



20 June 2021

CCA General Secretary's Message on World Refugee Day–2021

Refugees in Asia: Are they forgotten entities?

The number of refugees worldwide increases for the ninth year in a row as more and more people continue to be displaced. More than two-thirds of people worldwide who fled their homes and crossed the borders of their country of origin due to conflict, violence, or persecution are from just five countries, including from Afghanistan with 2.6 million, and from Myanmar with 1.1 million. There are 26 million refugees globally and over half of these refugees are under the age of 18. More than 4.4 million refugees are located in different countries in the Asia Pacific region and additionally another 2.3 million are stateless persons.

Refugees who are on the move in vulnerable situations are particularly exposed to the health impacts of COVID-19. Many Rohingya refugees live or work in crowded or unsanitary conditions where COVID-19 can easily spread, especially in refugee camps and shelters in Bangladesh, India, and along the Myanmar-Thailand border. Their access to health may be compromised, particularly when they are undocumented or excluded. They also often lack access to other basic services—from housing to water to sanitation, from nutritious food to social services, education, and financial resources. The provision of aid services in several refugee camps has been significantly reduced, which has made the work of camp-based organisations more difficult and increased the hardships and vulnerabilities of the refugee community.

World Refugee Day, which falls on 20 June each year, shines the spotlight on these most vulnerable people. The theme of World Refugee Day–2021, 'Together we heal, learn, and shine', can be interpreted to focus on the reconciliation of refugees and the redress of their grievances, given that human rights violations are the ultimate result of the oppression of refugees. Volatile political situations in Asia today, such as the military coup in Myanmar in February earlier this year, are indicators that forced displacement will continue—at a rate faster than solutions can be found. The direct human suffering alone engendered by forcible dislocation must demand the sustained attention and response of the international community.

On the occasion of World Refugee Day–2021, we uphold and remember the fragile and conflict-affected settings in which refugees in Asia are forced to survive. Tragedy after tragedy has befallen refugees in Asia in these past few years—with forced displacements of the Rohingya; the persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan, the decision of shutting down of refugee camps along the Myanmar-Thailand border, the Indian federal government's order directing the four north-eastern Indian states to deport the refugees arriving from Myanmar expeditiously; and the massive fire that broke out at the largest refugee camp in Asia in Cox Bazaar, Bangladesh.

About 85 percent of refugees in the world are being hosted in developing countries. This means that countries with minimal resources are hosting the majority of refugees. The majority of refugees in the Asia-Pacific region come from Afghanistan and Myanmar. Myanmar's refugees make up the eighth largest refugee population in the world. Myanmar is also the top refugee-producing country within Southeast Asia and has been a source country for refugees for decades. Although Asian countries have traditionally hosted large refugee populations over several decades, the benevolence of some of these countries has not been recognised. International mechanisms have not been used to compensate these Asian countries for the enormous costs involved in settling and rehabilitating refugees. Precisely due to this reason, certain countries in Asia are now wary of accepting refugees, and often turn them away right at their borders. The rights of protection for people at risk of persecution in their country of origin are established through international conventions, but these are often blatantly deprioritised or disregarded in the Asian context.

The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol are the key legal documents that outlines the rights of refugees, as well as the legal obligations of States to protect them. The core principle is *non-refoulement*, which asserts that a refugee should not be returned to a country where the returning refugee will face serious threats to life or freedom. This is now considered a rule of customary international law. It is indeed unfortunate that most countries in South and South-East Asia have signed neither the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention nor its 1967 Protocol. However, countries such as India, Pakistan, Iran, Thailand, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia host refugees.

Refugees are usually resilient in their ability to experience and overcome hardships. While we acknowledge their strength and courage to flee and escape from conflict and persecution, we must build empathy and understanding for their plight. We must not allow them to remain forgotten entities in our midst. No one wants to remain a refugee forever.

On World Refugee Day–2021, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) reaffirms its commitment to 'welcome the stranger'. Every human being is created in the image of God and is therefore entitled to their inherent dignity and respect. We are called to assist the refugees as a fundamental Christian duty stemming from the model of Jesus Christ, who himself was a migrant and a child of refugees. The CCA calls upon all its member churches and councils to fully commit themselves to honouring the intrinsic dignity and human rights of refugees, especially those that urgently and immediately require aid and assistance. God's purpose for the world must be fulfilled in the diakonia and various outreach missions of churches, to create conditions for the fulfillment and flourishing of 'life in fullness' (John 10:10), a life that refugees long and hope for.

Our role as communities of faith must be to lead the transition from a culture of rejection and exclusion to a culture of acceptance and inclusion. We must strive to overturn the negative narratives surrounding refugees in public spaces in Asia by campaigning and advocating for them, humanising them, and highlighting their lived experiences. Developing lasting solutions that are tailored to the contexts of refugees requires more concerted efforts aimed at pressurising concerned Asian governments and at campaigning for a climate of respect for human rights. It is only when the dignity and lives of refugees are protected that their human rights will be affirmed; then we can truly begin to 'together heal, learn, and shine'. Let us remember the refugees in our midst and see to it that they are not forgotten entities.

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