people the rights to which it has formally committed itself. Neither can we dismiss issues of national security as meaningless. Security is a fundamental human need for which governments are responsible.

The best way forward will honor the tension of the present crisis, while keeping in mind the warning of history – that when we sacrifice human rights in the name of national security we end up losing both.

⁴ Leviticus 19:34

⁵ Matthew 25:35-36

⁶ A good starting point would be to watch "Introduction to the Refugee Highway", created by International Association for Refugees (<http://iafr.org/toolbox/iafr-multi-media>).

⁷ Download a copy from the following link: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3712c.html>

⁸ Learn about and download a copy from the following link: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49da0e466.html>