

Concern for others

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In my lifetime, in the two generations after the Second World War, we have witnessed many positive developments in the economic, political and social sectors, including the independence of the colonies, fantastic material development for billions of people, with greater equality for many but not for all, worldwide education and information explosion, and greater gender equality and women's emancipation in most parts of the world. Furthermore, we have seen improved social and religious diversity and tolerance. In the working life, there has generally been a positive trend in many countries with better pay and shorter working hours, less hazardous work conditions, etc., yet, in recent years, reverse trends can also be seen. The understanding for environmental issues, including climate change, has grown tremendously. The world has generally become smaller, with improved global trade and travels, Internet communication, and more. But the world has not become more peaceful and kinder in spite of the world wars and the 'cold war' having ended.

The refugee and migration situation improved until the 1960s, but has now entered a crisis situation, brought to the limelight in Europe in recent weeks. I shall discuss the latter in this article, reflecting on why it has happened in spite of the many positive trends I mentioned above. In some ways, we have become better at sharing resources; yet, at the same time, we have become more selfish, thinking about own individual and group interests rather than our neighbours.

I have written about refugees and other forced migrants earlier, and I have worked in that field in Pakistan. Pakistan was for many years the world's largest host country for refugees, with up to seven million in a country of less than two hundred million inhabitants. Still, there are one and a half million registered refugees here, and more than a million other Afghans.

I have also written about refugee and migration issues elsewhere in the world, often tying them to economic development issues. In my column on 14 May, I tried to consider some of the reasons behind the current migration crisis in Europe, where refugees are the largest group, caused by wars and conflicts in the Middle East and repression and development problems in some African countries. I also touched upon the historic reasons, going back to the colonial era.

The West, indeed UK, cannot just wash its hands for what happens in Syria and the Arab peninsula today, and conflicts in other countries. America can also not just pretend that its actions in trade and politics don't have negative (and positive) impact in developing countries. The World Trade Organization, the World Bank, IMF, and today the European Union institutions, set frameworks and standards for the whole world. Other countries are also gaining importance, thus having greater impact and responsibility in the region; China, Russia, Iran and others.

In my column last Thursday 3 September, I commended the leadership and values towards refugees and other migrants of a few European leaders, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and the former Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, and also his successor Stefan Löfven. Many other local and national leaders have come onboard, or are asking soul-searching questions about their attitudes and policies, trying to find new ways.

On Tuesday, Merkel and Löfven met in Berlin. They kept their promises of open doors to refugees, yes, with order and regulations, but underlining that a humanitarian crisis requires humane and realistic response. They said that Europe is big and rich enough to cope with the crisis and help all. Löfven said that it is actually just some who come; most needy and desperate people have no choice but to stay in their own lands, sometimes as

internally displaced persons, or they manage to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. They underlined that the refugee-producing lands must indeed be helped to get out of conflicts.

The European Union has over five hundred million inhabitants, and Merkel and Löfven stressed that Europe can cope with the current influx of refugees. Germany will receive more than half a million annually in the next years. Löfven made the analogy, saying that if there was a village with five hundred people and one person in need was knocking on the door and wanted to be let in, of course, we could accommodate one more!

Yesterday, the EU leaders met in Brussels and even the otherwise strict EU President Jean-Claude Juncker spoke in favour of the humanitarian agenda drawn up by Merkel and Löfven. Yes, 'even' Juncker because he didn't quite come across as a friend of the weak and needy when the Greek crisis was recently discussed. And Merkel was that time also quite strict. Maybe they both repent?

Let us now applaud the Europeans, that they have finally realized the need for new approaches in the current large refugee and migration crisis. Juncker admitted that it was belated and he also said that EU had to improve the 'foundation of its house'. It will remain a scar on Europe that it took so long for them to wake up, and we will all watch how they will handle the challenges.

It is strange that Europe was so late in understanding the importance of tackling the current refugee crisis in an acceptable way. After all, we usually look to Europe, even more than to America, for the right moral and political standards. The Europeans point fingers if there are human rights abuses and weaknesses in responses to refugee and migration crises elsewhere in the world. This time, though, when in their own lands, they dithered. They somehow seemed not to comprehend what was happening, being used to seeing most of the large-scale problems at a distance, on TV and newspapers.

Furthermore, many if not all European countries will in future need more young people since their populations are old. They simply do need immigrants. Thus, the large number of refugees helps solve that problem. True, the Europeans might have wanted to select and choose migrants to suit more directly their labor market and demographic needs. Yet, it is also a fact that many refugees from Syria and elsewhere are skilled workers, with vocational and professional training. Many may indeed be keen to get into Germany's excellent schemes for skills and vocational training. The intelligent and energetic, young Syrians may indeed be ideal recruits for German economic power house. Maybe Angela Merkel isn't just motherly kind, the way she appears; she may also be a clever industrial manager!

It warmed my heart when I yesterday saw on TV that the Swedes were waving posters at train stations reading, 'Welcome refugees', as they had also done in Austria and Germany a few days earlier.

That is indeed the attitude we should have towards people needing help. Let me add, refugees need help when they are new arrivals. But if they are allowed to work and look after themselves, most of them will in a few years contribute positively to the host country. If that isn't the case, it is more caused by shortcomings of the host countries systems.

I am hopeful that EU's promised review and rethinking of the whole refugee scheme will lead to a new and better understanding. The bottom line will show that refugees who stay long are actually an asset. Let us not only feel sorry for the refugees; let us also see them as any other fellow human beings, as assets, who contribute, with new ideas and skills. I believe that Afghans in Pakistan have also contributed positively to Pakistan – yes, to the very generous host country and people.

We human beings have lost some of our direction and purpose in my lifetime, not least in Europe. We show less concern for others. But there is hope; Pakistanis have shown that when accommodating Afghan refugees. The Europeans are again showing it now. We need this type of 'global warming', of people's hearts and minds.

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