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## World Refugee Day- Some Reflections

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The United Nations General Assembly passed a unanimous resolution on December 4, 2000 to celebrate June 20 every year as World Refugee Day. The objective was to sensitise the international community to the manifold problems facing the refugees; to express support and solidarity with them; to tackle their problems on a world-wide basis and, above all, honour them for their courage, fortitude and perseverance to face difficult situations which have arisen as a result of man's inhumanity to man.

Every year, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) selects a theme relevant to refugee lives. Among the themes discussed so far mention should be made of: Migrants and Refugees: Towards a Better World (2014); Take a Minute to Support a Family Forced to Flee (2013); and Refugee Youth: Building the Future (2003). The theme for 2016 has been aptly titled "With Refugees Campaign". It is hoped that on World Refugee Day refugees will mingle with ordinary people and establish close rapport with them and chalk out a common course of action to bring cheer and hope in refugee lives.

In Swahili language the term for refugee is *Mikimbizi*, which literally means a "person who runs". In his thought provoking essay on Burundi refugees in Dar es Salaam, Marc Sommers points out that many express disgust at the continued use of the refugee label even after two decades of exile. Some believe that being *Mikimbizi* not only identifies them as people who were compelled to flee their homeland in fear for their survival, but who continue to flee.

To begin with it is necessary to clearly distinguish between three inter-related terms – refugees, internally displaced persons and economic migrants. Refugees are those who out of fear for their lives seek asylum in another country. Internally displaced persons are those who have left their homes, but are unable to leave the country. They move to another part of the country. The Kashmiri Pandits, who had to leave the

Kashmir Valley out of fear and today live in rest of India are a good illustration of internally displaced persons. Economic migrants are those who leave their country for a better life elsewhere. Sometimes they pose themselves as refugees in order to remove the stigma of illegal migrants. Majority of Bangladeshis who have come to north eastern India are economic migrants.

The distinguished Anthologist Valentine Daniel has given an interesting explanation of refugee status. The refugee, as Valentine Daniel puts it, “mistrusts and is mistrusted. In a profound sense, one becomes a refugee even before fleeing the society in which one lives and continues to be a refugee even after one receives asylum in a new place among new people”. The dynamics of refugee problem is determined by foreign and domestic politics.

In South Asia inter-state boundaries are artificial creations. Instead of uniting people who belong to the same ethnic group, speak the same language and follow the same religion, the boundaries have tended to divide the same people. Thus there are Nagas in India and Myanmar; Mizos in India and Myanmar; Meities in India and Myanmar and Khasis in India and Bangladesh. In the forced migration that has taken place since the dawn of independence the State is the major villain. By pursuing policies of cultural homogeneity and upholding the interests of the majority community, the State makes it impossible for minority groups to co-exist with majority community. Still worse, few governments have resorted to forced eviction as a means of dealing with minority groups. By denying citizenship to the overwhelming number of Nepalese in Bhutan and by driving them out of the mountain kingdom, the government of Bhutan has been able to concentrate power in the hands of a coterie. And above all, refugees have become an instrument in foreign policy. Whether it is Afghan refugees in Pakistan; East Pakistani refugees in India or Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu, the refugee phenomenon has become closely intertwined with the larger foreign policy objectives.

During the cold war years, the so called “free world” followed a partisan policy on the subject of providing asylum to refugees. Refugees from Communist countries were welcomed with open arms, because they had a propaganda value. They had a special aura in the United States. As Gil Loescher has remarked, the “anti-communist” bias in the United States refugee policy got “translated into virtually open-ended blanket admissions for individuals fleeing communist regimes”. Of the 71,303 refugees admitted into the United States during Reagan administration, 96 per cent were from communist countries. For many years, West Germany provided financial incentives for refugees from East Germany, Romania and Soviet Union.

The abiding Indian traditions of tolerance and goodwill resulted in India following a benevolent policy towards all those who sought asylum. In ancient India, there were four maxims; 1) *Matru devo bhava* – your mother is like God, 2) *Pitru devo Bhava* – your father is like God; 3) *Acharya devo Bhava* – your teacher is like God and 4) *Athithi devo Bhava* – Your guest is like God. The refugee was considered to be an *Athithi*. The welcome accorded to the Christians, Jews and Parsees were in accordance with the noblest Indian traditions of hospitality. And after independence, India has accorded asylum to more than 25 million people – from Pakistan, Tibet, East Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iran, Somalia and Myanmar.

There had only been two cases when India unfortunately deviated from this tradition of hospitality

The first took place in 1967 when Stalin's daughter Svetlana came to India with her husband's ashes to be immersed in the *Sangam*. It may be recalled that Svetlana was married to a Kashmiri Pandit and according to her late husband's wishes she brought the ashes to Allahabad. She sent feelers to the Government of India that she would like to take asylum and stay in India. New Delhi did not respond favourably. Finally she went to the Roosevelt House and from there she was taken to the United States. Svetlana became a willing tool of the United States in its attempts to malign and denigrate Soviet Union.

The second case took place in Male on February 12, 2013 when former President Mohammad Nasheed sought asylum in the Indian Embassy. Nasheed was and is a great friend of India. He mobilized the Maldivians against the tyrannical and oppressive regime of Gayoom and was voted as President of Maldives. He could not win the second term because the religious obscurantists and reactionaries ganged up against him and deposed him. In order to avoid arrest by Maldivian police he sought asylum in the Indian Embassy. New Delhi did not rise to the occasion and threw him back to the wolves. After many twists and turns in his political career Nasheed has been recently given political asylum by the British Government. Denial of asylum to Nasheed in February 2013 is a black mark in India's refugee policy. The doctor in Albert Camus's book, *The Plague*, has the following advice. "There are pestilences and pestilences in this world. We should not, as much as possible, contribute to these pestilences".

The basic principle underlying international humanitarian refugee law is the principle of *non-refoulement*. It includes non-rejection at the border, non-return, non-expulsion or non-extradition. *Non-refoulement* is the Magna Carta of refugee law.

Following Rajiv Gandhi's assassination by the suicide squad of the Tigers, then Chief Minister Jayalalitha wanted to send back refugees to Sri Lanka. In that process the state government resorted to means – fair and foul- to get the consent of the refugees to return. The repatriation commenced in January 1992. Human rights organizations within India and abroad raised a hue and cry that India was pressurizing the refugees to leave; that repatriation was "involuntary" and since peace had not returned to Sri Lanka the repatriates would not be safe in the island. In order to avoid further criticism from human rights organizations Prime Minister Narasimha Rao permitted the UNHCR to open an office in Chennai in July 1992. The UNHCR interviews the refugees who want to return to Sri Lanka and certifies the "voluntariness" of repatriation. It immediately resulted in improvement of the overall situation. During the last 14 years the UNHCR office in Chennai has been doing commendable service to the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees.

On the eve of the World Refugee day in 2016 let us remind ourselves that if misfortune occurs all of us can become refugees. As Benjamin Zephaniah, the refugee poet, has written: "We can all be refugees; Nobody is safe; All it takes is mad leader; or no rain to bring forth food. We can all be refugees; we can all be told to go; we can be hated by someone for being someone".

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