COVID-19 AND THE GLOBAL MIGRANT CRISIS

An Expert Panel
by **The Security Distillery**

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Rationale

As the border lockdowns brought on by the spread of COVID-19 have begun to ease, the persisting refugee and migrant crisis that began prior to the pandemic is expected to complicate the delicate balance countries have found in combating the spread of the virus. As such this may cause increased tensions surrounding already stigmatized migrant and refugee camps, potentially causing one crisis to deepen the other. This panel looks to provide a platform for the intricacies of this dilemma to be discussed.

Panellists:

- **Myra Dahgaypaw** is the Managing Director at the U.S. Campaign for Burma. Prior to this, she worked as a human rights advocate at the United Nations with the Burma Fund United Nations Office.
- **Dan Sullivan** is the senior advocate for human rights at Refugees International. Dan focuses on Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan, and other areas affected by mass displacement.
- **Niemat Ahmadi** is a native of North Darfur, and serves as Founder and President of Darfur Women Action Group. She previously worked as the Director of Global Partnerships for United to End Genocide.

Moderator:

- **Mac Hamilton** is a second year international masters student in security, intelligence, and strategic studies focusing on peace and security in Africa and the Middle East.

Q&A Summaries

Q1: Even prior to COVID, many refugee response plans were massively underfunded in various regions. For those who engage with policymakers closely, have you seen any significant policy and funding changes in the COVID era? What are the key messages you are emphasizing to policymakers right now?

Response Summary: *While some institution have increased their number of funding streams (The World Bank in particular), there still remains the persistent issue of funds getting lost in the process due to corruption as well as neglect towards older camps. This issue is multiplied by the fact that the number of refugees continues to rise as government sanctioned violence continues in both Sudan and Burma. Simultaneously the virus is being used to perpetuate racism and 'us vs. them' narratives to allow for greater securitisation of African refugees from certain areas of the world.*

Q2: In refugee communities, various groups are considered more at-risk for negative physical and mental health outcomes. These may include women heads of households, unaccompanied youth, orphans, and the elderly. In your experience, how has the pandemic affected these particularly vulnerable groups? Is the pandemic highlighting other groups that are also very at risk?

Response Summary: Women and girls continue to be the most at risk/affected groups within refugee populations, due partially to patriarchal role divisions. Additionally, women impacted by domestic violence have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic globally as they are forced to live in close proximity to their abuser(s).

Q3: The theme of scapegoating refugees for bringing in COVID was brought up a few times by panelists. Scapegoating was already an issue before the pandemic. This scapegoating can lead to a lot of violence (physical, sexual, economic), discrimination, and exclusion. What can advocacy workers do now or when the pandemic cools down to work on this issue to hopefully aid in providing relief from this scapegoating and create more secure situations?

Response Summary: Underlying issues such as racism have become even more critical. This racism further pushes the stigmatization of refugees/migrants, who are now more easily securitised as a public health concern. This is being seen across the field, with discrimination between Asian ethnicities becoming more prominent at the community level as well as at the government level with a prominent example being that of Burma regarding the Rohingya population.

The harmful stigmatisation of these vulnerable populations, combined with conditionality of their refugee/asylum seeker status can lead to some individuals not coming forward and being honest about exposure leading to further spread of the virus within the camps/local communities.

Key takeaways

- Underlying, horizontal issues such as racism and sexism continue to play a important role in the treatment of migrant/refugee populations.
- Migrant and refugee populations are becoming increasingly securitised and seen as public health threats.
- The pandemic hasn't halted the ever-growing global population of migrants and refugees, presenting the possibility of these crises deepening one another.
- There is a need for greater engagement with host communities and local capacity building to achieve sustainable peace and development.

Moving Forward

- There is a need to ensure the sharing of information pertaining to the virus and safety measures. This is doubly important given the amount of confusion and disinformation that continues to persist since the initial viral wave.

- There is a need for greater local engagement and stewardship. Additionally local communities need to be compensated in some way as to help alleviate tensions between themselves and the refugee communities.

- Progamming must address base issues; such as the racism and corruption that has been seen to continuously undermine efforts.

- As ever, it is critical that citizens reach out to their governments and demand for more to be done for these at risk populations.

Resources for Further Learning

- [A Critique of Burma's COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan](#)

- [COVID-19 and the Displaced: Addressing the Threat of the Novel Coronavirus in Humanitarian Emergencies](#)

- [Darfur Women's Action Group](#)

- [The Security Distillery: Conversing COVID](#)

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