

CONFERENCE REPORT

Managing Migration: Europe and the Refugee Crisis



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This is a report on a public session titled “Managing Migration: Europe and the Refugee Crisis”, held as part of the TRT World Forum 2019. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2019, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

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Speakers



Francesco Rocca

President of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC)

Francesco Rocca joined the Italian Red Cross in 2008 when he was asked to lead the change process of the Italian Red Cross and transform the structure from a public-sector organisation to a private volunteer-based organisation. Mr Rocca was elected president of this new structure in 2013. In 2009, when the Italian Red Cross was elected member of the IFRC Governing Board Mr. Rocca was the appointed representative. In 2013 he was elected Vice President and in 2017 he was elected President of the IFRC.

Summary

The panel “Managing Migration: Europe and the Refugee Crisis”, discussed the future of refugees in Europe.

The keynote speaker Francesco Rocca, President of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, argued that the situation of migrant boats in the Mediterranean Sea is a huge threat to humanitarian action. He spoke about what he called the “criminalisation of humanitarian aid”—a policy adopted by some European countries, such as Italy, to refuse migrant boats harbour—and deemed it wrong because it goes against humanitarian values and European norms. Furthermore, he argued the rejection of migrants in Europe is fuelled by a narrative of invasion and fear created by political leaders and the media.

Regarding the migrant detention facilities in Libya, Rocca expressed that the EU has abandoned all of its Mediterranean patrolling operations, and decided to send migrants to unsafe “torture

camps” in Libya. He called the situation in those camps an outrage to the conscience of humanity. Rocca argued that European countries have collectively failed to develop policies to effectively deal with the causes of migration or to work jointly in persuading their communities about the acceptance of the migrants and the humanitarian actors helping those at risk.

President Francesco Rocca elaborated on Turkey’s crucial role in mitigating the extent of the migrant crisis by hosting around four million Syrian refugees. He highlighted his view that the EU-Turkey migrant deal was not fair because Turkey was left with the burden of millions of refugees with inadequate support from the EU.

On finding a solution, Rocca recommended developing a new way of burden-sharing among European countries, to support migrants in their own countries by addressing factors that force them to leave in the first place. Rocca emphasised that world leaders should “rediscover” their missing moral duties to restore humanity in politics.



Report

Invasion Narrative

Since early 2015, large numbers of refugees/migrants arriving to the European Union from across the Mediterranean or overland through Southeast Europe engendered political challenges in several EU nations. Turkey has played a crucial role in mitigating the extent of the crisis by hosting around four million Syrian refugees since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011.

On the measures taken against the migrant NGO boats in the Mediterranean Sea, Rocca expressed that it represents a significant threat to humanitarian action in general. Rocca noted that it is the narrative of invasion that fuels the rejection of migrants in Europe. Fear is always there because “when you meet with something

unknown it always creates fear.” Furthermore, Rocca noted the term “migrant crisis” is problematic because it sends a negative message and contributes to fear. In reality, refugees and migrants have always existed in history. It is an indication that something is not working properly and the world will have to deal with its causes. He noted that European countries could fight the invasion narrative by working with local governments and humanitarian actors to identify solutions for better inclusion of migrants. To achieve that, according to Rocca, local governments need to work more effectively and supportively of migrant needs. The support of politicians and local community leadership is key to the work of finding solutions for migrants in Europe and fighting the fear associated with them.

The “Criminalisation of Humanitarian Aid”

Rocca spoke about a policy adopted by some European countries, such as Italy, to refuse migrant boats harbour. Calling it the “criminalisation of humanitarian aid”, Rocca declared the policy to be wrong because “saving a life at sea could never be considered a crime.” He argued the criminalisation of humanitarian aid in the Mediterranean could be “the worst legacy of this era for the future generation” because young people are exposed to this image, which their politicians endorse.

Rocca challenged the criminalisation policy for two reasons. First, because Italy is a country that has signed the Geneva Convention. It is not only a moral obligation, but it is also a legal obligation to protect and process refugee requests. The second point relates to Libya as a safe point for refugees. The 2017 deal between Italian and Libyan authorities (including traffickers who reportedly attended migration talks in Italy) to intercept migrants at sea and bring them back to Libya where human rights groups say the migrants suffer torture and abuse, is a case in point that amounts a “big shame on Italy and the European Union”.

The criminalisation of humanitarian assistance also exists in the US. People were put on trial in Texas for simply providing food and water to migrants along the US-Mexican border. Reflecting on his personal experience, Rocca argued that one can

truly understand why people are escaping their own countries after seeing the horrible living conditions in many countries, such as refugee camps in Syria. According to him, what humanitarian actors can do is to disseminate information on the refugee situation “to make the local refugee-hosting communities better understand the situation, deal with the refugee complexities and achieve inclusion.” Towards this end, the media, he argued, can play a big role by shaping public opinion at every level.

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Sending Migrants Back to Libya

Rocca spoke about the controversial EU decision to send the migrants back to detention camps in Libya. Terming them as “torture camps”, he emphasised that the EU abandoned Operation Sophia (European Union Naval Force Mediterranean) and all other operations that were patrolling the Mediterranean to save lives. Instead of dealing with human rights as per the Geneva Convention (i.e. respecting the refugees and improving the quality of their living conditions), he said the EU and the Italian government have initiated a policy to send migrants back to an unsafe situation

in Libya. According to the former U.N. human rights chief, Zeid Ra’ad al Hussein, the situation in Libya is an outrage on the conscience of humanity. Al Hussein said U.N. monitors who went there were shocked by the thousands of emaciated and traumatised men, women and children, locked up in hangers with no access to the most basic of necessities and stripped of their human dignity.

According to Rocca, the biggest takeaway from this policy is that Europe has failed to fix the causes of

migration. Since the start of Europe's migrant crisis in 2015, at least 1000 kilometres of fences have been erected by Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Macedonia and Slovenia. European countries failed to develop policies to effectively deal with the causes of the migration or to work jointly in persuading their

communities about the acceptance of the migrants and the humanitarian actors helping those at risk. Furthermore, Rocca noted that a solution is only possible when European countries act together, using their economic, cultural and intellectual ability to work as a whole.

The EU-Turkey Deal

With regards to EU-Turkey refugee deal, Mr Rocca argued that the EU wants to externalise the border. Put differently, the EU wants the Turkish government to stop the flow of migration to Europe without providing sufficient disbursement support for refugees in Turkey. Initially, the EU leadership said the deal would be the "perfect solution" for the crisis, but it seems the discussion has come to revolve around the EU's financial commitment "because President Erdogan hinted he would reopen the border if Europe does not support Turkey."

According to Rocca, this is an indicator showing the lack of vision regarding how the EU could collaborate with the Turkish government about how to better work together towards a solution. For Rocca, the EU-Turkey deal was not fair because one country, Turkey,

was left with the burden of around four million refugees. Rocca further noted that despite this burden, it is remarkable that the political dynamics in Turkey have not dramatically changed compared to the one million refugees that altered the political fabric in Germany and Italy.

Rocca hinted that the prevention of a new wave of refugees depends on a diplomatic effort between Turkey and EU and how both interact in the near future. To prevent a new migrant crisis in Northern Syria, Mr Rocca pointed out that it is crucial that the EU and Turkey work together hand-in-hand. He warned against treating refugees as a political weapon and asked all parties to ensure respect for human dignity and to protect the civilians.

Finding a Solution

For Rocca, the pronouncement from the new European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, calling for the bloc to develop a new way of burden-sharing gives hope. It is an indication of improvement regarding appropriately dealing with refugee and migrant populations. The idea of the shared burden is also significant to fix the causes of migration by supporting the migrants in their own countries. Europe and the international community should address factors that force people to leave their countries. According to Rocca, the resources of many refugee producing countries are exploited by the Western world and there is no indication that this exploitation will end anytime soon. In his terms, "We, the Western countries, look at Africa as a place where we can exploit as much as possible in terms

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of opportunities and natural resources. I mentioned Libya. It is about gas and oil and is not about the dignity of human beings.”

Rocca challenged world leaders to look at their missing moral duties and “rediscover the real meaning of human dignity and the respect for it.” He pointed

out that the world is losing many of the humanitarian achievements made in the last 160 years due to the behaviour of the current political leaders. Moral duty, according to him, should drive the world to restore humanity in politics.

Key Takeaways

- No one benefits when humanitarian aid is politicised and saving lives at sea is criminalised. Moral duty should drive the world to restore humanity in politics.
- The support of politicians and local community leadership is key for finding solutions for migrants in Europe and countering the fear associated with them.
- A solution to the migrant crisis is only possible when European countries develop a collective policy to deal with the problem and act together, using their economic, cultural and intellectual ability.
- The media should disseminate information on refugees properly so that the hosting communities can better understand the situation, deal with the refugee complexities and achieve inclusion.
- The criminalisation of humanitarian aid in the Mediterranean goes against humanitarian values. Migrants should not be sent back to unsafe detention camps in Libya.
- The international community should support migrants by developing policies and approaches to effectively address the factors that force them to leave their countries in the first place.
- Turkey has played a crucial role in mitigating the refugee crisis by hosting around four million Syrian refugees. The EU and Turkey should work together to prevent a new migrant crisis in Northern Syria, ensure respect for human dignity and protect civilians

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