EUROPE 10.04.2020 | Isabel Santos & Bettina Vollath & Dietmar Köster

The corona crisis doesn't justify suspending human rights

The coronavirus could spread to overcrowded, unsanitary refugee camps — and the EU can no longer look away

The Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on our daily life – all of a sudden, we found ourselves confined to our houses. But that wasn't an option for every single one of us, especially for the less fortunate ones who had to leave everything behind in search of safety and a dignified life.

The harsh conditions in overcrowded, unsanitary camps where refugees and migrants are usually placed, in either Bosnia and Herzegovina or anywhere else, show us a though reality, sparking fears of a rapid and dramatic spread of the virus with devastating consequences to its populations.

Simple actions like handwashing, physical distancing or self-isolation are unrealistic in cramped camps, where the conditions are extremely bad.

Time is running out for refugees, migrants and the authorities. However, nothing can legitimise the violation of human rights, not even the combat against Covid-19.

A breach of the Geneva convention

Thus, we cannot turn a blind eye to the recent news that Bosnia and Herzegovina is planning to move thousands of refugees and migrants to a tent camp in a remote village about 25 kilometres from the border to halt the Covid-19 spread.

These type of measures only prompts fear and panic among the camp's populations, in view of a further deterioration of their living conditions. Such actions may have, in fact, the opposite effect of what was first intended, namely containing the propagation and avoiding a real disaster.

In February, we undertook a mission to the refugee camps in Bosnia and

Herzegovina. For those of us who had been there in the past, we only noticed that the Vučjak camp had been closed and further attempts made to provide minimum conditions to those stranded there. Apart from that, the scenario remained the same. There's still the same anger, frustration and feeling of abandonment by the European Union.

The European Union needs to face up to the fact that neither externalisation nor abandoning its responsibility will solve the situation of the thousands of people currently fleeing to Europe for a liveable future.

On the Croatian side, there are constant push-backs, inhumane treatments and denial of access to asylum procedures. The practice of refusing people entry or pushing them back without providing them the opportunity to claim asylum violates international law and human rights. The violent push backs of the Croatian border police constitutes a breach of the Geneva Convention.

On the Bosnian side, the lack of a coordinated response denies hopeless refugees and migrants the possibility to reach EU territory after they have been on a torturous journey.

The European Union must act

EU member states must take action now. We need an immediate evacuation of at least unaccompanied minors. Moreover, the refugees must have the opportunity to protect themselves from the virus. Bosnia and Herzegovina also needs medical equipment and support.

The European Union has failed to support the refugees and its neighbouring countries in hosting refugees for years. Although we, as parliamentarians, have since 2014 repeatedly proposed the establishment of a fair, human rights-based asylum system with a redistribution mechanism, the European Council has blocked the reform of the current Dublin regulation ever since.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Bosnia and Herzegovina can no longer face this issue alone, especially in the light of the recent events at the Greek-Turkish border.

The understanding of the various dimensions of the problem does not mean that we tolerate the creation of ghettos where thousands will perish. Human rights are not negotiable under any circumstances and we can never be complacent when they are violated.

The European Union needs to face up to the fact that neither externalisation nor abandoning its responsibility will solve the situation of the thousands of people currently fleeing to Europe for a liveable future. We need a new asylum pact based on redistribution, the rule of law, humanity and solidarity and, we, Members of the European Parliament will fight for this.



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