

Permanent resettlement is the only way to resolve the refugee crisis

The trauma of conflict is so overpowering that people often do not wish to return home. They deserve a humane response.

Two years ago this month, the image of Aylan, a Kurdish toddler washed up on one of Turkey's sandy beaches, shocked the world. The Kurdi family were part of the large wave of Syrian refugees fleeing civil war in their country. The small inflatable boat in which they had set sail for Europe capsized in the choppy waters of the Mediterranean. The little boy, only three years old, drowned along with his mother, Rehana, and five-year-old brother Galip. When photos of his dead body surfaced, there was outrage, accompanied by what felt like a resolve on Europe's part to devise a humane solution to the refugee crisis.

Two years on, that determination appears to have floundered, and the problem of refugees has only intensified and spread. Over the last week, nearly 50,000 Rohingya Muslims, arguably the most persecuted of any minority group on Earth, abandoned their homes and fled in the direction of Bangladesh to escape the Myanmar military's brutal crackdown. South Asia, much like Europe, is failing people in need of urgent help. Bangladesh is unwilling to take in the Rohingyas. India is looking for ways to expel Rohingya refugees who have settled in the country.

Part of the reluctance on governments' part to take in refugees stems from the fear that they may never return home, that temporary visitors may become permanent settlers — because of the nature of the conflicts they are attempting to escape. This was not always the case. For instance, most of the Belgians who sought refuge in Britain during the First World War returned when the war ended. After the Second World War, which created some 40 million refugees, multiple international agencies were instituted in a concerted effort to help refugees. Those wars had definitive ends. Even in the 1990s, millions of people displaced by the Balkan wars returned home.

Things have got much worse in the 21st century. According a report released last

year by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are more than 65 million refugees across the world, people driven from their lands either by unending conflicts or the pressures generated by globalisation. The children among them will forever be haunted by the memory of bloodshed. Even adults can barely cope. The trauma induced by war, particularly in the case of Syrian refugees, is so overpowering that most say they cannot conceive of conditions that will allow them to return. Their pain is only compounded by the hostile and humiliating reception they often receive in Europe and other places, where the refugee crisis has become grist for xenophobic and chauvinistic political parties and groups.

There are spots of hope, however. As The National reports today, the Italian island of Sicily is refusing to succumb to the anti-refugee bigotry prevalent in other parts of the continent. But such examples, though inspiring, cannot conceal the fact that the world desperately needs to acknowledge the reality before it: permanent resettlement of refugees is unavoidable if the crisis is ever to be resolved.

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