

Reflection on the Visit to Turkey

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A number of years ago my eyes were badly injured during a recreational soccer game. As a result of this injury, I was temporarily blinded for a few weeks. Although this was a traumatic and frightening experience, it was not without its rewards. The whole ordeal was a lesson in blindness. It taught me how I took my vision for granted all along. It taught me empirically what it means to be deprived of one of the most precious senses. Above all, it taught me how easy it is for one to suddenly lose his vision. When I recovered, I began to cherish my eyes and used my sense of vision with a great deal of pride, care and appreciation.

Last summer I had the opportunity to work as a graduate intern at the UNHCR head office in Ankara, Turkey. My first duties included researching various refugee-related issues. Eventually, I was given the opportunity to interview asylum seekers and screen them according to the UNHCR's refugee determination criteria.

This experience was similar to my eye injury, because, although it was very depressing, it was nonetheless very rewarding. It brought me close enough to witness the plight of those refugees who were in serious financial, psychological and even physical pain. The uniqueness of such an experience is the realization of the same ubiquitous reality that one witnesses night after night on the television screen, but this time perception of this reality is aided with more than one sense. The focus of this perception is on displaced people who are human beings like everyone of us with flesh, feelings and hopes, but are dehumanized by having been turned into file numbers. One of the most unforgettable

incidents while I was there took place during an early morning interview. A middle-aged asylum seeker was just admitted to the office for his first interview. Although the man appeared healthy, he was under so much stress that as soon as he started to reveal his grounds for asylum he collapsed with a heart attack. He died in the office, right in front of the legal officer and an interpreter. I was told later that this was "nothing," incidents such as someone burning himself in front of the UNHCR building or somebody throwing his sick child in front of a vehicle to relieve the child of the pain were common incidents there. My daily experiences were particularly depressing for a new employee who had to face the misery of destitutes—and then make a yes or no "moral" decision. Indeed, reading Locke, Hume, Hobbes and all other theoretical writings on ethics meant nothing when it came to a real life situation. It was striking to see that the permanent employees were very accustomed to this situation. It frightened me to think that the same thing could have happened to me if I had stayed there a little longer. There, in the legal unit of the UNHCR, legal officers are involved in making decisions on the future of these applicants. They act like quality control inspectors on an assembly line—filtering out unwanted goods. The irony in this process is that the *needless* determine the fate of the *needy* in accordance with ethical values which are relative and culturally biased. Being involved in this pedagogical process was indeed my greatest difficulty, especially when the system is known to be deficient from experiences elsewhere.

As one of the consequences of the Gulf war, the majority of the refugees coming to Turkey were Iraqis, who were fleeing the severe economic hardship imposed on them by Western

economic embargos. The distinction between convention refugee and migrant worker is clear in the UNHCR Determination Handbook, and of course "the UNHCR does not act as travel agency" in population movements. Thus, those who do not fit the convention definition are doomed to be rejected. None of the asylum seekers get any benefit from the UN, unless they are first recognized as a convention refugee. The result is tantamount to a disappointing brush-off for a great number of those who seek asylum. The standard and ubiquitous cliché: "we regret to inform you that..., thank you for your interest in UNHCR, we hope that you are successful elsewhere in your future objectives" appears in the only correspondence that a refugee receives from the UNHCR. Indirectly, the rejectees are treated as though they are guilty of committing an embarrassing crime like shoplifting or plagiarizing an essay, while their only "misdeed" is trying to provide better living conditions for their family. "You migrant worker, how dare you impersonate a convention refugee." A "crime" that without any hesitation anyone of us would commit being in their position. Often both the *needless* and the *needy* are where they are due an accident of birth and fate. The *needless*, seeming immune from displacement, are indifferent to the needs of the *needy*. The *needless* never think that they too may easily become one of the *needy*, just as we hardly ever consider that we may lose our precious eyesight.

The rejectees often remain in Turkey illegally, hoping to reach their destination through smugglers. The smugglers, who can hardly be trusted, often prey ruthlessly on the vulnerability of these desperate people. They charge as much as U.S.\$8,000 to provide them with a forged passport and an airline ticket. While in Turkey, if

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they are caught, they are subject to prosecution and deportation by the Turkish authorities.

As a result of this obviously faulty process, many NGOs and refugee rights advocates have campaigned for broadening the 1951 UN definition of a refugee. Although concerned for human rights, I personally never favoured the idea of changing the "outdated" definition of a convention refugee in order to accommodate the larger number of asylum seekers of 90s. That is because, I believe that we should always seek an optimal solution as opposed to a band-aid approach and false comfort. Therefore, we must handle any problems at the foundational level, to see what has caused the cracks in the structure in the first place. Thus, we ought to remove the sources which have generated the defects, rather than just dealing with symptoms. Furthermore, if we try to revise the 1951 definition of refugee in order to accommodate the current situation of 90s, then what are we going to do in the next few decades when the 90s definition is also outdated? Therefore, it seems that changing the definition every once in a while is far from being an optimal solution or a foundational approach. The solution does not lie in allowing more Iraqis to settle in the West. The solution ought to be in eradicating the problem from its root, which is indeed viable if our priorities are just and correctly focused. For example, if the UN economic blockade against Iraq is lifted then many of these refugees whom I met in Turkey would not abandon their homeland, possessions, culture, way of life, family and beg for membership in a foreign and often hostile society. These refugees are the victims of the so-called "New World Order", which evidently breathes disorder. So long as such a causative factor is left untouched, the plight of refugees will continue to exist. Until then, I believe there is a serious and urgent need for helping the downcast non-convention refugees who are wandering around Turkey and elsewhere in the world. ■

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